

Customer Voice Research Family Relationship Support

Sherbert Research



**Research Report No
DCSF-RR203**

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Research objectives

To understand parents' reactions to the proposition, "Strong, stable family relationships have positive benefits for children, adults, communities and society" and ascertain the role parents think 'the State' should play in strengthening relationships.

More specifically this research:

- Explored what people value and appreciate in their relationships with each other as a family generally and as a couple in their role as parents specifically
 - looking for language used and experiences talked about
- Established the stresses and strains on parents' relationships looking at the demands of day to day, as well as major life events
- Explored how parents think stresses and strains impact on family life
- Explored the different strategies parents employ to manage the stresses and resolve problems
- Ascertained whether they felt they needed further support and who they could imagine giving them support
- Establish what, if any, support they imagine the Government could provide
- Tested a range of words and their overall understanding of these words
- Explored parents current knowledge of the role that schools play in teaching children about health, emotional, social issues

Ultimately this research provided the DCSF with a contextual understanding of family relationships, the support that parents feel they need and some insight into the role Government may be able to play, feeding into the Green Paper

Research methodology

- 8, One and a half hour triads (3 people per session) with Parents and Carers using the DCSF Segmentation, all were recruited based on attitudinal statements Four with Mums, Four with Dads
 - One with 'Struggling Through' Mums
 - One with 'Struggling Through' Dads
 - One with 'Relaxed and Caring' Mums
 - One with 'Relaxed and Caring' Dads
 - One with 'Stepping Back' Mums
 - One with 'Stepping Back' Dads
 - One with 'Committed but Discontented' Mums
 - One with 'Committed but Discontented' Dads

Followed by four, two hour in home family observations with four of the respondents from the depths - chosen at the end of the triads

- Two with Mums, her husband/ partner and children
 - One with 'Struggling Through' Mums
 - One with 'Committed but Discontent' Mums
- Two with Dads, his wife/partner and children
 - One with 'Relaxed and Caring' Dads
 - One with 'Stepping Back' Dads

Dates and locations

July 22 York (Rural), July 23 in home in York

July 22 London (drawn from range of boroughs in Zones 1 and 2), July 23 in home in London

July 23 Newcastle, July 24 in home Newcastle

July 29 Nottingham (Urban), July 30 in home in Nottingham

The research methods used in this project allowed for breadth and depth. Phase one involved speaking to parents in single gender sessions, recruited by segment. Followed by phase two whereby researchers went to the home of one of the respondents and spoke with other members of their family including all the children. This served to triangulate the information, allowing for recommendations to be rooted clearly in the context of children and families.

Key findings

This research revealed that for many, the couple relationship came under most stress when day to day life felt unmanageable or overwhelming. At best, some respondents reported sharing responsibilities, making time for their children and for themselves as a couple. They also reported trying to talk problems through calmly, productively and away from the children. These tended to be 'Relaxed and Caring' and 'Committed but Discontented'. At worst, other respondents reported feeling harried and unsupported. They seemed to have little time for themselves or the couple and admitted to handling conflict in aggressive and unconstructive ways. They tended to be 'Struggling Through' and 'Stepping Back'.

The majority in this sample recognised that the couple relationship was central to the family's overall happiness and well being; however many recognised that it could be vulnerable to extraneous stresses.

Across the sample, parents seemed to strongly believe in the notion:

“Strong, stable family relationships have positive benefits for children, adults, communities and society”

Although for some people the statement felt more of an ideal than a reality as not all of them saw themselves in strong stable relationships. However, even those people who expressed frustrations and anxieties during the session, agreed with the statement. Most could see that functional and positive parenting and the relationship within the family was the bedrock of their kids' futures. They believed it was their responsibility to support their children in coping with different emotions, understanding conflict and showing that arguments can be resolved.

Even though a few in this sample found the statement wordy, they could see how the morals and values could promote a virtuous cycle.

Role of the State

Perceptions of the role of the State in providing support largely reflected people's politics and previous experience of service provision and delivery. For example the majority questioned whether direct intervention was appropriate as it could feel a bit intrusive (e.g. State sponsored therapy), although most like the idea of a subsidised/ free but private counselling service. Most seemed to feel more comfortable with the Government supporting families on a practical or financial level rather than an emotional one.

Support and provision of services seemed consistently inconsistent across the sample. It seemed that there was some regional variation depending on Local Authorities. When people reported positive experiences (e.g. with Health Visitors, Sure Start, supplementary support at school, posters and information) they seemed to understand that the State could have a supporting role and were more open to it. However, some respondents reported feeling let down by services and that availability was fragmented especially around childcare e.g. after school clubs, school holiday support which they found disappointing. Many also claimed they were unsure of where to find information about services although some looked at DirectGov, LA websites or 'googled' what they were looking for, and many relied on word of mouth.

There was a strong sense across the sample that the Government stepped in for families at risk rather than families 'like them'. Also unmarried couples believed that married couples received more support than them!

There was some acknowledgement of support currently offered e.g. childcare credits, children's centres. Furthermore there were positive activities that parents reported enjoying as a family (e.g. going to outdoor play spaces), that were supported by Local Authorities that they did not directly acknowledge as being from the Government.

Areas for support

Across the sample, respondents were able to identify areas where they would value support. Although many imagined receiving support from the people in their lives such as family, friends, church rather than direct Government intervention.

