



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Six *Children and Young People: factors promoting and prohibiting their wellbeing*

The Call for Evidence

The Commission launched its Call for Evidence in October 2021 as the first major step in our inquiries. It provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of people aged 18 and over, faith communities, and organisations working with children and families in England in thinking about some of the key issues relevant to the Commission's work. These are described in our first Briefing paper.¹

We are analysing the responses thematically and sharing the emerging themes through a number of discrete briefing papers. In reporting the emerging themes the Commission is not commenting on them at this stage, but simply sharing them with a wider audience while using them to inform our thinking and to guide the various Commission activities that are taking place to dive more deeply into the evidence.² The briefings we share may well spark additional conversations, which we would welcome.

About this Briefing

The Commission is examining the factors that promote strong relationships, stability, safety and sustainability within families and households and the conditions in which children can thrive and reach their full potential. The Commission explored a number of questions in the Call for Evidence to help us understand these factors. This and the following briefings focus on questions about children and young people. In this briefing we look at the responses to two questions about the factors in family life that either help or inhibit children and young people from all kinds of backgrounds to flourish.

Context

In previous Briefings we have reported on answers to questions relating to couple and family relationships and highlighted the changing nature of family life in the past 70 years. Bringing up children has been regarded as one of the most important tasks adults perform, and a high value is placed on 'good' parenting and on both mothers and fathers being involved in parental activities that support positive child development. The research evidence highlights that a child's home and family environment, the quality of the relationship between the child and

¹ *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One*, March 2022

² *ibid*



each parent, and the relationship between the parents are crucial factors influencing child development.³

Parenting today takes place in the context of a multiplicity of family structures, including single-parent households, reconstituted/step-families, and in homes headed by same-sex partners. Children today, therefore, may experience a wide variety of family living arrangements as they grow up. For some this may include time spent with foster parents and/or being adopted.

Over the past fifty years concerns have grown about the number of families in which the relationship between the parents breaks down, resulting in separation or divorce. One of the main concerns is the potential detrimental impact of unresolved conflict between the parents on everyone concerned, especially children.⁴ Respondents to the Call for Evidence questions about couple relationships referred to the importance of raising awareness about conflict in the family and finding ways to reduce or resolve conflict.

Research has shown that parental divorce increases the risk factors which are known to contribute to poor outcomes for children and young people, so it has become increasingly essential to understand the factors that promote positive child development and the ways in which children's best interests can be met in all kinds of families and situations.⁵ In 2010, the Marmot Review⁶ on health inequalities pointed to six policy objectives, the first two of which were to 'Give every child the best start in life, and to enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives'. These objectives were reinforced in the ten year follow up report.⁷ In the recent report from the Children's Commissioner for England, a key finding was that children 'believe in family. Not just the nuclear family – families of all kinds. Simply, they want happy homes'.⁸

³ Harold, G., and Leve, L.D., (2018) *Parents as partners: how the parental relationship affects children's psychological development*, In Harold and Leve: How couple relationships Shape our World: Clinical Practice, Research and Policy

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Misca, G and Smith, J (2014) *Mothers, fathers, families and child development* in Abela and Walker (Eds) op.cit.p151-165

⁶ Marmot, M., Goldblatt, P., Allen, J., et al. (2010) *Fair Society Healthy Lives (The Marmot Review)* Institute for Health Equity

⁷ Marmot, M., et al., (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On.*, The Health Foundation

⁸ The Children's Commissioner (20220) *The Big Ask – The Big Answer*

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/>



In your experience or that of your organisation, what are the most important factors in family life that help children and young people to flourish?

There were clear themes running through the answers to this question in the Call for Evidence. They focused primarily on the importance of children being loved and supported, but with a clear recognition that their basic needs must be met and parents must be supported in their parenting task. The answers about the factors helping children to flourish resonated strongly with answers to our general question about family and individual flourishing, which we reported in Briefing Two. We report on the main themes here.

