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Official Statistics

Parental conflict indicator 2011/12 to 2017/18

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1. Introduction

Evidence shows that poor relationships between parents can damage children's short term and long term wellbeing. In particular, frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict can affect their mental health, overall wellbeing and future employment. Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families>) set out how the government plans to address the root causes of worklessness, as well as monitor and track progress against current analysis using a set of national 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 2 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 measure the proportion of children in separated families who see their non-resident parents regularly. We use this as a proxy for the existence of reasonable relations between parents.

This publication is updated on a 2-yearly (biennial) basis in line with the availability of underlying data.

Changes to the source data mean it is not possible to include a measure of parental conflict for separated parents in this release.

2. Main stories

Parental conflict is twice as likely in workless couple-parent families compared to where both parents are working. This gap has narrowed since 2015 to 2016.

A part of this release has been suspended. Due to a change in the coverage of source data the available data on separated families no longer represents the whole separated parent family population. This means that for the period 2017 to 2018 we are not able to calculate the proportion of children in separated parent families who are in contact with their non-resident parent at least fortnightly. This data issue only applies to the 2017 to 2018 data period, the separated families measure will be available for the period 2019 to 2020 when this statistic is next released in 2022.

3. Relationship distress in couple-parent families

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

Change between chart and table

Understanding Society Survey wave (year)	Proportion of children (%)
2011 to 2012	13%
2013 to 2014	12%
2015 to 2016	11%
2017 to 2018	12%

Understanding Society Survey wave (year)

Proportion of children (%)

2011 to 2012

13%

2013 to 2014

12%

2015 to 2016

11%

2017 to 2018

12%

Source: Understanding Society Survey, waves 3, 5, 7 and 9 (UK) (<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>)

In 2017 to 2018, 12 per cent of children in couple-parent families were living with at least one parent reporting relationship distress. The figure shows no statistically significant variations over time, it is one percentage point less than reported in 2011 to 2012 and one percentage point higher than in 2015 to 2016.

Details and methodology

This measure was developed by Department for Work and Pensions (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.

Read the about these statistics section for further details on how this measure was designed.

4. Relationship distress in couple-parent families by employment status

Figure 2: Proportion of children in couple-parent families reporting relationship distress by parental workless status 2011 to 2018

Change between chart and table

Understanding Society Survey wave (year)	Both parents workless (%)	1 in 2 parents workless (%)	Neither parent workless (%)
2011 to 2012	27%	17%	9%
2013 to 2014	28%	13%	10%
2015 to 2016	27%	15%	9%
2017 to 2018	21%	16%	10%

Understanding Society Survey wave (year)

Both parents workless (%)

1 in 2 parents workless (%)

Neither parent workless (%)

2011 to 2012

27%

17%

9%

2013 to 2014

28%

13%

10%

2015 to 2016

27%

15%

9%

2017 to 2018

21%

16%

10%

Source: Understanding Society Survey, waves 3, 5, 7 and 9 (UK) (<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>)

In 2017 to 2018, children where both parents are workless are twice as likely to experience relationship distress than those where both parents are working.

This gap is seen across the waves from 2011 to 2012 to the latest data in 2017 to 2018, although it has narrowed considerably in this wave with the changes in all 3 categories being statistically significant. In previous waves the relationship distress gap between both parents working and neither parent working showed relationship distress when neither parents are working was 3 times as high.

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.

5. Regularity of contact in separated families – statistic suspended

Due to a change in the coverage of source data the available data for the period 2017 to 2018 does not represent the whole separated parent family population and so has not been included. The data has not been updated since the previous release.

Figure 3: Proportion of children who see their non-resident parents regularly 2013 to 2016

Change between chart and table

Understanding Society Survey wave (year)	Proportion of children (%)
2013 to 2014	53%
2015 to 2016	52%

Understanding Society Survey wave (year)

Proportion of children (%)

2013 to 2014

53%

2015 to 2016

52%

Source: Understanding Society Survey, waves 5 and 7 (UK) (<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>)

In 2015 to 2016, 52% 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 to 2014.

Details and methodology

Information around relationship quality between separated parents is missing in the Understanding Society survey (for around 30% 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 (PDF) (<https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2008-Problematic-contact-after-separation-and-divorce-2008.pdf>)). This over estimates the rates of contact we see reported by non-resident parents.

6. About these statistics

How the couple-parent relationship distress measure is derived

The Understanding Society survey collects information about the quality of couple relationships through 10 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 10 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 type 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 10 relationship quality questions, the parents have been divided into 2 groups:

- those who responded negatively to the question
- those who did not respond negatively to the question

The average score for each of the 3 outcomes is measured and compared between the 2 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 2 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 4 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 4 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 2 years.

Data source – cross sectional analysis

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

These indicators were originally published in Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-evidence-base>) for 2011 to 2012 and 2013 to 2014. For the period 2011 to 2014 children whose families had dropped out were not included in our sample.

We changed the 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.

7. Where to find out more

- read about the Improving Lives: Helping Working Families analysis (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-evidence-base>) and the development of the indicators
- read the policy paper (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families>) which this evidence base underpins
- read the previous release (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/parental-conflict-indicator-201112-to-201516>) of the parental conflict indicator statistics

8. Contacts

Feedback on the content, relevance, accessibility and timeliness of these statistics and any non-media enquiries should be directed by email to:

Analyst: Laura McConnell

Media enquiries: 0203 267 5144

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