



Evidence shows that poor relationships between parents can damage children's short term and long term wellbeing. It can affect their mental health, overall wellbeing and future employment. [Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families \(IL:HWF\)](#) set out how the Government would monitor and track progress against current analysis using a set of national indicators and programmes. This publication updates the information presented in Improving Lives about rates of Parental Conflict in both couple-parent and separated families.

Main stories

Parental conflict is three times more likely in workless couple-parent families compared to where both parents are working

3 times

The proportion of children in separated families who see their non-resident parent regularly (2015-16)

52%

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Comments? Feedback is welcome

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What you need to know

Evidence shows that strong and secure families, with good-quality relationships, help provide a firm foundation for children to develop into healthy, happy and successful adults.

[*Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families \(IL:HWF\)*](#), published in April 2017, presented a broad range of evidence on the effects of parents being out of work and its link with disadvantage and poorer child outcomes. Following the Government's commitment to track progress in this area the paper announced nine national measures called indicators and committed to providing an annual update on all nine indicators.

This publication provides some more detailed information underlying one of the indicators: the Parental Conflict indicator. This is so we can examine the impacts for children exposed to conflict.

The parental conflict indicator is comprised of two measures:

- the proportion of children in couple-parent families living with parents who report relationship distress
- the proportion of children in separated families who see their non-resident parents regularly

When the couple are still living together, we are measuring the proportion of children in families experiencing relationship distress as evidence suggests this affects child outcomes

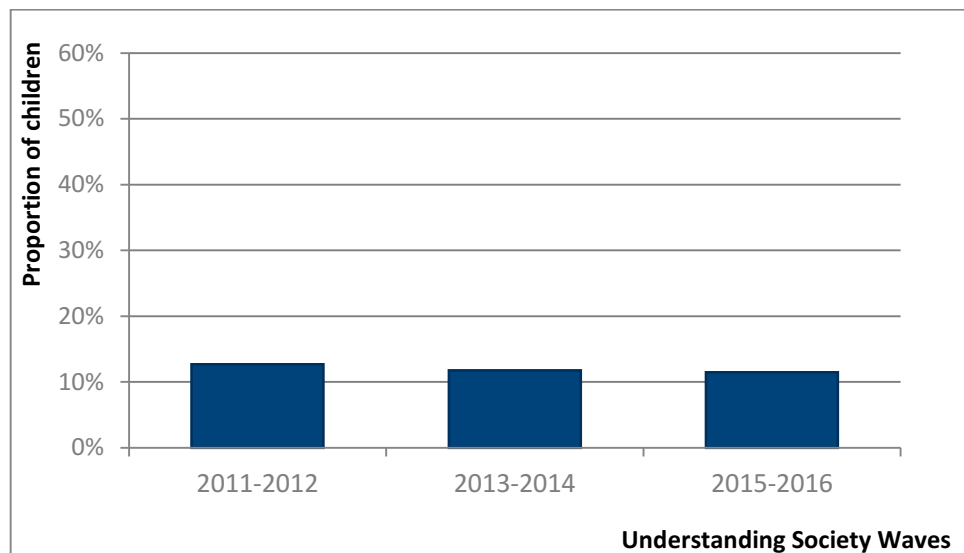
Where parents are separated, analysis of the available data on frequency of contact shows that regular contact between the child and non-resident parent is a good indication of a better relationship between the parents.

That is why we are measuring the proportion of children in separated families who see their non-resident parents regularly. We are using this as a proxy for the existence of reasonable relations between parents.

We will be publishing this on a two-yearly basis in line with the availability of underlying data.

Parental Conflict Indicator – Relationship Distress of Couple-Parent Families

Figure 1: Proportion of children in couple-parent families reporting relationship distress has fallen by two percentage points since 2011- 2012



See **Table 1** in the accompanying spread sheet for the data.

In 2015-16, 11 per cent of children in couple-parent families were living with at least one parent reporting relationship distress. This is two percentage points less than reported in 2011-12.

Details and Methodology

This measure was developed by DWP analysts using cross sectional analysis of Understanding Society survey data. This means that we are looking at the data at a specific point in time and shows what is going on at that time (or 'wave' of data in this case).