Love

Unsurprisingly, a key factor mentioned in a large number of responses was ‘love’ alongside mention of other factors:

- *Love, love, love, love, love!! Obviously, having suitable housing, enough food, decent clothes, good schools etc. also matter - but above all else it is love which children need*
- *The most important is love and then providing for basic needs of nutrition, warmth, clothing, shelter and security*
- *Support and love. If a child knows it is loved and has a home to return to at the end of each day where they are listened to and supported...*
- *Unconditional love; Safe space to live and to go out from and to return to; Freedom to be who they are*
- *Secure and loving family life (whether birth or foster/adopted). Adequate housing, food, warmth, clothing, safety etc. friendships*
- *Children being loved and cared for in a safe environment. Good parenting. Quality of housing. Good quality schooling - supported by parents and carers.*

Stable family life

Many responses referred to the importance of having a stable family life which often included reference to stable, happy relationships between parents:

- *A stable family. Money is not that important*
- *The most important factors are*
 - 1) *safe, secure environment with loving care;*
 - 2) *strong couple relationships between parents*



- *Feeling secure - knowing they have a home, food on the table and a safe bed to sleep in. Knowing their parents/carers are happy.*
- *Children need to feel safe and secure, so stable family relationships are most important. Children also need to be happy*
- *Strong, positive relationships within the family unit. Supportive parenting that encourages children to find their own way in the world*

Some responses pointed to the importance of strong and stable marriages as the foundation for enabling children to flourish:

- *A stable loving marriage with freedoms and boundaries for children.*
- *The most important [factor] is a healthy marriage - loving supportive couple together. Next is healthy parenting skills of the couple*

Investing time in children

Some responses mentioned the importance of investing time in children, occasionally referring to 'quality time', such as having meals together as a family:

- *Young people and children knowing that they are loved and listened to. That they have time invested in them as individuals and know that they matter, and that people believe in them. Being given support to understand themselves, their emotions, what they enjoy and are good at. The time and space to play, laugh, and explore*
- *Feeling safe and nurtured. Being in an encouraging and supportive home with parents/carers who give time to children. Access to opportunity. Decent physical environment where basic needs are met and there is some personal space. Access to outdoors, nature and exercise. Prompt and appropriate support accessible if needed.*
- *A stable and loving environment, with clear set of rules/boundaries set to enable each individual to be the best they can be. Children and young people need to feel safe and secure. Not only do they need appropriate housing and provision of basic essentials including heating and good nutrition, it is vital that they experience safe, secure and consistent relationships. This means they need consistent caregivers with whom they can build a strong attachment, and who have quality time to give them*
- *That the children are valued. That they are given time and are given a voice.*



Nurturing early years

There were references to the importance of a child's early years... a topic that is currently being promoted by government⁹

- *Nurturing early relationships are critical for early development and to enable all children to thrive*
- *A good start in life- which includes, good and positive parenting, access to clean and healthy home and community. Access to education, health care, healthy nutrition, leisure and social activities ... Protection from harm and danger. Access to their religion and Christian support and guidance*

Clear ground rules and boundaries

A few respondents talked about the need to set clear boundaries for children:

Love, clear ground rules, treating them with respect:

- *Stable and safe environments are key, and they are built through providing structure, routine and clear boundaries to enable self-regulation and self-care. Children and young people need to be given responsibility, equipped with the skills to fulfil these responsibilities and then given positive feedback*
- *Good boundary setting allowing for some individual need and joy at success no matter how small*
- *A stable and loving environment, with clear set of rules/boundaries set to enable each individual to be the best they can be.*

Education

Some respondents referred specifically to the role of education in enabling children to flourish:

- *Good schools in all areas People to advocate for the young people whose parents don't do it for them. Space to develop emotional awareness and self-awareness ...*
- *Provision of excellent education*
- *Love, respect, good education, safe and secure environment in which to live, age relevant places to play and socialise. Access to sports and other physical activities*

⁹ Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (2021) *The Best Start for Life: A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days* The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report



Opportunities for personal growth

A number of answers talked about the opportunities for personal growth which enable children to flourish:

- *Prospect of a productive life and opportunity for personal growth. Freedom from tyranny and crime, freedom from drugs, and the gangs that dominate communities*
- *Consistent love, care, nurture and support from immediate family with consistent boundaries. Participation in wider community events. Help in discovering their talents and interests and encouraging them to develop them. Acceptance of them as a unique individual and being loved for who they are*
- *The security and love that children and young people receive as they are developing and growing is of the utmost importance. The church is ideally placed to offer support through parenting courses and other initiatives*

Support for parents

There was considerable understanding about the challenges of parenting and the importance of providing appropriate support for parents and carers in order that they can help their children to flourish. This support could be offered by the church community:

