Introduction & background

The Government’s goals for children and young people were set out in the Children’s Plan in December 2007. These include strengthening support for all families during the formative early years of their child’s life, and involving parents in their child’s learning. In addressing these goals it is clear that the both understanding of, and communication with, parents and families is key. And to tackle the longstanding issue of inequality in child well-being and achievement, it is essential that communities and groups are identified which have traditionally had low levels of engagement with support and learning services. This may involve different perspectives on ‘hard to reach’ groups.

BMRB Social Research together with Henley Centre Headlight Vision (now The Futures Company1) were commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to conduct a large-scale survey of parents and carers, and of their children and young people, and to develop a robust segmentation of these groups based on their attitudes, aspirations and behaviour. Two complementary outputs resulted: a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the results (BMRB); and a segmentation of both parents and children (The Futures Company).

Key findings (Survey)

- High proportions of parents express positive feelings about their role, with 89% saying they enjoy their family’s time most of the time and 79% happy with how close their family is. The realism of family life is also evident with 45% acknowledging that parenting can sometime be frustrating and 10% feeling they put in lots of effort but see little return.

- Lack of social support, low self-esteem, and feelings of being constrained by family life were strongly correlated with parental discontent. Feelings of low self-worth were related to a lack of confidence in terms of helping children in their education – this link was most pronounced when children reached 16.

- Three in ten children aged 14-19 felt they had no or little control over their future, this feeling heightened among children born to younger mothers and living in lone parent families.

- While the majority of parents and children agreed with each other that they had a close bond, for a sizeable minority relationships had broken down: 16% felt that communication with their parent was pointless as they never listened and 26% felt that their parent was always putting me down in some way.

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1 The Futures Company was launched on 14 October 2008, and is the coming together of Henley Centre HeadlightVision and Yankelovich
Parents who lacked qualifications themselves were less likely than average to be engaged in their child’s education either in terms of their attitudes (28% thought they should have no role in helping their child to achieve at school) or in terms of practical help (21% never help their child with homework). However, parents with higher-level occupations and incomes helped with homework less regularly than other parents.

Four in ten children felt very pushed by their parents, although this could be accompanied by resentment: 54 per cent of them felt that their parent cared more about their progress at school/college than their happiness compared with 28 per cent of children who felt less pushed or not pushed at all.

BME parents placed a stronger emphasis, relative to other ethnic groups, on the importance of career and academic achievement, and were particularly likely to consider that they should play a key role in their child’s educational progress.

Key findings (Segmentation)

- The segmentations were based on adult-child relationships. Nine parent segments and seven child segments were identified based on their attitudinal profile and relationship with the other person.

- Adult segments were labelled as follows: comfortable & confident; committed but discontented; struggling through; supportive but frustrated; relaxed & caring; stepping back; separate lives; family focussed; content & self-fulfilled. Each segment accounted for between 10% and 13% of the parents interviewed.

- Child segments were labelled as follows: growing & learning; happier at home; breaking the rules; anxious & unsure; weakening links; high ambitions; exploring independence. Each segment accounted for between 10% and 20% of the children interviewed.

Objectives

The research focussed on families with resident children aged 0-19. The main aims of the research were to better understand parents and carers in terms of:

- how they exercise their role as parent;
- the relationships between parents and the children/young people in their care;
- parents’ involvement and engagement in their child’s learning, health and wellbeing;
- the impact of their attitudes to work, lifestyle and civic society on the development of their children;
- for children old enough to provide reliable information (10+), how they view their parent’s role, involvement and impact; and
- children’s levels of engagement with the education system and wider society.

In particular, there was a need to gather robust information on “hard to reach” parents and carers, defined in terms of their attitudes to learning and parenting.

The key aim of the project as a whole was therefore to provide insights into family attitudes and dynamics, and how these support the wellbeing, behaviour and learning of children and young people.

These objectives fit within the framework of the Children’s Plan set out in December 2007.

Methodology

Two linked surveys were conducted: a survey of parents; and a survey of children drawn from the same households as interviewed parents. All interviews took place in England between February and April 2008. The survey questionnaires were informed, but not determined, by a separately commissioned qualitative phase exploring segments of parent-child bonds (see end of this Brief for publication details).

The survey was based on a random probability sample of parents of resident children aged 0-19 in England. The sample consisted of a representative core sample together with a boost sample of parents living in deprived areas. A random probability methodology was adopted, with addresses drawn from the Postcode Address File. Where more than one eligible parent at the address, including the situation of a teenage parent living in their own parents’ home, one parent was selected at random.

