

How are the lives of families with young children changing?

Summary

About this review and the *Changing face of early childhood* series

This summary presents the key themes and trends explored in the first review in our *Changing face of early childhood in the UK* series.

The review draws on data from the last two decades to address key questions about the changing nature of family life and what that means for the experience of young children in the UK today. We explore the implications of different policy changes for parents and young children and identify where there are gaps in data and research. These gaps are important, because until we understand the whole picture, we only have a partial foundation for policy and practice.

The review also provides the context for our *Changing face of early childhood* series, which seeks to generate an informed debate on early childhood

based on what the collective evidence tells us. The series draws on an extensive body of work funded by the Nuffield Foundation and undertaken by a range of researchers from different disciplines, alongside other key studies. Over the course of 2020/2021 we will publish robust and accessible reviews of research and provide a forum for further engagement through our events programme and additional commentary on our website.

We value input and feedback on the series as it progresses and the responses we receive will inform the concluding review. Ultimately, we want this series to contribute to significant and lasting change for young children and their families. To download the full review and to sign up to our mailing list, please visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org/early-childhood



All accounts of the first five years of life are framed within the context of the family, but what is understood by ‘family’ and the role of public policy in relation to the family has changed fundamentally in the 21st century.¹

This review shines a spotlight on the changing nature of family life and its implications for the economic security, development and wider well-being of young children. It is essential that these changes are understood and recognised by policy makers in the round, particularly at a time when issues of social well-being and inequality are being thrown into sharp relief by COVID-19. Without understanding the complexities of family life today, the policies and initiatives that seek to address other key areas of our society—education, the economy, health and mental health—will falter.

Family circumstances have a powerful influence on how a baby develops and fares throughout childhood and beyond. The quality of a young child’s environment is shaped by his or her parents, carers or other guardians and the wider context—grandparents, neighbourhood, the quality of services, cultural and socio-economic factors, as well as global factors such as climate change, pandemics and war.² In this review, we explore the demographic, social and economic shifts that have influenced the family context that young children grow up and develop in. We provide a broad but not exhaustive analysis of the **changes**

and continuities that have helped shape early childhood and family life in Britain in the last 20 years, focusing on major demographic changes.

When painting a population-level picture of children’s lives it is also important to highlight the variation in their experiences: improvements and deteriorations have not been universal. Generally speaking, the experiences of parents and their children can vary greatly based on their qualification level, geographic location, deprivation level and ethnicity. **A recurrent theme in this review is inequality and gradients between advantaged and disadvantaged families.** Place and immediate local context are also playing a role in the lives of young children.

Family living arrangements in the UK are increasingly varied, with the growth of cohabitation, re-partnering and blended families. Children are more likely to be living in a more fluid family form. The ‘family’ has been a heavily debated and ideologically contested subject, with diverging views about the importance of marriage and the impact of separation on children’s well-being. **Family context and socio-economic factors intertwine in shaping children’s outcomes and well-being.**

Research has suggested that differences between the cognitive, social and emotional skills of children with married parents, and those with cohabiting parents, are largely explained by differences in the socio-economic

¹ This review draws and expands upon this theme and others first explored in Eisenstadt and Oppenheim (2019).

² It is worth noting what we mean when we use the term ‘parent’ in this review. Drawing on work on fathers by Burgess and Goldman (2018), we recognise the important role that step, adoptive and social parents can play. The kinds of parents referred to in this review include: birth parents—whether co-resident or not, and whether in contact with their children or not; adoptive parents—those who have legally adopted a child but who are not biologically linked to the child; social parents—including co-resident step-parents, foster parents, cohabiting partners, and guardians; and resident step-parents—those who are living with the child full or part-time, are a cohabiting partner or former cohabiting partner of a child’s birth/adoptive parent (mother or father).

status of parents who choose to get married rather than marriage itself.

When it comes to differences in the early cognitive development of children in single and two-parent families, these are also largely driven by differences in economic circumstances. However, the research evidence is mixed regarding the age at which we would expect to see an impact on early development outcomes (older versus younger). Further research is needed to disentangle these factors and to further test these associations—particularly in relation to social and emotional development.