- *Care for the adults to ensure they are able to offer the best of themselves for children. Someone to hear them and advise and support them [parents/carers] be that family, friend or professional, but someone who actually has a good knowledge of what it take to care for a child*
- *Parents being supported when they struggle as parents, early intervention programmes where needed to help parents build bonds of attachment, good physical health and recreation*
- *Strong relationships between parents, supportive extended family and friends, and wider community - in which we would include churches and the support many offer, from toddler groups to foodbanks and parenting courses*
- *Relationships matter and helping parents where there is frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict to understand its impact on children is a worthy endeavour. Modelling good relationships will enable young people to be model parents in the future*
- *Building strong loving relationships within the marriage as well as between parents and their children and the wider family. Churches can help parents learn how to connect more deeply with their children and biblically navigate their children's worlds, give them hope and speak into their lives in transformative ways. In this context parents are better*



able to teach and guide their children and enable them to develop physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally and morally

Some respondents talked about the need to reduce stress on parents:

- *Meeting basic household needs and reducing the physical and social stresses on parents and children*
- *Adequate support for material and emotional needs*
- *Families being able to put food on the table without having to go to a food bank, having nice clothes comfortable shoes not having to pay for expensive school uniforms and P.E. kits*
- *Low stress - overwork, poverty, safety and security, health worries all undermine the ability of adults to successfully support their young people.*

Access to wider support

Several people referred to the need for a range of support systems to be available to families:

- *Acceptance, love and access to wider support when needed (from church, community, friends, schools, professional agencies)*
- *Love and care. Having parents who are present and engage with their children. Good support systems, church, school, extended family*
- *Enough money. Financial support for deprived communities. Money for schools, education, free university courses, free paid apprenticeships, free childcare, children's and youth facilities, public sports facilities etc.*
- *Loving parents (including LGBTQI+). Food on the table. A house to live in. Secure jobs for the parent (s) with decent wages. Decent schools. Less discrimination. More resources for the family*

The support could include the provision of role models for the children and young people:

- *Stable, secure, trustworthy adult role models.*
- *Good role models both within the family and outside*

Belonging to a community

Reducing stress for parents and ensuring access to support was linked for some respondents to the importance of families belonging to a community:



- *[Families] Feeling like they belong to a community develops a sense of responsibility and kindness to others that counteracts our selfishness. Belonging used to be a faith expectation but with lots of families now not going to church we could work hard on how to develop communities and be part of that as a church.*
- *Support to thrive, feeling loved and safe and having supportive systems in place in the community*
- *A safe home, with enough food and relationships that are 'good enough' and willing to improve. A neighbourhood that values children and their place in society*
- *To make them [children] feel accepted no matter what culture or background that they are from.*
- *They [children] need a sense of meaning and connection which comes from a developing spirituality*

Summary

Responses to the Call for Evidence are clear that the most important factor in family life which helps children and young people to flourish is love. Together with a stable, supportive family life which encourages personal growth, the answers to this question suggest that love can provide the foundation for flourishing. As one respondent put it succinctly, children need:

1. *Education to widen their minds*
2. *Love to nourish their emotional needs*
3. *Trust to feel secure to progress*
4. *Faith to guide and support moral values*

Others expanded on these themes:

- *Children and young people need to feel safe and secure. Not only do they need appropriate housing and provision of basic essentials including heating and good nutrition, but it is also vital that they experience safe, secure and consistent relationships. This means they need consistent caregivers with whom they can build a strong attachment, and who have quality time to give them.*
- *They need a sense of value and belonging, to be affirmed in who they are, rather than who others want them to be.*
- *They need calm and appropriate boundaries.*



- *They need opportunities to develop skills appropriate to their abilities, without being overwhelmed by expectation.*
- *They need a sense of meaning and connection which comes from a developing spirituality within a faith community.*
- *They need support in dealing with life's challenges and opportunities to express emotions appropriately*

There were several suggestions about the way in which the Church can help parents:

- *Churches can help parents learn how to connect more deeply with their children and biblically navigate their children's worlds, give them hope and speak into their lives in transformative ways. In this context parents are better able to teach and guide their children and enable them to develop physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally and morally. It's about connecting first before you direct or correct. This also enables parents to model what it looks like to live out their faith in ordinary as well as extraordinary daily moments ... Helping parents learn how to listen to their children and learn from them is also important and will better enable them to navigate their children's worlds and use scripture to speak Gods word more relevantly into their lives. Prayer is also important and teaching children to pray and asking them questions that help them think about praying.*

In your experience or that of your organisation, what are the most important factors in family life that inhibit the wellbeing of children and young people from all kinds of backgrounds and present the biggest threat to their being able to flourish?