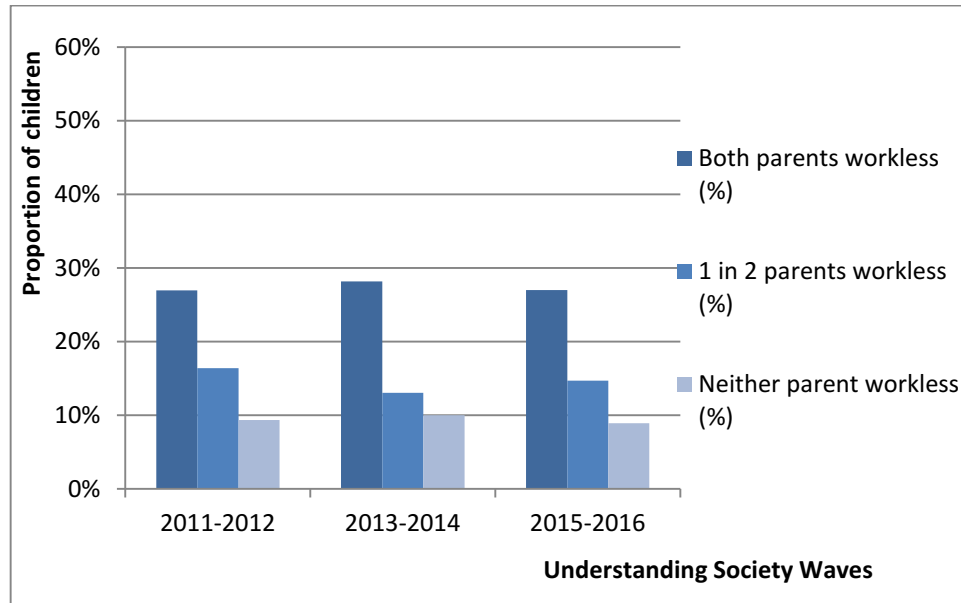
A couple-parent family is classified as experiencing relationship distress if either parent responds that most or all the time they consider divorce, regret living together, quarrel, or get on each other's nerves (in response to questions asking about their relationship with their partner).

These questions were chosen from a wider range available in the survey, as there was a higher link between negative responses to these questions and other negative outcomes of interest.

Further details on how this measure was designed are available in the Notes section on page 6.

Parental Conflict Indicator – Worklessness

Figure 2: Proportion of children in couple-parent families reporting relationship distress by parental workless status 2011- 2016



See **Table 2** in the accompanying spreadsheet for the data.

In 2015-16, children where both parents are workless are **three times more likely** to experience relationship distress than those where both parents are working.

This trend is seen across the waves from 2011-12 to the latest data in 2015-16.

Details and Methodology

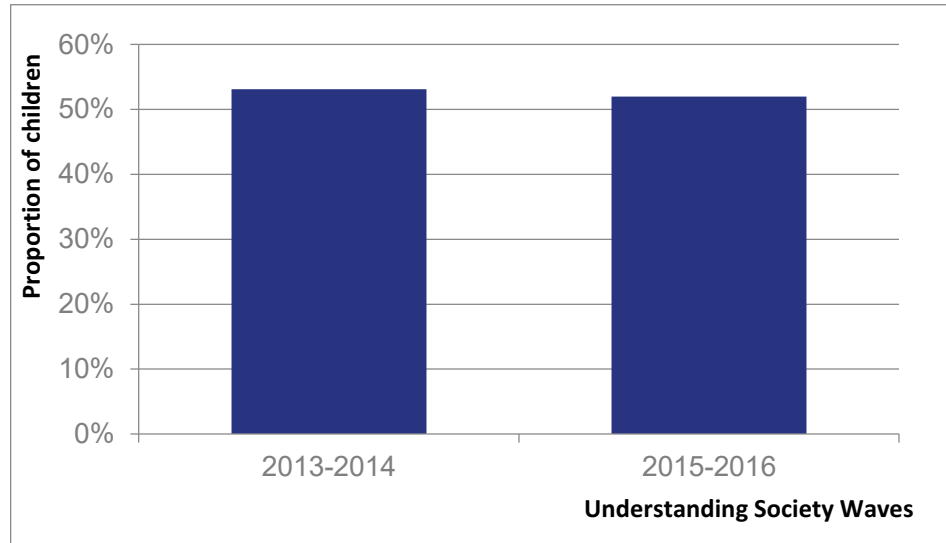
The classification of the family type the child is in is as follows:

- Both parents workless - both parents respond that they are not in paid employment
- One in two parents workless - only one of the parents is not in paid employment
- Neither parent workless - both parents respond that they are in paid employment

Children in households where either parent had a missing response were not included in the sample.

Parental Conflict Indicator – Regularity of contact in separated families

Figure 3: Proportion of children in separated families who see their non-resident parents regularly has fallen by one percentage point since 2013 -14



See **Table 3** in the accompanying spreadsheet for the data.