More recently there has been a growing understanding, underpinned by research, that the quality of the relationship within a couple, whether together or apart, influences both how mothers and fathers parent as well as children's outcomes and life chances. **The presence of persistent, hostile and unresolved conflict has a detrimental impact on childhood well-being and outcomes regardless of family structure** (Harold et al. 2016). Our understanding of more complex family forms and their implications for young children growing up is partial, limited by the poor data available. This matters because it means we know relatively little about the needs of mothers, fathers and young children who are undergoing significant transitions in their family arrangements, or who are living in complex families, and how best to support them.

Children growing up in families where the youngest child is under five are more at risk of poverty than families with only older children. Since 2011/12, relative child poverty rates for all children have increased, though stabilising in the last three years prior to the outbreak of the

pandemic (Bourquin et al. 2020).³ Poverty has a direct impact on children's material well-being as well as an indirect impact, generating financial and psychological stress that affects relationships and interactions within the family—both between parents and between parents and children. These stresses and strains in turn affect how children fare. The focus of this review is on all children; we will return to issues of poverty and vulnerability in our second review of the series, *Changing patterns of poverty and vulnerability*.

The working lives of mothers have also changed dramatically, with a marked rise in the proportion of mothers in paid employment when their children are younger. This is part of a longer-term transformation in women's lives in the second half of the 20th century. There are some signs that fathers' roles are changing too, with greater involvement in young children's lives and the beginnings of modest shifts in working patterns. Increasingly, both resident parents and lone parents need to be in paid work to maintain living standards. We have also witnessed more mothers returning to work sooner after a child is born than in previous years.

These changes in both family form and working patterns have been driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, legal and cultural factors. Over the last two decades, we see the growth of more liberal attitudes to family life with a decline in the importance attached to marriage as a pre-cursor to having children, support for same-sex relationships and greater support for a more equal sharing of childcare and employment responsibilities.

Since 2000, there has been a small decline in the overall amount

3 A full breakdown of the measures of poverty used in this review can be found in Section 2.6 of the full review.

of time parents are spending with their pre-school children. While women in the UK carry out the bulk of childcare within the home, there have been small shifts, with men increasing the time spent on childcare and women slightly decreasing the amount of time. **We know very little about how time with young children is spent.** Warm, responsive parent-child interaction is a key aspect of child development and clearly having time with children is one important dimension of this. So too are issues of poverty, and insecure and intermittent work, which shape the context and environment in which mothers and fathers parent.

Over the last two decades, the changing patterns of work and care for parents, particularly mothers, have profoundly altered the environment in which young children grow up. This is changing how and where children are looked after, and by whom. **The current generation of children in the UK is the first in which the majority are spending a large part of their childhoods in some form of formal early childhood education and care (ECEC).**⁴ However, there appear to be clear patterns in the take-up of formal education and care according to area, family and child characteristics. More disadvantaged families and children from some ethnic minority groups are less likely to take up free early years entitlements.

Despite the norm for the majority of three and four-year-olds to be in formal early education, informal care remains

an important part of how parents manage their working lives. Given that nearly all children experience early education and care, it is vital that this environment enhances their development, growth and learning. This is particularly so for the most disadvantaged children, where gaps in school readiness at national level remain wide, and progress in narrowing them has stalled. We will explore the issues of quality of early years provision and its impact in the third review in this series: *The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances*.

Alongside the issues of quality in early years provision there are also questions about the optimal balance between formal care and home care with a parent, guardian or carer. This is a highly contextual issue, often coming down to personal choice, financial considerations and the availability of services. As a result of all these changes, **early childhood has become a more varied, often enriching, but also complex experience as small children negotiate different settings and relationships.**

In other areas, labour market pressures and structures are affecting the context and spaces where children are being cared for and develop. In recent years, for example, the labour force participation rate for over 50s has steadily increased, with the largest percentage point increases occurring for women aged 60–64 years. If these trends persist, some grandparents may need to make a decision between going to work or caring

4 When referencing formal and informal care, we use the most recent definitions used by the Department for Education (DfE). Formal providers include: nursery schools, nursery classes, reception classes, special day schools, day nurseries, playgroups, childminders, nannies or au pairs, babysitters, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs. Informal providers include grandparents, older brother/sisters, other relatives, friends or neighbours. Estimates for the use of 'any childcare' and 'informal childcare' prior to the 2019 wave include ex-husbands/wives/partners as a form of childcare, and this should be borne in mind when making comparisons across survey years (DfE 2019).

for their grandchildren. This has important implications not only for how parents manage childcare, but also for inter-generational relationships.