In this question the Call for Evidence was seeking to understand the threats to children being able to flourish. Not surprisingly, the answers referred to the lack of the factors that promote flourishing, which had been highlighted in the previous question. Poor parenting and instability in family life featured strongly, along with a wide range of factors in daily life.

Parental Instability

Within this theme there were a number of different concerns identified:

- *Inhibiting factors include; Instability in their parents relationship; Lack of support for their own efforts, no acknowledgement of their existence or efforts; little or no face time from their parents and elders from their families; Seeing their life role models giving up in the face of adversity; Seeing their life role models not being able to work together and blame each other; Having little or no time together as a family*
- *Instability within the home/family. Lack of basic amenities*



- *Instability, insecurity, inconsistency of parental relationships*

Some respondents linked family instability to increased individualism and materialism in society:

- *Most important factors in family life are helping people to live good, consistent moral lives. What prevents that is too much focus on the individual*
- *Parents not having sufficient time ... not taking time to explain about life, not encouraging good habits*
- *The pressures of the materialistic life*

Poor parenting

Instability was associated with poor quality parenting, referenced by many respondents:

- *Bad parenting ... Child abuse. Peer pressure. Bullying*
- *Lack of time given to children by the other adults in their family. By families being dysfunctional. The lack of opportunity for children to get involved in their communities*
- *An absence of consistent, secure, nurturing relationships is a significant threat to early childhood development. Factors such as poverty, domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental illness (among others) can impair early relationships and thus make it more difficult for a baby to thrive*
- *Parents not having sufficient time, giving into children, not taking time to explain about life, not encouraging good habits*
- *Lack of parenting skills due to generations of 'not good enough' parenting. Children being too anxious to flourish due to fear, worries about their family, insecurity due to family instability, poverty.*
- *Lack of quality time with family, poverty, parental work patterns, lack of understanding*
- *[Children] not being cared for appropriately, emotionally or physically. Not giving the right sense of direction or support*
- *Emotional and physical neglect.*
- *Lack of consistent care and nurture, especially where they [children] receive different reactions and messages from their caregivers, so they don't know where they stand. Lack of acceptance for who they are*



- *Violence, [children] being scared or neglected, worrying that their parents might leave, or they might be taken away*

Basic needs not being met

Many responses talked about basic needs not being met which also impacts on the quality of parenting:

- *Parents who aren't able to give their child what they need - often through no fault of their own. So if there isn't enough food / they can't eat healthily / they are in cramped conditions etc.*
- *Unhappy or inadequate parenting. Inadequate housing, inadequate income*
- *Conflict/unsafe environment. Lack of care, attention and encouragement Poor diet and lack of sleep/rest*
- *Low pay and zero hours contracts also put immense pressure on families who are struggling and working all hours to provide for the basic needs of families*
- *Not enough food, shelter, warmth, clothes. Parents not having the respite they need, not having the support needed for medical needs. So many families currently aren't getting the care support that they have been assessed for because of a lack of funding and services*

Poverty

A recurring theme was the impact of poverty on families which makes it difficult for parents to meet their children's needs:

- *The appalling rates of poverty in this country*
- *Poverty, inadequate resources to provide food, decent clothing and lack of housing*
- *Poverty that prevents parents from being able to meet the basic needs of their children. Poverty that drives both parents to need to work and be less available to their children. Mental illness in parents and conflict in the home and not knowing how to wisely and peacefully resolve conflict*
- *Lack of funds, constant worry over debt or not having enough money for basic needs, including adequate housing*
- *Poverty and associated worry, poor health, hunger Poor mental health Loneliness Hopelessness*



- *Unfairness, lack of equality, systems set up against people who live in poverty*
- *Constraints of low income and suitable, affordable housing can have a detrimental effect on all of the family*
- *Poverty. Domestic violence. Criminality.*

Family conflict

Separation and divorce were mentioned as potential inhibiting factors for children's healthy development and, for some, family breakdown and parental conflict were considered to be the most important negative factors:

- *Children are inhibited from flourishing when family difficulties are not resolved within weeks. They become enmeshed with parental issues that they should be protected from*
- *Family conflict, abuse, children having to act as carers.*
- *Enduring inter parental conflict in which some families endure rather than fix. This occurs across the social strata although evidence indicates that lower income and workless households are at increased risk of parental conflict. The evidence suggests that it can impact on children's behaviour through internalising and externalising reactions that impact on children and young people's development*
- *Unquestioningly, the factor which presents the biggest threat to children flourishing is parental conflict*
- *Children will be affected by a split-up of parents without a doubt. We make it so easy for people to part, plus allow the temptation to be given, Facebook has you look at a dating site even if you have married as your status!!!*
- *Family breakdown is the biggest factor that inhibits the well-being of children and young people*