In 2015-16, 52 per cent of children in separated families saw their non-resident parent regularly – that is, at least fortnightly. This is one percentage point less than in 2013-14.

Details and Methodology

Information around relationship quality between separated parents is missing in the Understanding Society survey (for around 30 per cent of cases). However, analysis of the available data on frequency of contact shows that when contact between the child and the non-resident parent is regular, it gives an indication of reasonable relations between parents. This leads us to focus on the frequency of contact between the non-resident parent and child which is available for most respondents and serves as a proxy for reasonable quality inter-parental relationships among separated families, as well as being a positive outcome in its own right.

All adult respondents are asked whether they are the parent of a child under 20 where the other parent is not in the household. Those who say 'yes' are asked some further questions, including how often the child 'usually sees' the non-resident parent in term time and (separately) in holidays. Results are similar in both questions. We have defined regularly as 'at least fortnightly' during term time.

Questions about contact in separated families are asked of both resident and non-resident parents in the survey. We are using the views of resident parents for this indicator because research suggests much lower response rates to surveys for non-resident parents that do not have contact with their children (for example, see Peacey and Hunt, 2008). This over estimates the rates of contact we see reported by non-resident parents.

About these statistics – Notes on the data

How the couple-parent relationship distress measure is derived

The Understanding Society survey collects information about the quality of couple relationships through ten questions; these questions are:

1. How often do you have a stimulating exchange of ideas? (IDEAS)
2. How often do you calmly discuss something? (DISCUSS)
3. How often do you work together on a project? (WORK TOGETHER)
4. How often do you and your partner "get on each other's nerves"? (NERVES)
5. How often do you consider divorce/separation? (DIVORCE)
6. Do you ever regret that you married or lived together? (REGRET)
7. How often do you and your partner quarrel? (QUARREL)
8. Do you kiss your partner? (KISS)
9. Do you and your partner engage in outside interests together? (INTERESTS)
10. Overall, how happy are you with your relationship? (HAPPINESS)

Each of the ten questions have been analysed by exploring the association between negative responses to the questions and a range of indicators which are directly or indirectly associated with outcomes of children. There are three types of outcomes we have considered, which are:

1. Children's behavioural outcomes: as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire sub-scores: Emotional Symptoms and Conduct Problems.
2. Poor maternal mental health as measured by the 12-item General Health Questionnaire. Poor parental mental health is associated with poorer outcomes for children.
3. Likelihood of separation in the following year of the survey. Parental separation can carry economic risks for both children and parents.

For each of the ten relationship quality questions, the parents have been divided into two groups: those who responded negatively to the question and those who did not. The average score for each of the three outcomes is measured and compared between the two groups of parents. Results of this comparison were used to score each relationship quality question: higher scores were assigned to those questions where a larger difference between the two groups of parents was observed; no points were given if the result of the comparison was not statistically significant. The results of this comparison are summarised as follows (strongest to weakest relationship): 1. REGRET; 2. DIVORCE; 3. QUARREL; 4. NERVES; 5. DISCUSS; 6. KISS; 7. WORK TOGETHER; 8. IDEAS; 9. INTERESTS; 10. HAPPINESS.

The top four questions, REGRET, DIVORCE, QUARREL and NERVES were chosen to inform the indicator. The final relationship indicator has been constructed such that, if either adult answers negatively to any of the four questions, the relationship is considered to be 'distressed'. If either adult did not respond to the four questions, then the quality of the relationship is defined to be 'unknown'.

Data source - Understanding Society survey

The Understanding Society survey is a nationwide household survey, which has been interviewing up to 40,000 households across the UK annually from 2009 onwards. The survey captures a wide range of information about people's social and economic circumstances, attitudes, behaviours and health and contains a rich range of information on families. It is a longitudinal household survey, which means it follows and records information on the same families over time. Questions about relationship quality and frequency of contact for separated parents are asked every two years.

Data source - cross sectional analysis

These figures relate to all children for which data is available in the relevant year.

These indicators were published in [Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families](#) for 2011-12 and 2013-14. Previously children whose families had dropped out were not included in our sample.

We have changed methodology because as we increase the number of waves this approach would increasingly restrict and bias our sample, and it also would mean that the whole back-series would change each time.

Where to find out more

For further reading on the Improving Lives: Helping Working Families analysis and the development of the indicators please see the following:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-evidence-base>

And the policy paper which this evidence base underpins:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families>