Any piece of work assessing the changing lives of young children and their families would be remiss to ignore the impact of COVID-19. Research into previous crises suggests that **its impact is likely to be significant, particularly on those who are already disadvantaged or vulnerable**. Although the government has introduced various support packages, the economic shock precipitated by the pandemic is filtering into much higher rates of unemployment and with it, increased economic hardship among families with children. We know that COVID-19 is having a particularly severe effect on some Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, in both health and economic terms, exacerbating existing inequalities (Khan 2020; Platt and Warwick 2020).

The evidence on the differential impact of the lockdown measures, and the closure of formal childcare on employment patterns, suggests that it is mothers who have been particularly badly hit (Brewer et al. 2020a). While both parents have increased the amount of time spent on childcare, women are spending more time, thus further widening the pre-existing gender gap (Andrew et al. 2020).

And while there is no directly comparable precedent, the prolonged period of being out of early years settings, reception classes and in social isolation, unable to play and interact with other children, is likely to have profound implications for the well-being of children and their learning—especially for disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

This review draws on the emerging data on the immediate impact of the current crisis on family life with young children. However, this data is partial,

evolving and cannot capture the longer-term impacts on children's lives. In many cases, COVID-19 exposes pre-existing issues that have dominated the early years landscape. We therefore use the existing data and research to highlight domains where children's lives may be acutely affected by the crisis as a result of the demographic or policy changes that have occurred in the last two decades.

Family policy is still playing catch-up with how rapidly family circumstances are changing, both before the pandemic and now in a heightened form. Our principal sources of data no longer reflect the reality of modern family life in the UK. As a result neither policy, resources nor services may be meeting the needs of young children growing up in different kinds of family. This has profound implications for the well-being and life-chances of today's generation of young children.

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Forthcoming reviews in this series are:

Review 2: *Changing patterns of poverty and vulnerability*

Review 3: *The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances*

Review 4: *Parents and the home*

Review 5: *Are young children's lives improving? Are they happier and healthier?*

Conclusion: *Bringing up the next generation: priorities and next steps*

Key trends

Trends in family formation and fertility

Trends in parental age

- On average, parents are having children later in life than two decades ago.
- There has been a sharp reduction in the rate of teenage parents over the last 10 years, but the rate remains higher in the UK than in many European countries.
- While the gap has reduced in recent years, women on low incomes, and those with fewer qualifications, are more likely to have children at a younger age than women on higher incomes in the UK, particularly in certain regions.

Family size

- Families are smaller than before. However, UK fertility rates have declined at a much slower rate than other European and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries.
- Differences in family size by education level have widened over time with higher educated women having fewer children.
- Women in the UK who have children at a later age have fewer children, on average, than their peers who had children younger. This differs to some Nordic countries where women go on to 'catch up' in terms of the number of children they have.

Trends in family context and structure

Family structure

- There has been a decline in the proportion of children living in married couple families, alongside an increase

in the number of cohabiting, blended and same-sex families.⁵

- However, the decline in the prevalence of married couple families with children

5 This review uses the term 'blended families' to describe a family unit where one or both parents have children from a previous relationship.

has been slower among British Asian and Chinese households.

- The proportion of lone-parent families has stabilised over the last two decades at around 22% of all families.⁶ This is a snapshot estimate. We can assume that a higher proportion of families will have been headed by a lone parent at some point.
- Public attitudes towards parenthood preceding marriage have relaxed significantly over the last two decades. The proportion of people supporting the view that marriage should be the starting point for bringing up children has almost halved in under 25 years.
- The number of same-sex families with children has risen in recent years—however this group still represents just under 1% of all families with children.
- There has been a downward trend in divorce rates since their most recent peak in 2003, which is broadly

consistent with a decline in the number of marriages since 1989.

