



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Hearing the voices of young people who have experienced the family justice system

Members of the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) took part in a focus group with members of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households and talked about their experiences of family life and of the family justice system. Their contributions will be included in our analysis of the voices of young people across England who have taken part in the Commission's evidence-gathering activities via focus groups and discussions in schools.

Following our focus group, the FJYPB organised a survey of their members which included questions about their experiences and the ways in which organisations, including the church, can help young people. We are very grateful to the FJYPB for organising this in consultation with the Commission. The answers given by the young people were recorded anonymously. The Commission is additionally extremely grateful to all those young people who contributed to the focus group and to all those who responded to the survey. Some had experience of public law proceedings and the care system and others had experienced the private family law process as a result of parental separation and divorce. Their responses are thoughtful and reflective.

This briefing records an analysis of the themes emerging from the young people's responses to the survey. We do not comment on these themes here but they provide an important addition to the evidence which will inform the Commission's report and recommendations.



The meaning of family: we know that families come in all shapes and sizes and young people's experience of family life can vary a lot, so what does 'family' mean to you?

There was consensus that family is not just the people who live in the same household or share blood or kin relationships:

- *I think 'family' doesn't necessarily mean that the group of people are connected biologically*
- *Family to me is not always blood*
- *It [family] does not necessarily have to mean kinship relations*

A number of words and phrases were used consistently in answer to this question. The descriptions of family included phrases such as 'the people you trust; the people who love you; people who support and believe in you':

- *Family to me means the people you trust and the relationships you hold with the people you care for ... but is who matters most to you and who is there to support you in times of need*
- *The word 'family' means to me: the people that I can trust; people that I love; people that I care for and people that also care for me*
- *Family means a group of people or just a number of people who love each other and care for each other and have respect for one another. They will also stick up for each other*
- *Family means to me a unit of people who work together and love each other. They can be anyone who means something to you*



Some young people elaborated on their thoughts saying that family means those who accept you for what you are and are not judgemental:

- *For me, family means to be around a group of people who support and believe in you. Somebody you can trust and go to in times of need and not feel you are going to be judged as a result. A network where you can be truly you and not need to play a role and need to worry about trying to be accepted as this love and acceptance will naturally develop and mature over time to a bond in which there is a safe space for personal growth*

Others talked about friends and colleagues as family:

- *Family is a part of what makes you who you are. It doesn't have to be related like some people called their best friend brothers, sometimes friends can be family. If you have lived with someone for a while and are all loved by each other is what makes a good family*
- *I believe many things could be considered a family, these can be big or small. For example, in a workplace, like a school, a small sports team, or even just one person. However, there are a few things that these different types of families have in common, and that is everyone is supportive, reliable, and loves each other unconditionally. If you are lucky enough to be part of any kind of family, you feel safe, happy, valued, respected and have a sense of belonging*

Some responses talked about the essential ingredients of being a family: family refers to people who are always there through thick and thin, and family members are a matter of choice:

- *Family ... is people who stick with you through the hard times and also the best times!*
- *[Family] can be anyone who means something to you*



- *Family means the people who are always there for you and you are always there for them, it's the people who are the most special to you ... Family is who makes you happy, so family is who you choose*

Changing perceptions of family: has your understanding of family changed as you've got older? If so, how has it changed?

We were keen to understand how perceptions of family change as children develop and grow into young people. We asked them to look back and consider how things had changed for them. A common response was that when children are young their perception of their family is confined to the biological relations they live with, but as they get older they understand that family can be much wider in its membership and meaning:

- *Yes, it has changed. I used to believe that you had to be related to someone, it didn't matter what they did or who they were to you, as long as they had a label such as "mum", "dad" or "sister", "brother", "auntie", "uncle", "grandparent" .etc. they were entitled to this classification. But now I know that's not the case- just because you name someone this, doesn't mean you have to let them into your idea of family. Family is who you choose, so they also do not have to be related to you, you could class your best friend as family, and that's totally okay*

