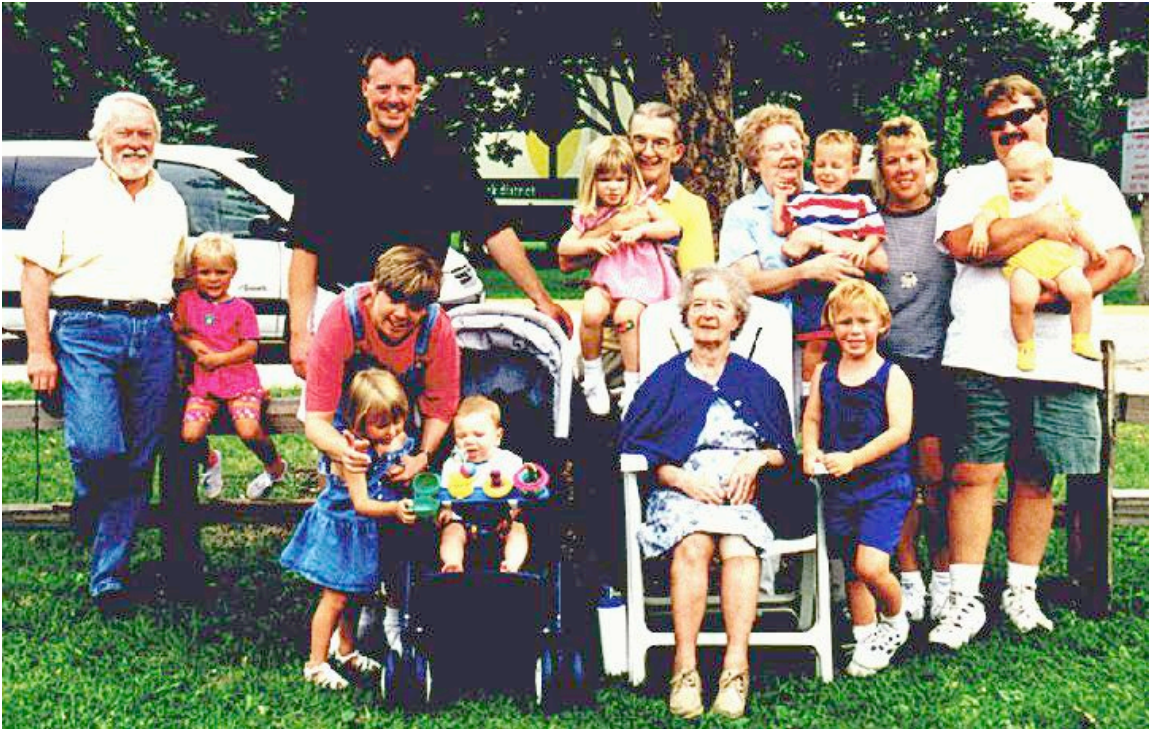


Family and relationship trends for TV series



KEY FAMILY TRENDS

Context

We can no longer make any assumptions about families. There is no doubt that family, like marriage, is still a powerful institution and one pregnant with emotional meaning. It is the first social setting in which most of us grow up. Small wonder, then, that it shapes us the rest of our lives and goes on to influence the new families we create.

Family life itself is no longer as predictable nor even as desirable to some as it once was, although there is still a rather romantic belief in the ultimate security of family life. But there is a discrepancy between the nostalgic ideal of family and the actuality of modern family life today.

“The major shift in modern Western society has been not in the family itself, but in the culture surrounding it. While it is accepted that the family does, and should, play a central role in nurturing individuals and raising children, there is a growing ambivalence about people’s capacity to succeed at this task.” Jennie Bristow, Spiked online.

Some people think that there is little future for the family. But families are highly valued and continue to be. Even if their own families are fractured and difficult, people still want to watch, gossip and read about other people’s families.

If we consider the high viewing figures for nightly ‘soaps’ it suggests that there is a great interest in family life, even if it is only representative of dysfunctional television families. Family2000.

Families are fundamental to human life. It is just that we are in the process of recreating them.

“In a significant minority of people's lives by 2020, family will not play a major role and friendship will be much more important in these people's emotional lives.” The Guardian.