Wider economic context

- In 2018/19 more than half of the total 4.5 million children in poverty were living in families where the youngest child was aged under five—some 2.4 million children (Social Metrics Commission 2020). The risk of poverty is highest in families where the youngest child is under five (37%).
- There are higher rates of poverty among children from Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups. Rates of poverty are also higher for children living in families where there is a disabled adult or child.
- Different family types have different risks of poverty too. Analysis by the Social Metrics Commission shows that almost half (48%) of people living in lone-parent families are living in poverty. This compares to 26% of those living in couple families with children.

Trends in employment and care

- The employment rate for mothers with young children (aged under five) has increased dramatically in the last two decades—but is still lower than that of fathers or women without dependent children.
- Most children under five will grow up in a household where both resident parents work. Meanwhile, in a marked shift from the early 1990s, the employment rate for lone parents has also risen.
- Mothers are returning to work more quickly after a child is born than in previous years.
- The UK has seen a modest rise of ‘non-standard’ family working patterns, with changing ‘breadwinning’ responsibilities among mothers and fathers (though research suggests this is shaped by mothers’ and fathers’ education).

6 We use the term ‘lone’ to describe a parent who is not married and does not have a partner, who is bringing up a child or children. As with any shorthand definition, it is not without its issues. It does not make any distinction between situations where a child has regular contact and/or partly resides with their other parent and a child who solely resides with and is cared for by one parent.

- Attitudes towards the traditional division of gender roles have softened over time, though substantial support remains for women remaining in the home and caring for their child full-time when children are under school age.
- Overall, women in the UK still carry out much more childcare than men. However, there have been small shifts in recent years, with men increasing the time they spend on childcare for pre-school children by just over half an hour per week between 2000 and 2015, while the time women spend has slightly decreased.
- Apart from a slight drop in 2017, the number and proportion of young children in formal ECEC has increased steadily over the last five years. However, the take-up rates for state-funded entitlement vary by ethnicity, region and economic disadvantage.
- While the use of informal care has decreased since 2004, the use of grandparental care has remained largely stable and the number of over 50s in paid employment continues to rise.

The impact of COVID-19

- The combination of job losses, nursery and school closures, and home working is changing how parents spend their time and divide responsibilities for paid work, childcare and housework.
- A large proportion of children under five will have missed six months of being in an early years setting or reception class. We do not yet know what the impact of this lost time will be on how children play, learn and interact with others.
- There is growing concern about the sustainability of private and voluntary childcare provision. Vulnerable before the pandemic, they are now in danger as a result of long-term closure and, potentially, reduced demand as a result of the recession.

Points for reflection and discussion

Below we outline some of the main questions and points that we feel require further reflection and discussion.⁷ The list is not exhaustive but is seen as the beginning of an exercise to map key issues to be

expanded during the course of each review in the series.

Family formation and fertility

- Given the association between teenage pregnancy and vulnerability for both

⁷ While relating to our areas of interest, not all of the areas identified fall within the Nuffield Foundation's funding priorities at the time of writing (see: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/funding).

parents and the child, what can be learned from local areas that have been more successful in reducing teenage conception?

- What are the implications of the growth of one-child families? We only have a partial understanding of how child outcomes are influenced by sibling relationships.

Family structure and context

- What role do non-resident fathers play in lone and blended families? What measures can support fathers' involvement in young children's lives after separation?
- How do changes in family form and socio-economic factors affect young children's social and emotional development?
- Does parental separation have a greater impact on children's well-being and outcomes if it occurs when they are under five?
- We have relatively little data on the growth of 'blended families' and the implications of this on young children's experiences. What research should be prioritised and how can public policy better support this growing group?

Employment and care

- What shapes the decision for new mothers to return to work?
- How are the fathers who are spending more time with children under five using this time?
- What would a more integrated experience of education and care look like for families with young children?
- How does balancing work and care affect parent-child interaction?

The impact of COVID-19

Given the limited data, we can only cautiously assess how COVID-19 and its social and economic consequences will affect families with young children over the long term.

- Will the economic and social consequences of COVID-19 have a transient effect on young children's experiences and life chances or will we see scarring that impairs their outcomes in later childhood and beyond?
- What impact will remote and home working have on the time families spend together, and how might this affect early child development?

References

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A complete list of references is available in the full review: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/changing-lives-families-young-children