

**The review shows that the quality of relationships and family circumstances matter most for improving outcomes**

**Policy implications – what the research says**

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 with 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.

*The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* (2010), HM Government.

Henricson, C. (2012), *A revolution in family policy: Where we should go from here?* Policy Press.

Ermisch, J. and Francesconi, M. (2000), Cohabitation in Great Britain: not for long, but here to stay, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Volume 163 (2).

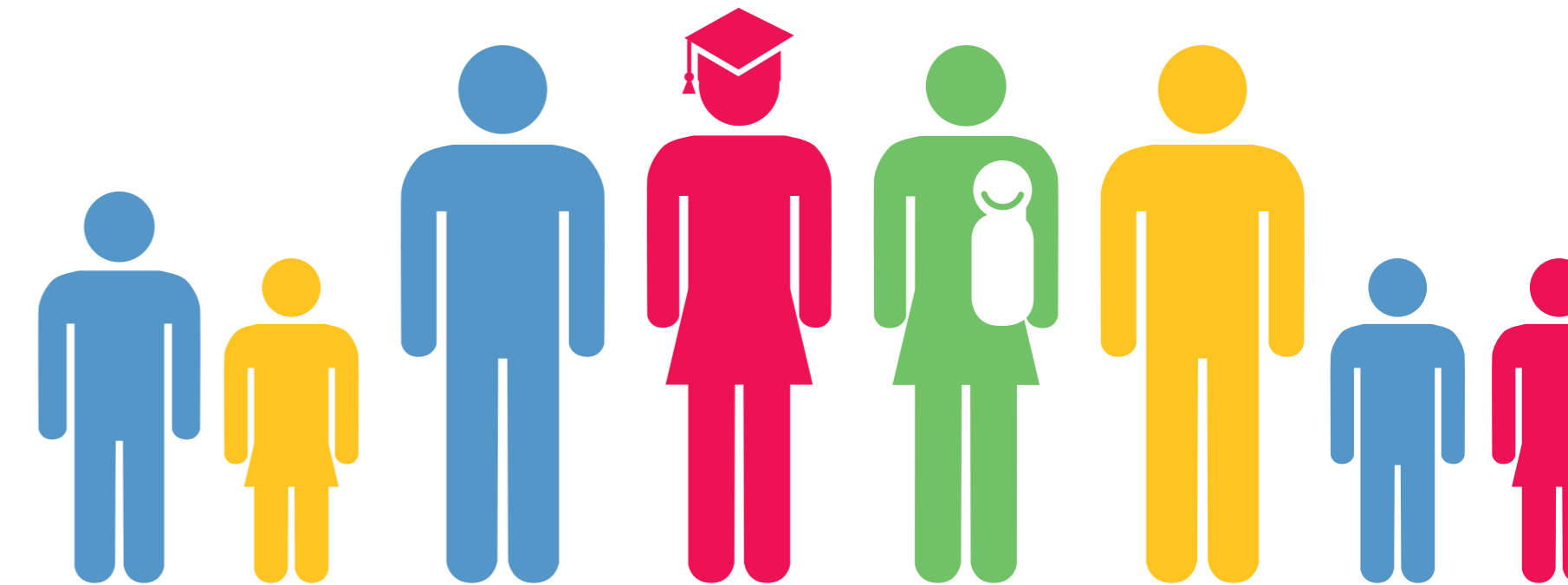
Ermisch, J and Murphy, M. (2006), in *Changing household and family structures and complex living arrangements*, Economic and Social Research Council, Swindon.

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@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:info@understandingsociety.ac.uk).



# Families: the end or simply different?

Using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and Understanding Society to strengthen families



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This case study is part of a series aimed at potential users of Understanding Society data, including: policy makers, researchers and people in a position to influence social policy. If you are using data from Understanding Society and would like to profile your work, please email [info@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:info@understandingsociety.ac.uk)



Understanding Society has been commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The Scientific Research Team is led by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex.

**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?**

Government's role in personal relationships has often been approached with a great deal of caution. Getting 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 in Britain: 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, poor material circumstances, emotional distress, and ill health tend to reinforce other disadvantages for children and adults.

Families have to fulfill their own responsibilities but there are three main reasons why strong and effective family policy is necessary:

- where decisions or circumstances of a family has 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 mantra. For example, the Coalition Government states that it: 'believes that strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society'.

Family issues continue to generate active debate. According to the Economist (16 March, 2013), significant changes are afoot in society which politicians may need to adapt to. Since the 1980s, the number of marriages has collapsed and divorces climbed. The traditional two-parent, male-breadwinner family is becoming extinct, and whilst the proportion of single-parent families has recently been declining, 22% of families are still headed by a single parent (2011).