Many of the young people who completed the survey referred to the changes in perception that were triggered by their experience of changing family constellations and their experience of the family justice system:

- *When I was younger I believed my family had to be my biological parents being together, and that step-family would always be "pretend family", however, for me now, I see my "step-family" more as my real family and would not refer to my estranged biological family members as being a "family" to me*



- *I always believed family was the people you were born with, nobody else could be your family unless you marry and have your own kids one day. I lived by this rule. Until I realised the people who should have been there for me in my birth family were not in the capacity to give me that secure space. I began to see what healthier or more natural relationships looked like when going into care and I have learned that anybody can be in your family not just blood relatives. Unconditional love is the key factor to any family and I do not believe that this type of love has boundaries*
- *My perception of family was changed just after I came into foster care. That was when I realised that families do not have to be blood related. I now no longer consider my birth parents and their parents' family*
- *As a young child I thought a family was mother two kids and a dad, however as I grew up and went through the family courts I learnt that family is not just a nuclear one it is one with people who aren't blood relations or the 'typical' family*

A few young people said that their perception had not changed but they had realised that families are not perfect and that there are certain values that matter more:

- *My understanding of family hasn't changed except that now I know that there is no such thing as 'the perfect family'*
- *My definition of family has not changed. I think that it is very important to know that family doesn't happen by blood and if they are related or not but about how much love there is towards each other*
- *As I have gotten older, I have gained more understanding of the definition of family. I was taught that the 'ideal family' is a mother, a father, and children, living together. As society has been evolving, people have recognised that every family is unique. There is no such thing as the*



'ideal family'. I would list every type of family, however that would take too long because no families are the same

The influence of the family justice system: how has going through the family justice system influenced your thoughts about family life?

All of the young people were able to comment on the ways in which the family justice system had impacted on their understanding of family life. For some, their experience had made them sceptical, less trusting, and for others it had given them a broader understanding of how family breakdown impacts the child and can leave longer-term impacts:

- *In some ways, I think it has made me more cynical of family relations and the incidence of family breakdown. But in other ways, it has also taught me a lot about the fact that family can be made up of relations wider than kinship relations and the variety of families, and how this can be more beneficial/healthier*
- *The family justice system has influenced my thoughts of how one small argument between two parents can make more and more arguments that then can accelerate very quickly and not only tare the family apart but also affect the child mentally and their mental health, and leave the child with difficulties in life like trust issues and trauma*
- *I learned more about divorced family and what people go through when families go to court*
- *I think that it made me trust people less and really think about who I consider as 'family' and who I consider as someone who is just related to me*



Some young people had realised what makes for a thriving family as a consequence of their experiences:

- *Families are all different, but one thing that makes every thriving family great is that everyone in it is happy, healthy and has the best intentions for everyone in it. It's not always easy, but a family must be there for each other*
- *Going through the family justice system has severely impacted my view on family life – I now believe that it's not normal for it to be toxic it should be a calm and loving environment*
- *Going through the family justice system and my personal experiences have helped me learn the real definition of family life. For a long period of time, I did not feel safe in my 'family', and I later realised that the person I was calling 'family' was not fulfilling any of the qualities to be considered 'family'. In a way, I am glad that I had the experience of going through family court because I gained a better understanding of the concept of 'family' and the attributes of it*
- *Having gone into care at a more mature age to most children, I was able to understand the process a lot better and see things for what they were. In a way I knew my birth family was unsafe and not 'normal' and so I was lucky to be taken away and be kept in the loop. I used all the families I stayed with as either inspiration or a learning curve for what type of relationships I will strive for in my future. I was ready to make this connection. I think having seen so many families for emergency placements in the short term as well as longer term ones, I have got to a point where the word family can mean anything – from a young age you get this idea in your head that a family is permanent and you are in a way stuck with it – take it or leave it attitude, but in fact anything and anyone can be your family as long as there is mutual trust, respect and forgiveness*



Thinking about the family justice system: are there things about family life that you wish the family justice system had understood?