Interviewing was conducted using Computer

2 Henceforth referred to as "parents"
3 Henceforth referred to as "children"
Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). The parent interview was conducted first. At the start of the parent interview, once information about all members of the household was collected, the computer randomly selected a child within the parenting unit to be used as the “reference child” during the interview. As the interview with both the parent and child focused on the parent/child bond, this enabled questions to be asked about one particular child, rather than all children present. Reference children selected covered the full age-range 0-19. However, only 10-19 year olds were selected for the second part of the survey.

Once the parent interview was complete, and, if the reference child was aged 10-19, the interviewer sought an interview with the child. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions, a section of each questionnaire was administered using Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing (CASI).

The parent interview lasted an average of 53 minutes. A total of 2,572 interviews were conducted with parents, based on a 57% response rate.

The child interview lasted an average of 34 minutes, and a total of 1,154 interviews were achieved with an 87% response rate, based on all parents taking part.

All data were weighted to provide national estimates.

Findings

Underlying parenting philosophies

For parents with younger children under 10, most recognised the importance of shared family time (mealtimes, evenings at home & days out). However, this time tended to diminish with the age of child. In addition, higher income families participated less in family time at home and more in family days out, perhaps reflecting a more “cash rich, time poor” lifestyle.

In general parents of younger children were more self-sacrificing in their views than parents with teenagers. Only a small proportion were willing to admit that work should be given a higher priority than family, although this view was heightened among BME parents. Mothers working full-time were less likely than other mothers, and fathers, to feel that children miss out if both parents work full-time, although around half of them would prefer a better work-life balance.

Parents from higher socio-economic groups in terms of income, education, and occupation placed a relatively greater emphasis on education and the concept of “parental push”.

While there was unanimous support for the idea that children need a strong parental role model, strength of this feeling declined by age of child and when the child was known to engage in a high degree of risky behaviours (including alcohol, drugs, violence).

Parental self-identity and well-being

Higher than average levels of parental dissatisfaction were linked to a number of personal and social factors including low self-esteem, lack of social support, financial difficulties, and children’s behaviour.

Around half of parents felt they lacked sufficient quality time with their child, these feelings being particularly pronounced among fathers working full-time, within father/daughter bonds and when the child was aged 11-14.

One in eight parents lacked confidence helping their child at school. This finding was clearly linked to parents’ own education - although parents’ perception of their educational achievement was more important in this context than parents’ actual achievement. Parents with a poor self-view were increasingly likely to feel unable to help as their child aged – especially at the critical ages of 16-18.

Feelings of frustration and inability to cope were heightened among low-income groups, younger parents, parents with an SEN child and parents whose child was involved in risky behaviours.

Parents from minority ethnic groups were particularly likely to feel constrained by family life. But despite this, they did not necessarily relish the prospect of their children leaving home - higher proportions worried about how they would cope when they reached this stage.

Attitudes of young person towards self, school and life

Eight in ten children felt it was important to get good marks and two in five felt it mostly true that school/college gave them confidence to make decisions. Children from lower income families were less positive about their education, while Black children placed more emphasis on the value of academic achievement and higher education.

Children in lone parent families and/or where their parent was unemployed were most likely to feel
they had little control over their future, and that they had done little in their life to feel proud of.

Prevalence of bullying among the 10-19 year olds was highest among children aged 10-13. Victims of bullying tended to have much lower than average self-esteem and more negative feelings towards school life.

A fifth of children were classified as “extreme risk-takers”, this group characterised by very low self-esteem and strained family relationships. Parents were relatively ignorant of risk-taking behaviours their children had admitted to, especially in relation to taking drugs and bullying other children.

Care and togetherness
Positive assessments of personal bonds with children declined with the age of child. The desire to spend more time with a parent was most frequently expressed by younger children within the 10-19 range and those with a part-time working parent. Three quarters of children considered their relationship with their parent to be a form of friendship.

Most children would choose their mother as a confidante when upset or worried. Over half of children felt comfortable enough with their parent to talk about things that mattered to them on a regular basis. Conversely, one in six felt there is no point in talking to my parent about things that are important to me – they never listen, with fathers more than mothers perceived as not listening.

Nine in ten children indicated that their relationship with their parent incorporated a degree of teasing, and two thirds reported their parent showed them affection both verbally and physically. While virtually all children said they received praise from their parent, for 15 per cent the praise was inconsistent and for a further 4 per cent it was lacking altogether. A quarter claimed that their parent was always putting me down in some way.

Control
Although the vast majority of parents said children get on best with a regular routine, they appear to fall short of this standard in practice - almost half of children said there are no fixed rules where they live. However, children were happiest in situations where there were no fixed rules.

Just over half of children claimed their parent did not have to keep asking them to do things and most helped with household chores. However, children often recognised that they could do more: three times as many said they could do more as said they did too much, and over half said their parents were not strict about making them do household chores.

There was evidence of some tension over friends. While six in ten parents thought they knew all their child’s friends, only three in ten children thought this to be the case. Half of parents said they were unhappy with at least some of their child’s friends.