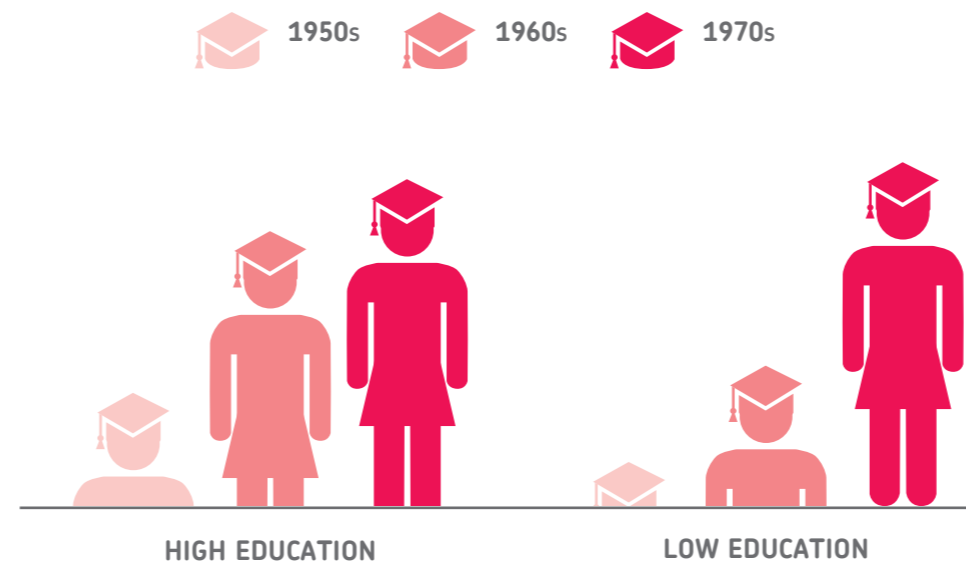
**Patterns of cohabitation, marriage and motherhood**

The percentage of working people cohabiting increased from 2% in the 1970s to 10% by the 1990s. There was also an increase in the median age of motherhood, primarily driven by more educated women.

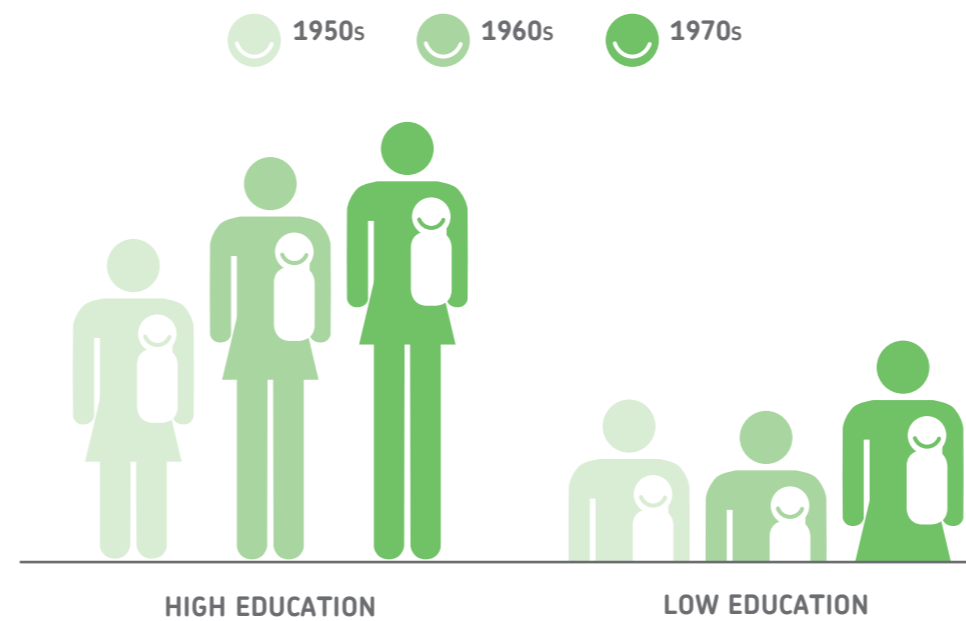
*There is no such thing as a typical family in 21st century Britain. They are complex, dynamic and have evolved and adapted to social changes.*



**HIGHLY EDUCATED WOMEN LED THE MOVE TO LATER MARRIAGE, BUT LOW EDUCATED HAVE NOW TAKEN OVER**



**MEDIAN AGE AT MOTHERHOOD SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED FOR MORE EDUCATED WOMEN**



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

**Why Understanding Society and BHPS?**

The Cabinet Office/DCSF 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 marriages in life and the changing age of motherhood (Ermisch and Francesconi,

2000; Ermisch and Murphy, 2006). The percentage of working people cohabiting increased from 2% in the 1970s to 10% by the 1990s. There was also an increase in the median age of motherhood, primarily driven by more educated women.

The BHPS, and its successor Understanding Society, are particularly suited to informing family research and policy because of their household design, including questions on family circumstances and relationships. The BHPS provides data going back to 1991 whilst Understanding Society started in 2009 and now incorporate BHPS households who have consented to continue in the successor study.

Understanding Society has modules covering family relationships, childcare, parenting styles, child development, family networks and access to children. Broader measures 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 households - whether this is to do with the birth of a child, divorce and separation or ill-health. With growing diversity in Britain, the ethnic boost in the study offers new opportunities for family research.

*Understanding Society has demographic data as well as modules covering family relationships, childcare, parenting styles, child development, family networks and access to children.*