Children and young people who have experienced the family justice system are well-placed to offer their reflections as to how well it understands young people's needs. A key theme to emerge was the importance of listening to the child's own voice and taking that into account within family law processes:

- *I wish that the family courts would have understood that just because I am related to someone, it doesn't mean that I want to live with them and they should have listened to my voice. I also wish that they had considered that sometimes I don't want to talk to people that are related to me and that should be okay because I don't consider them as family anymore*
- *That mothers aren't always telling the truth, to listen to kids more because more often than not they [children] are telling the truth*
- *I wish the family justice system understood to not only listen to the parents but also to the child and to not always assume that only one parent is correct, and also to listen to the child the most and to not assume the parents know more than the child, so, they should listen to both sides and all of the versions*
- *... not all young children grow up being able to rely and trust on their parents. There is this expectation of the norm which is then applied so even if a child is verbally mature and cognitively able – the first port of call is always the parents – so automatically the child's voice gets lost. There can be censorship and manipulation at all levels. Sometimes I felt the need to try and bond with my birth family making it seem 'traditional' but by doing this I lost my true self as I was forcing myself to become something I wasn't*



Some responses referred to the need for children to be given more information:

- *Children aren't stupid, but they do need to be explained things in order to be understood. They need to be told information, leaving them in the dark could harm them more than being told what's happening, and that harm can be reduced even further quite easily by being told things in a child-friendly way. It's frightening not to know what's happening when it's obvious that there is change*

Another young person challenged the received wisdom about contact with parents:

- *I wish the family justice system had understood the fact that although my Mother was supposed to have a biological role and an innate caring nature, that sometimes the tendency towards contact with both parents, and the bias of custody towards Mothers, can actually cause more harm than good. And in my family, this positive bias towards my Mother was more problematic/unsafe than not seeing her*

Other young people reminded us that every family is different and that this is important for the family justice system to understand:

- *I wish they could understand that every family isn't the same and comparing families doesn't work*

The following response indicates the critical qualities in family relationships:

- *I hope that in the future the family justice system would recognise that family is not about material things like buying expensive gifts for each other, but about demonstrating love for each other by showing that you*



care. This could be really simple, for example, telling one another what you appreciate about each other. However, actions speak louder than words. Using your time and effort to support each other and help each other achieve goals demonstrates true love and a sense of family. Another quality of being part of a family, which the family justice system should recognise is that the thoughtful things you do, should be constant

Hopes for the future: thinking ahead, what are your own future hopes for family life?

The survey asked young people to think ahead to their own future and to share their hopes for family life. Most responses referred to the wish to have a loving family and many spoke about having children:

- *In the future, I would like to have some kids. I would like to be healthy, have a stable job and have a good income to provide food for myself and my family. I would like my kids to live in a healthy environment and I would listen to their opinions and let them know that they have a voice which will contribute to any decision that will be made*
- *I hope to have a happy and healthy family life of my own when I grow up*
- *To have a healthy and happy family where we can all work together whether that is a split or together*

Others referred to their experience as influencing their hopes for the future:

- *My own hopes for family life are to be happy and not to worry about conventionality. I also know that if I was to have children, I would always want to adopt to be able to give a home to children and young people who currently are stuck in the system*



- *I wish to stay connected with my foster family and carers as my foster 'cousins' are like my best friends. I will go visit a lot and stay in touch*
- *To have a loving family and to make sure all arguments in the family are solved fairly and to not let the arguments accelerate, and to teach my future family to solve problems by their own and be equal and fair to other people in and outside of the family*
- *After experiencing the family justice system and a family breakdown, I will use my knowledge of how to identify a true family to develop my own personal relationships in the future. I am aware that you can never be 100% sure of the future because as time goes by, people's needs change, however, if it is a true family relationship, when faced with difficulties, they support each other regardless*
- *Honestly, I just want it to be hassle free- for me and my family- which I know sounds unrealistic, but I just want to be a safe haven for the people I care about, and I want to be able to spend time with them and be completely at ease, in a safe and positive environment, and vice versa for them*