The types of support that people felt they either received currently or would appreciate seemed to fall into 3 categories: emotional, practical and financial.

Types of support that were top of mind seemed to differ by gender as well as segment; men called for financial support, whereas women also admitted needing emotional and practical support.

Emotional support - from a trusted service and doesn't feel 'state led'

- Learning to communicate
- Giving and receiving empathy
- Therapeutic support
- Mentoring / peer support schemes
- Parenting skills
- Coping strategies
- Information and advice leaflets
- Understanding how to handle conflict /conflict resolution

Financial support - Information needs to be easy to access

- Tax credits (belief that marriage offers tax breaks!)
- Subsidised (not free)
- School holiday schemes
- Cheaper childcare
- Free pre-school provision (under 3)
- Subsidised family tickets
- Free counselling
- Free spaces / parks to take children

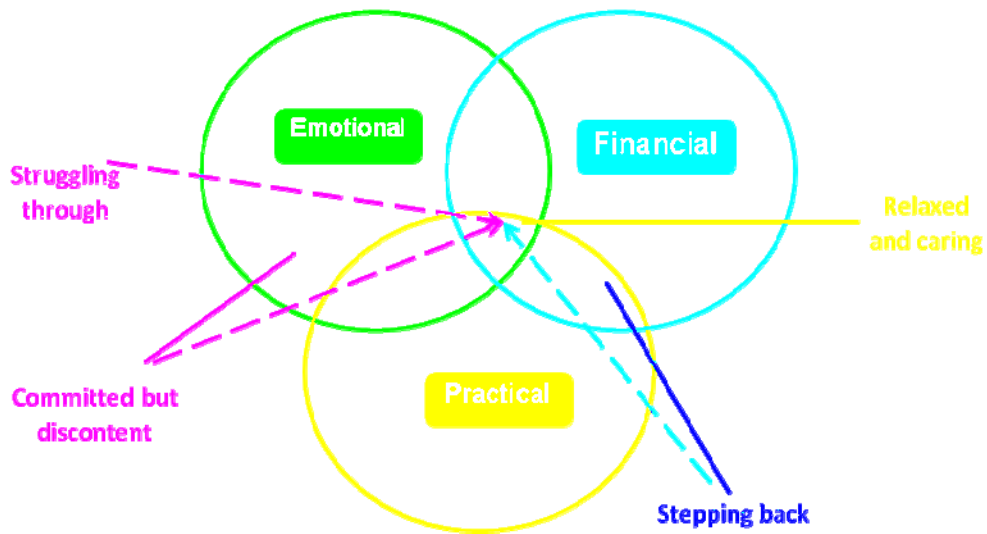
Practical support - Expand existing provision

- Childcare (breakfast and afterschool - wrap around)
- Childcare (early years provision)
- Subsidised holiday schemes
- Extended time childcare
- Flexi work
- Shift work
- Babysitting services

The segments in more detail

- **Struggling Through** parents felt day to day family life was chaotic. Stress came from being time poor, having financial worries, tiredness and arguments. They dealt with conflict by regularly arguing in front of the children and sometimes struggled to communicate in other ways.
 - **Support:** Some mums would appreciate free counselling but worried about information going onto their medical records; others would like subsidised and flexible childcare if both working. Many were unaware of support mechanisms available.
 - **Role of state:** Couples didn't see it as the state's role to intervene. Cost was also a barrier in seeking support.
- **Relaxed and Caring** parents seemed happy in their day to day life and didn't tend to get stressed by it. They dealt with conflict by talking things through and were conscious not to argue in front of the children.
 - **Support:** Mums would like flexible child care provision. Dads felt quite self sufficient and did not feel the need for extra support, although extra information and advice on education and well-being would be welcomed by both.
 - **Role of state:** To provide subsidised childcare (after school and school holidays). They would like consistent and coordinated services, and more encouragement to employers to provide flexible working arrangements.
- **Stepping Back** parents were resigned to the couple relationship and seemed to enjoy family life less often than some of the other segments. Stress came from feeling undervalued and sharing the discipline of the children. They deal with conflict by internalising stress.
 - **Support:** Child care support for younger kids and support through schools for older kids. Clear and consistent information about family health and wellbeing from regular point of contact.
 - **Role of state:** Joined up government support where needed and financial support to relieve some of the burden.
- **Committed but Discontented** parents seemed to make an effort to keep harmony within the family and couple. Stress came from trying to juggle work and family life and they feel guilty for not spending more time with their partner or children.
 - **Support:** They would appreciate some financial support (subsidised childcare, tax credits etc), reassurance that government services aren't just for those 'at risk' and clear information and advice as to what's available.
 - **Role of state:** Some felt invisible, there was a perception that they were not well served by government initiatives. They would like more information on practical matters and financial subsidies.

This graph illustrates the position of the different segments looking at the three key areas of support; Financial; Emotional and Practical.



Conclusions

There may be a role for the Government to support relationships and therefore families. However it seems this would be best expressed in practical and financial ways, through the provision of services and relevant financial subsidies that help relieve some of the pressure that families reported experiencing.

It seemed that there is also scope to offer independent emotional support, sensitively delivered, to families through free / subsidised relationship counselling, conflict prevention and conflict resolution training and support.

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