

## PARENTING, CARING AND EDUCATING

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 7/1 *Parenting, Caring and Educating*, by Yolande Muschamp, Felicity Wikeley, Tess Ridge and Maria Balarin. The report was commissioned to review published research on changes in patterns of parenting and caring in the pre-adolescent years and their impact on children's primary education. Drawing on a representative selection of the extensive literature, together with government data and material from bibliographic and research institute data bases, the report examines changes in the structure and formation of the family, and in parenting practice, home-school relationships and the role of the home in supporting pupil learning. **The full report, including details of sources consulted, is available online at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).**

### The structure and formation of the family

- Demographic and social changes in the last half of the twentieth century have wrought considerable transformation in family formation and structure. Increasing instability in family life has resulted in greater diversity and complexity of family forms.
- Children in the twenty-first century are more likely than forty years ago to experience parental separation, lone parenting, step families, visiting families, half-siblings and being an only child.
- These trends are not confined to England and the United Kingdom. There is increasing diversity of family structure across Europe where many countries are also experiencing reduced fertility, later child bearing and increases in the proportion of smaller families and numbers of lone parents.

### Parenting practices

- As the complexity of family forms grows, more children will experience shared care involving parenting in different locations across time and space. Children may have two very different sets of living arrangements with equally different parenting practices.
- Despite debates about the changing role of men, traditional assumptions about women's roles remain relatively fixed. Fathers in England now work the longest hours in Europe and poor childcare provision remains an issue especially for parents who work unsocial hours.
- About 32 per cent of mothers and 46 per cent of fathers who work unsocial hours believe their job limits the time that they spend reading and playing with their children or helping with their homework. This compares with 12 per cent of mothers and 18 per cent of fathers who work between 9 am and 5 pm.
- Families with no paid employment rely on benefits and live in relative poverty. 2006 saw the first rise in the number of children living in relative poverty for many years, with 3.8 million children now living below the poverty line.

## **The policy context of home and school**

- The promotion of a market ideology for public administration has resulted in a much more active role for parents in their relations with schools. Parental choice of school has been established as the main driver of 'excellence' and parents are now seen as 'consumers' of educational services.
- An emphasis on establishing home-school partnerships addressed some of the problems of the deficit model of parenting prevalent in previous decades. The balance shifted, at least in the rhetoric, to 'a notion of a home-school alliance that promotes the wider interests of children and the community' but there still remain conflicting roles for schools.
- Home-school communication is seen as important in securing greater pupil achievement. The White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools* stressed parents' rights to be regularly and adequately informed of their children's progress in school.

## **Home-school relations**

- Social class is a key influencing factor in parent-school relationships. Parents and children need to understand 'the rules of the game' that operate in schools if the partnership is to be successful.
- Parents exert their influence indirectly by shaping their child's self-concept as a learner and through setting high aspirations, rather than through working directly with schools. At-home good parenting has more effect on children's achievement, adjustment and attainment than in-school parental involvement.
- Simple activities in the home can be educationally advantageous and homes can be the source of a fund of knowledge which if mobilised can transform classrooms. This suggests the need for a broader view of the parental role in learning than is currently the norm in schools.
- Computers are often more available at home although their use by parents as an educational tool is limited. Whilst parents assume that computers have an educational effect they appear to be uncomfortable in taking on a quasi-teaching role with their children, and express concerns about the implications of importing the classroom into the home.

## **Conclusions**

- The changing patterns of parenting and child care present significant challenges for the primary school.
- The diversity in family structures brings with it complex administrative demands for home-school communication and a complex array of family relationships for teachers to understand and engage with.
- The school remains a primary source of community-based support for working parents and carers, although the impact of complex employment arrangements adds to the demands for childcare support beyond the school day.
- The most challenging home circumstance, which cannot be viewed optimistically, is the increasing number of children living in relative poverty. Poverty remains a significant factor in the lives of many children, with the inevitable impact on children's health and wellbeing and on their capacity to engage fully in school activities, both financially and emotionally.
- In reality, home-school relationships are between individual parents and individual teachers, all of whom have the interests of the child at heart. Parents are not a homogeneous group but neither are teachers, and attempts to improve the relationship between these groups need to acknowledge the strengths and expertise of each.
- Teachers need to establish more fruitful links between home and school which build on the support for children's learning that already exists in the home and community. Further research as to how this can happen would be helpful.

- Further research is also needed into the lives of children and how their complex family relations, and the caring roles which many children themselves undertake, impact on their education.
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## FURTHER INFORMATION

**The report on which this briefing is based:** Muschamp, Y., Wikeley, F., Ridge, T. and Balarin, M. (2007) *Parenting, Caring and Educating* (Primary Review Research Survey 7/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-06-3.

The report is available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk) and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Parenting, Caring and Educating**.

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