Family life among 30-year olds is characterised by instability. Partnership breakdown continues to rise. People born in 1970 are twice as likely as those born 12 years before to have experienced at least one partnership breakdown by 30. ESRC (2004) Stepfamilies and lone parents: Changing family life in Britain. Jun, online.

People are more likely to view life as a series of temporary stages, in which marriage, cohabitation and single-parenthood may all feature for a season. Stephanie Merritt, author of “Real”, published by Faber on 9 June 2005.



Changing definitions

We can see families in at least two ways – blood and self-created. The biggest changes are in technology-assisted conception and in self-created families.

The blended or stepfamily

A couple may bring children from previous relationships into their current relationship. These families may operate every day of the week, at weekends, or only during school holidays. As 65% of remarriages now include parents, blended families are the most rapidly growing family type.

“Because of the high rate of divorce, and the incidence of blended families, it is likely that some boomers will be taking care of children they did not give birth to, or paying someone else for their care.” Demos (UK).

- In 2001-2, 83% of stepfamilies in Britain consisted of a stepfather and natural mother. This is because children usually stay with their mother following the break-up of a partnership.
- More men are raising other men's children while, in many cases, their own children grow up elsewhere.
- No fewer than 17% of dads born in 1970 are stepfathers, nearly double the number among men born just 12 years earlier.
- Where people take on someone else's children, this is known as “social” rather than “biological” parenting.

The single parent family

- The proportion of lone-parent households with dependent children almost doubled from 1971-2003, now accounting for 5% of households.

- Teenage mothers make up only 3% of lone parents at any one time, while three in five single mothers have previously been married to their children's fathers.
- Single parenting is so acceptable, that many women now actively choose it (better perhaps to choose it than to be forced into it) and see that having a career and/or a baby is more important than having a man.
- Websites market sperm for women who want the child but not the husband.

The gay family

“Reported” same-sex couples are a rarity throughout most of Britain. Less than a third of 1% of couples define themselves as same-sex and, in many areas, there are almost no same-sex couples. Brighton and Hove remains the gayest town in Britain, where 2.67% of all couples define themselves as same-sex.

- There is a four-parent gay and lesbian family in Brighton. Sue and Kim wanted to have children together (Kim already had two from a previous marriage). They met John, a gay man, who donated his sperm. The women went on to have two kids, Jack and Kate. John and his partner, Paul, share care and say the arrangement (where the children spend time at weekends and some weekdays with John and Paul) works well.
- Many lesbian mother groups have sprung up across the UK, especially in larger cities. For the last few years in Manchester there has been a monthly social event for lesbians and their children, which, according to two mums, provides a sense of community for the children, as well as a support network for the mothers.



The unmarried family

Unmarried cohabiting parenthood is quite common across the UK. The average is 31% of all parents and even the lowest scoring areas record 12%. In the very highest, like Hull, Blaenau Gwent, Scunthorpe and Dundee, around half of births to all couples are to unmarried parents.

“Married heterosexuals are perceived as having a more ‘valid’ relationship than those who merely cohabit, but cohabiting is still ‘better’ than living apart if you have children,

while gay couples are still fighting for the right to do both on equal terms.” Stephanie Merritt, author of “Real”.

The transgenerational family

The next 20 years will see the rapid growth of beanpole families. This is a multigenerational family, where people are spread over several generations, but fewer living relatives within these generations. This creates a beanpole shape, rather than the more traditional pyramid shape.

- It has created the “sandwich generation” that has to work, look after elderly parents, and care for grandchildren.
- Many grandparents have more input into families than they once did, taking over babysitting roles on a regular basis and in some cases, even providing parenting when the natural parents cannot.
- In Britain 61% of grandparents see their grandchildren at least once a week and 78% at least once a month. Almost as many have contact by letter, phone, fax or email.
- The Glasgow Southern General Hospital runs antenatal classes for grandparents to teach them the importance of breastfeeding, as a lot of grannies used to bottle feed. Other topics include cot-death prevention, car safety and how to spot post-natal depression in a new mum.