Abuse, addiction and mental health issues

Some responses talked about the negative behaviours of parents which make it difficult for them to parent effectively:

- *Parents with drug or alcohol abuse. Second and third generation families who have not worked*
- *... violence, abuse, drug use, alcohol misuse, divorce, death of a parent, bullying, lack of healthy boundaries, lack of encouragement ... lying, gambling*



- *Domestic violence and abuse. Emotional neglect*
- *Threat of or actual violence (of all kinds, e.g. verbal, physical, emotional). Neglect, conflict, denial; all kinds of maltreatment and abuse; emotional as well as physical neglect; family members with addictions; witnessing domestic abuse; family members with significant challenges, such as physical or mental health vulnerabilities*
- *Chaotic lifestyles of parents, especially those with alcohol /drug /gambling addictions*
- *Abuse and trauma, separation of nuclear family, lack of access to essential services such as mental health help*

Multiple factors

The majority of responses referred to the existence of multiple cumulative factors that inhibit children being able to flourish:

- *Factors tend to pile on top of each other: drug and alcohol abuse obviously come with broken families, physical and sexual violence, mental problems, unstable or suboptimal living conditions, under-performance at school, unemployment or criminality and of course the financial distress which is obviously always going to be an outcome of the foregoing No single factor or combination of factors is insurmountable; individuals can and do rise above the worst circumstancesThe wellbeing of children and young people is inhibited primarily through a lack of love and a lack of safety and security. Key issues that affect flourishing ... include: - Poverty – and lack of basic needs such as food and clothing; - Impact on children and young people of becoming young carers either to a parent or sibling; - Stigma of having parents in prison; - Domestic Abuse; - Impact of addiction, debt and bereavement; - Impact of low self-esteem and a lack of support structures for parents and families; - Isolation; -prejudice and discrimination affecting various parts of society; - Poor education and a lack of role models. The replacement of human interaction with screens and social media can become a barrier to good listening and development of communication and other social skills. Low pay and zero hours contracts also put immense pressure on families who are struggling and working all hours to provide for the basic needs of families*
- *A combination of social, economic, and environmental factors that impact the wellbeing of children and young people*
- *Abuse of all forms, including neglect and emotional abuse which can be subtle but hugely destructive. Abusive or aggressive relationships amongst parents and other family members. Trauma, and lack of understanding about how to process it. Poor attachment relationships. Poverty. Hidden disabilities, possibly undiagnosed, such as autistic spectrum disorders. Broken family relationships, and the sense of being abandoned, or even blamed by one or both parents. School bullying, and sometimes lack*



of support with this at school. Poor parental mental health. Lack of spirituality and meaning within the family. Expectations from home or school beyond the capability of the child, and the subsequent sense of powerlessness and failure.

Summary

The Call for Evidence has highlighted a wide range of factors which are seen to inhibit children being able to flourish. Many of these are inter-related and can serve to create an environment which is immensely challenging for parents and their children. Poverty and difficulties in meeting basic needs underpinned many of the concerns expressed about poor parenting, mental health issues and the possibility of children experiencing abuse and neglect. Family separation and the potential for unresolved conflict were also regarded as damaging for children.

Some responses also highlighted the pressures on families in today's society when both parents need to work, the culture of long working hours, and the subsequent reduction in quality time families can spend together, with an associated lack of support services:

- *Both parents having to work. Children being in day care from a very young age, causing poor attachment to primary caregivers. Family breakdown. Domestic violence and substance abuse. Reduction of early support to families in the form of health visitors, baby clinics, etc. Lack of social services support.*

There was also a call for a more realistic view about what children and young people can achieve and the danger of creating overly high expectations:

- *There seems to be a pervasive theory in society today that wants children to believe that they can be anything they want and achieve anything they put their mind to. Whilst this is not wholly bad, it is unrealistic in some scenarios and fails to address the issue of a) the fact that things are not always fair and b) what to do when disappointment comes. Learning to deal well with disappointment is a huge lesson for children (and adults) to learn.*

Professor Janet Walker OBE
April 2022