Conflict management
From a parental perspective, arguments are more frequent with pre-teen than older children. However, children think they argue more, and the biggest disparity between responses is found among older teenagers (17-19 year olds). Conflict frequency increased when the parent had a more inconsistent approach to behaviour management.

Four different self-reported approaches to conflict management were identified from the survey data. Around half said that resolution of conflict was usually attempted and agreement reached (“managing conflict well”) while seven per cent said the same but they tended not to get anywhere (“managing conflict badly”). A third said that no resolution was usually necessary, while six per cent were “conflict avoidant” thinking it better to keep the peace.

Children were more likely to say that confrontations arose when parents were classified as “avoiding conflict” or “managing conflict badly”. Among parents self-classified as “managing conflict well” or where no management was deemed necessary, children were more likely to say that disagreements were resolved non-confrontationally.

Parent/child bonds where children were involved in high levels of risky behaviour were characterised by high levels of conflict, parents adopting a more inconsistent approach to behaviour management, and higher than average proportions of parents classified as “avoiding conflict” or “managing conflict badly”.

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Parental engagement in learning and education

While most parents felt that they should take on the onus of responsibility for teaching children about sex and relationships, when it came to educational matters (learning to read, doing well at school) parents felt that responsibility should be shared between parents and the school or with the school directly.

Most parents (two-thirds) acknowledged that they should have a role in helping their children to do their best at school. A fifth attributed sole responsibility to the school, this rising to 28% when the parent lacked qualifications.

While parents from higher socio-economic groups were more likely than other parents to offer any support to their child in terms of homework, they were less likely to offer this on a regular basis. This may be partly attributable to the longer working hours of this group, although mothers working full-time provide more help than fathers in this situation.

Only three in ten parents consider themselves very involved in their child’s education although about half of all children generally believe that parents know a lot about their progress at school.

Only eight percent of parents thought that children aged 10-15 should make their own choices in terms of what subjects to study. However, around half of all children who had passed this stage said that they had been the sole decision-maker in their year 10 subject choices. Non-involvement of parents was most common in families with lower incomes and with low parental qualifications.

Aspirations for young person’s future

Although the majority of children aged 10-15 wanted to continue in education post-16, more children than parents cited a desire to take on a job at this age. Most parents, even those with pre-school children, had ambitions for their children. Socio-economic status was a key differentiator in aspirations of both children and their parents with those in better off households more likely to want to continue studying and attend university.

Four out of ten children felt very pushed by their parents with BME children particularly likely to feel this. BME parents were also far more likely to prioritise their child getting good qualifications over them finding a job they would be happy in.

When parents worried about them not reaching their true potential, children were more likely to feel pushed. There was a degree of resentment among children who felt pushed, with heightened levels feeling that my parent thinks I’m useless and my parent cares more about how well I do at school/college than whether or not I am happy.

More parents perceived their child to be doing better than their peers than worse indicating a degree of false optimism. Parents were not always aware when children were struggling: only 38% of parents concurred with their child’s view when the child thought they were doing worse than their peers.

Segmentations

The segmentations were targeted to address the key question: which factors and aspects of family dynamics influence parents’ and children’s attitudes, aspirations and outcomes?

The first segmentation aimed to understand parents in the context of their children, and the second to understand children and their relations with their parents. The segmentations aimed to allow particular focus on “harder to reach” parents and their children, and by focussing on attitudes to define the segments, enable a different view from that found in demographically or geographically based social research.

The segments were identified using cluster analysis based on seven key dimensions. Nine parent segments and seven child segments were identified, each containing individuals with broadly similar responses along the adult/child key dimensions. These were labelled as follows (proportion of the sample shown in brackets):

**ADULTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Comfortable &amp; confident (11%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Committed but discontented (11%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Struggling through (12%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>Supportive but frustrated (10%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>Relaxed &amp; caring (12%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6</td>
<td>Stepping back (12%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td>Separate lives (10%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8</td>
<td>Family focussed (10%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9</td>
<td>Content &amp; self-fulfilled (13%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHILDREN

C1: Growing & learning (14%)
C2: Happier at home (17%)
C3: Breaking the rules (11%)
C4: Anxious & unsure (10%)
C5: Weakening links (11%)
C6: High ambitions (20%)
C7: Exploring independence (17%)

Examples of two segments (one adult and one child) are shown to illustrate how the segments map onto the key dimensions.

Example of adult segment: A2 *Committed but discontented*

Example of child segment: C5 *Weakening links*
Additional information

Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR059) are available by phoning the DCSF Publications Orderline on 0845 60 222 60. Reports are priced at £4.95.

The initial qualitative study on child-parent segments is:

Both reports can be accessed at:
www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about the research in this Brief can be obtained from Stephen Witt, DCSF, W606, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.

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*The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.*