Pragmatic families

These are families that stay together because it offers a more secure lifestyle than being apart, and they will have more money to spend. However, the parents are not happy together.

- One in five men and nearly one in four women born in 1970 claim they are unhappy with their partner, compared with just one in 30 among those born in 1958.

Kinships

The idea of kinships is drawn from anthropology. It refers to anyone with whom we have an affinity, not just blood relations. It seems to be a very apt expression for the direction in which society is heading, with fewer traditional families, and the tendency to commit later and surround oneself with friends instead.

Christine Hardyment's vision of "maypole families" (or families of choice) may also emerge as a growing segment, with the understanding that kith and kin can be extended to include friends, godparents, and even ex-partners. (Hardyment, C. *Predictions: The future of the family*. Phoenix, 2000.)

Parents are being watched

“From state legislation instructing people how to raise their children to corporate attempts to correct their employees' work-life balance to books on the pitfalls of being a stay-home/working mother, the message to the modern family is one that emphasises its vulnerability and its need for external support.” Jennie Bristow, Spiked online.

- Frank Furedi has described the preoccupation with child-centredness, and the barrage of official advice on pregnancy and parenting, as the “emptying-out” of adult identity. (Furedi, F. (2001) *Paranoid parenting*. Allen Lane. 2001.)

- Sharon Hays argues that women's increased participation in the labour market has been complemented by the aggressive promotion of "intensive mothering", which preaches the need for the parent - whatever their working situation - to hold the needs of the child paramount. (*The cultural contradictions of motherhood*, Sharon Hays. Yale University Press, 1996.)

Bad parenting is taboo

The mommy wars pitch stay-at-home mums with career mums and make sure both sides feel guilty about their choices, eg, *The Mommy Myth*.

- Among married or cohabiting women with a child under five, 19% work full time (10% of lone mums); rising to 41% (46% for lone mums) by the time the youngest child is 16.
- Children in Britain are likely to achieve better GCSE results if their fathers are more involved with their development.
- Children are more likely to experience emotional and behavioural problems if there is conflict between the parents.
- Information like this can put pressure on to be "good" parents.

"Parents who are well-educated, successful, and healthy tend to have children who do well in school tests, but it doesn't seem to much matter whether a child is taken to museums or frequently read to or plopped in front of the television. For parents who are obsessed with child-rearing technique this may be sobering news." Levitt, S. and Dubner, S. (2005) *Freakonomics*, HarperCollins, Apr.

Family as sanctuary

The downside of being open to scrutiny is that families are supposed to be a sanctuary, a private realm separate from government, the market, or the state.

Has the family become public property?

"Once the family is opened up to the gaze and regulation of the state, to live as a 'family' is to subject oneself to more external pressures and sanctions." Jennie Bristow, *Spiked online*.

One extreme response to this is neutronic families - this is effectively the family turning inwards and only family members and family activities and behaviours are important. They have stylised family behaviours like the family hug. They also shun the rest of the community.

Teen abuse

A 2005 survey of 2,000 British teenagers by NSPCC found:

- 33% experience some form of domestic violence or abuse at home
- 11% see their parents hit each other
- 20% have been hit by their parents
- 31% think cheating gives a guy the right to get aggressive
- A clear link between girls experiencing domestic abuse in the home and then being abused by boyfriends. NSPCC.
- Parents in the South east are very likely to lose their cool with their teenage girls - more than a quarter scream and shout at them regularly and a quarter of teenage girls in

London admit to “feeling frightened” of their parents. One in five is hit regularly by parents. (NSPCC (2005) Teen abuse survey of Great Britain. Mar 21, online.)

Being parents later in life

- A November 2003 study found nearly 90% of people in their 20s and 30s either had (54 %) or said they wanted (34 %) children. However, of those in their late 30s who wanted children, 24% did not yet have them.
- People leaving parenthood until later in life are more likely to plan children, but are no more likely to be in control of when and if they have kids. Average age is currently 29.3.
- One response to fear of financial loss is “consumption smoothing”, meaning they seek to ensure enough income to minimise the impact of children on their consumption.
- In the UK the number of women over 40 having babies has doubled in the past 10 years and now stands at more than 2%, while government studies show that one in seven babies are born to women over 35.
- Madonna gave birth at 41 to her second child in September 2000, Iman, David Bowie's wife, gave birth in August 2000 at the age of 44, and Cherie Blair's surprise pregnancy came at the age of 45.
- Having a baby between 25 and 35 years of age is ideal; between 35 and 45, it is safe enough but there are risks of decreasing fertility, miscarriage and chromosomal abnormalities; and after 45, it is only for the healthy and wealthy, according to Professor de Swiet, Queen Charlotte's Hospital.