One young person spoke of the way in which they would wish to bring up their own children in a loving home:

- *Personally, I would love to have children of my own who I can give the gift of life to and give them the best beginnings so that they are strong and confident to be able to live independently ... often what everyone needs is that bit of nurture and being taken care of by somebody else, and for this reason my sole focus will be to make sure that my children can fend for themselves and do not need to rely on any one person permanently, and can build healthy relationships with more people. I want my children to be able to know that it is not a sign of weakness to need love and feel the confidence to express this. But also importantly for me is that my children should learn to receive love in an appropriate way and understand their boundaries*



Influences on personal relationships: what influences you the most when you develop personal relationships?

The final survey question focused on the influences young people experienced on how they develop their own personal relationships. Several young people talked about the need for trust and respect in their relationships, and to know when a relationship is unhealthy:

- *When I develop personal relationships, I believe the most important attribute is trust. I think trust is very broad and can be described in many different ways, but I think that if you cannot communicate well, or do not feel listened to, it would be very hard to develop a personal relationship. The best way to develop trust is to spend time with people, this way, you gain more understanding of the other person and vice versa*
- *When developing personal relationship the most important thing for me is to ensure that you hold similar values/morals, otherwise this can cause conflict and disagreement. It is also for me about ensuring that you have respect for each other, and being able to identify where respect has been lost, and the relation causes more harm than good, and is therefore unhealthy*
- *I think that being a part of FJYPB impacts the way I think about personal relationships because I now know that trust is a huge contribution to making any form of relationships, and if there is no trust, there is no relationship*
- *Personally, setting our boundaries and always having my guard up first till I know that the person is trustworthy*

Some responses talked about being able to grow in a relationship, to be accepting and non-judgemental:



- *The biggest influence for me is when a person is able to empathise and not judge. It does not necessarily have to be trauma related but everybody has a life story to tell and however big or small ... people have got to respect it and not minimise it. The other important thing for me is that personal relationships need to be with people who inspire you to grow or encourage open communication that even taboo topics can be discussed in a way in which is less reactionary and a more guided response. I always think personal relationships that work well for me are those where even when mistakes have been made there is an apology and a willingness to understand what led to it as opposed to opting for immediate conflict*

Some young people referred to the benefit of finding others who share the same interests and ambitions or who have the same understanding about family life:

- *For about a year now, I have attended a police cadet group ... Subconsciously, it just clicked that these were “my people”; because of this, I was able to build strong relationships with them more easily. I've now managed to have the mind-set that, when being faced with meeting new people and developing new relationships in groups, that we are all in the same boat for this cause that we are supporting. Usually, this boat can be quite obvious, like, “we are in this group for whatever reason, so we must have that thing in common” or even something as vague as being the same age or same gender ... Personally, this makes me more positive about interacting with new people and more friendly and relaxed*
- *In terms of family life, it is easier to solve problems and work together ... with the idea that a family is like a team and therefore look out for each other*
- *Being in the family justice board does influence me by giving me a better understanding and learning how I can help*



One young person referred specifically to the influence of their faith:

- *I think that going to church helps me get closer to my religion, that makes me think differently to how I should treat people and make sure everything is fair and equal so everyone gets a fair share. Being part of the Family Justice Young Peoples board (FJYPB) helped me understand how all families are different and how they could be dysfunctional and how parents try to repair them, also how children have different relationships between both of the parents. Personally, since I became a member, I give a fair chance to everyone and I'm much more open-minded and appreciate my family relationships much more*

Professor Janet Walker OBE
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