Despite the rhetoric about the state of families in Britain, in reality governments of all shades, rather than aiming for an overarching ambition, have had to think pragmatically. This has meant focusing on specific policy areas such as early years, parenting, childcare, family law (eg, dispute resolution) and ‘troubled’ families.

This wide range of policies touch most families in some shape or form, and will impact on them through policy changes such as in housing, social care or public health. Understanding the impact of such changes on families is critical. However, should these really be defined as part of family policy, particularly when the drivers are wider economic, social or health factors?

As family policy cuts across departmental responsibilities, a framework to underpin such policy can help ensure consistency and coherence in the Government’s approach.

The review shows that the quality of relationships and family circumstances matter most for improving outcomes. A more precise family policy can focus on the risks and core tensions within family relationships and the financial circumstances that put excessive pressures on daily family life.

Family policy should be guided by four principles, although there may be trade-offs between them:

• policy should empower families to reach their full potential
• interventions to address social consequences should be proportionate rather than coercive
• given the reality of modern families, policy should apply to families regardless of their form or structure
• universal support should be complemented with targeted support for those in genuine need to help secure equal opportunities.

Further information and resources
As well as all information related to the previous government, the evidence paper is archived and does not necessarily reflect the thinking of the current administration. The evidence review nevertheless provides a rich source of facts, figures and analysis. It uses considerable long-term evidence.

Cabinet Office and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008), Families in Britain: An evidence paper. The National Archives.


If you would like a more detailed briefing on this research or to discuss how you can make use of Understanding Society in your research please email info@understanding society.ac.uk.
Government’s role in personal relationships has often been approached with a great deal of caution. Setting the boundary right between the state and the individual is complex. This case study describes how Government has used research (including BHPS) to build a framework to inform robust and reliable cross-cutting family policy.

In 2008, the then Cabinet Office, and the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF - now the Department for Education) decided to put the importance of the family, and issues they face in the 21st Century, under the microscope. The result was Families and Well-being: An evidence paper. Its extensive analysis includes research based on BHPS, the precursor to Understanding Society.

Key findings
According to the evidence review:
• There is no such thing as a typical family in 21st century Britain. They are complex and dynamic, and as an institution, families have evolved and adapted constantly to social changes.

Children are born and raised in all manner of circumstances but families continue to be the bedrock of society, providing a wide range of functions throughout life.

Families with strong and healthy relationships can develop positive outcomes for the whole family.

Increased pluralism of family models need not lead to poorer outcomes, since evidence suggests that the quality of relationships and family circumstances have a greater effect on outcomes. However, post material circumstances, emotional distance, and ill health tend to reinforce other disadvantages for children and adults.

Families have to fulfil their own responsibilities but there are three main reasons why strong and effective family policy is necessary:
• where decisions or circumstances of a family have impact upon society more generally
• where families lack the information they need to make the decisions best for themselves and their members
• where different levels of needs and capabilities result in inequality.

Policy context
‘Stable, secure families’ is now a cross-party political agenda. According to the Coalition Government states that it: ‘believes that strong and stable families are the bedrock of a strong and stable society.

Family issues continue to generate active debate. According to the Government’s Green Paper, Families and Development, published in 2009, the Government believes that strong and stable families are the bedrock of a strong and stable society.

Is the traditional nuclear family dead? If so, what is replacing it?
• What are the trends in family creation, break-up and reformation?

Does this matter to government? What are the wider social consequences of the changing nature of the family? What kind of support might families need?

The model of the nuclear family, the magazine argues, is being replaced by different models. It appears that professionals, working-class natives and immigrants, may be going in different directions.

The research project
The aim of the study was to provide a framework to:
• take stock of family life and map recent trends and changes as well as explore future pressures on families
• understand what lies behind headline trends and changes and highlight the complexity and interdependencies of drivers and outcomes
• understand the implications of these changes and trends for family and wider societal outcomes
• define the role of Government in supporting and intervening in families and derive policy principles to guide a modern family policy.

Understanding Society has modules covering family relationships, childcare, parenting styles, child development, family networks and access to social care, health and retirement planning such as those on employment, income, social care, health and retirement planning are also covered. The study can, for example, help examine how material, emotional or physical outcomes change in response to events in the life of a household - whether this is to do with the birth of a child, divorce and separation or ill-health. With growing diversity in Britain, the ethnic basis in the study offers new opportunities for family research.

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Why Understanding Society and BHPS?
The Cabinet Office/DOCS review uses a very wide range of data and evidence to inform its analysis. The review was not a statement of policy but an attempt to provide a framework for thinking about modern day family policy. Evidence from the BHPS included the trend towards patterns of cohabitation, later marriage in life, the changing age of motherhood (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000; Ermisch and Murphy, 2006). The percentage of working people cohabiting increased from 25 in the 1970s to 103 by the 1990s. There was also an increase in the median age at motherhood, primarily driven by more educated women. The BHPS, its successor Understanding Society, are particularly suited to informing family research and policy because of their wide range of data and evidence to inform its analysis, including questions on family circumstances and relationships. The BHPS provides data going back to 1991 whilst Understanding Society started in 2009 and now incorporates BHPS households who have consented to continue in the successor study.

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