"I am impressed by how tired and ill older mothers become, suffering from extreme breathlessness, postural hypotension, syncope and palpitations caused by nothing other than pregnancy". Professor de Swiet.

Older parents seem to have more intelligent children. This may be because they are parents with careers who are more intelligent. Recent studies suggest that intelligence is genetic, and even though adopted children of smart parents will tend to have high IQ, this will fade over time and they will become more like their genetic parents.

Growth of remote parenting

Imagine if you could parent via a remote control button!

- Webcams might by 2020 be playing the role the telephone did in the 20th century, a vital communication link for families who might live hundreds of miles apart. Already some nurseries are linked up to their parents' offices by webcam.
- Today's new forms of communication – mobiles, email, SMS – may appear rather detached but can still be time with family. Family members talking to each other, account for a large proportion of telephone usage in the UK.
- *"And I think there's a certain amount of remote parenting involved. 95% of children under the age of 14 (who own a mobile phone) are given a mobile phone by their parents. Parents like to know where their children are. It's a security blanket."* Josh Dhaliwa, MobileYouth.
- The results of a British Gas poll of 1,000 adults in 2004 reported 44% felt conversations were shorter than ever and a third (33%) admitted they talked less to their friends and

family these days because they texted and emailed instead. Nearly half (46%) said they deliberately used text messaging because it meant they did not have to waste time on polite conversation.

- More men are raising other men's children, while, in many cases, their own children grow up elsewhere. 17% of dads born in 1970 are stepfathers, nearly double the number among men born in 1958.



Dads are more involved

- Men dressed as Batman and Spiderman close major bridges and throw purple powder in parliament, to publicise their demands for more rights for fathers estranged from their wives (Fathers 4 Justice).
- More men are raising other men's children while, in many cases, their own children grow up elsewhere.
- 15% of 19,000 babies born in 2000/1 tracked in a survey live just with their mothers. Of these, nearly half see their father at least once a week though nearly four in ten have no contact with him at all.
- Six out of 100 babies born in Britain at the turn of the millennium have no contact with their fathers.
- Although the amount of time that fathers spent with their children hasn't changed in 40 years, the sharp rise in the number of working mothers means that fathers now play a more active role in child-rearing.
- In 36% of dual-income families, it is the father more than any other individual who cares for the children when the mother is at work. **What happens with the other 64%?**
- In a survey conducted by Fathers Direct, 91% of children aged nine to eleven still want to see more of Dad.

- Resident fathers were more likely to be involved if the mothers were involved with the children, if the father held egalitarian attitudes to gender roles, and if the children were well-adjusted.
- Non-resident fathers were more likely to be involved with children if the resident mother was involved, if the separation was more recent, and if there were low levels of conflict between the separated parents.

Shift parenting

The 24-hour economy means that parents are more likely to be working atypical hours and to share childcare between them.

- Some parents (29% of partnered mothers) have adopted shift parenting where each parent works at times of day that do not overlap with the other, to share child care.
- Employed parents now work at atypical times of day (outside 9 to 5) more than other workers; 53% of mothers, 54% of lone mothers and 79% of fathers frequently work atypical hours.
- 38% of mothers and 54% of fathers work at least one Saturday a month. One-quarter of mothers and just under one-third of fathers work once a month or more on Sundays.
- Currently, 61% of working families have parents away from home during early mornings, evenings, nights and weekends; 34% have a parent working at weekends. The number is expected to double by 2007.
- One British study found millions of teenagers want to see more, not less, of their parents. Sadly, one in five young people said their parents – who have some of the longest working hours in Europe – are too stressed to make time for them.

REFERENCES

Listed in original

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