Nuffield Foundation

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1 How are the lives of families with young children changing? The changing face of early childhood in the UK

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How are the lives of families with young children changing? Summary

About this review and the *Changing face of early childhood* series

In this review we draw on data from the last two decades to address key questions about the changing nature of family life and what that means for the experience of young children in the UK today. We explore the implications of different policy changes for parents and young children and identify where there are gaps in data and research, such as the relative lack of evidence about fathers, 'new' family forms, local data and changing parenting practices. These gaps are important, because until we understand the whole picture, we only have a partial foundation for policy and practice.

The review also provides the context for our *Changing face of early childhood* series, which seeks to generate an informed debate on early childhood based on what the collective evidence tells us. The series draws on an extensive body of work funded by the Nuffield Foundation and undertaken by a range of researchers from different disciplines, alongside other key studies. Over the course of 2020/2021 we will publish robust and accessible reviews of research and provide a forum for further engagement through our events programme and additional commentary on our website.

- **Review 1:** How are the lives of families with young children changing?
- **Review 2:** Changing patterns of poverty and vulnerability
- **Review 3:** The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances
- **Review 4:** Parents and the home
- **Review 5:** Are young children's lives improving? Are they happier and healthier?
- **Conclusion:** Bringing up the next generation: priorities and next steps

We value input and feedback on the series as it progresses and the responses we receive will inform the concluding review. Ultimately, we want this series to contribute to significant and lasting change for young children and their families. To stay up-to-date with the series, please sign up to our mailing list at www.nuffieldfoundation.org/early-childhood

All accounts of the first five years of life are framed within the context of the family, but what is understood by 'family' and the role of public policy in relation to the family has changed fundamentally in the 21st century.[1]

This review shines a spotlight on the changing nature of family life and its implications for the economic security, development and wider well-being of young children. It is essential that these changes are understood and recognised by policy makers in the round, particularly at a time when issues of social well-being and inequality are being thrown into sharp relief by COVID-19. Without understanding the complexities of family life today, the policies and initiatives that seek to address other key areas of our society—education, the economy, health and mental health—will falter.

Family circumstances have a powerful influence on how a baby develops and fares throughout childhood and beyond. The quality of a young child's environment is shaped by his or her parents, carers or other guardians and the wider context—grandparents, neighbourhood, the quality of services, cultural and socio-economic factors, as well as global factors such as climate change, pandemics and war.[2] In this review, we explore the demographic, social and economic shifts that have influenced the family context that young children grow up and develop in. We provide a broad but not exhaustive analysis of the **changes and continuities** that have helped shape early childhood and family life in Britain in the last 20 years, focusing on major demographic changes.

When painting a population-level picture of children's lives it is also important to highlight the variation in their experiences: improvements and deteriorations have not been universal. Generally speaking, the experiences of parents and their children can vary greatly based on their qualification level, geographic location, deprivation level and ethnicity. **A recurrent theme in this review is inequality and gradients between advantaged and disadvantaged families.** Place and immediate local context are also playing a role in the lives of young children.

Family living arrangements in the UK are increasingly varied, with the growth of cohabitation, re-partnering and blended families. Children are more likely to be living in a more fluid family form. The 'family' has been a heavily debated and ideologically contested subject, with diverging views about the importance of marriage and the impact of separation on children's well-being. **Family context and socio-economic factors intertwine in shaping children's outcomes and well-being.**

Research has suggested that differences between the cognitive, social and emotional skills of children with married parents, and those with cohabiting parents, are largely explained by differences in the socio-economic

1 This review draws and expands upon this theme and others first explored in Eisenstadt and Oppenheim (2019).

2 It is worth noting what we mean when we use the term 'parent' in this review. Drawing on work on fathers by Burgess and Goldman (2018), we recognise the important role that step, adoptive and social parents can play. The kinds of parents referred to in this review include: birth parents—whether co-resident or not, and whether in contact with their children or not; adoptive parents—those who have legally adopted a child but who are not biologically linked to the child; social parents—including co-resident step-parents, foster parents, cohabiting partners, and guardians; and resident step-parents—those who are living with the child full or part-time, are a cohabiting partner or former cohabiting partner of a child's birth/adoptive parent (mother or father).

status of parents who choose to get married rather than marriage itself.

When it comes to differences in the early cognitive development of children in single and two-parent families, these are also largely driven by differences in economic circumstances. However, the research evidence is mixed regarding the age at which we would expect to see an impact on early development outcomes (older versus younger). Further research is needed to disentangle these factors and to further test these associations—particularly in relation to social and emotional development.

More recently there has been a growing understanding, underpinned by research, that the quality of the relationship within a couple, whether together or apart, influences both how mothers and fathers parent as well as children's outcomes and life chances. **The presence of persistent, hostile and unresolved conflict has a detrimental impact on childhood well-being and outcomes regardless of family structure** (Harold et al. 2016)**.** Our understanding of more complex family forms and their implications for young children growing up is partial, limited by the poor data available. This matters because it means we know relatively little about the needs of mothers, fathers and young children who are undergoing significant transitions in their family arrangements, or who are living in complex families, and how best to support them.

Children growing up in families where the youngest child is under five are more at risk of poverty than families with only older children. Since 2011/12, relative child poverty rates for all children have increased, though stabilising in the last three years prior to the outbreak of the pandemic (Bourquin et al. 2020).[3] Poverty has a direct impact on children's material well-being as well as an indirect impact, generating financial and psychological stress that affects relationships and interactions within the family—both between parents and between parents and children. These stresses and strains in turn affect how children fare. The focus of this review is on all children; we will return to issues of poverty and vulnerability in our second review of the series, *Changing patterns of poverty and vulnerability*.

The working lives of mothers have also changed dramatically, with a marked rise in the proportion of mothers in paid employment when their children are younger. This is part of a longer-term transformation in women's lives in the second half of the 20th century. There are some signs that fathers' roles are changing too, with greater involvement in young children's lives and the beginnings of modest shifts in working patterns. Increasingly, both resident parents and lone parents need to be in paid work to maintain living standards. We have also witnessed more mothers returning to work sooner after a child is born than in previous years.

These changes in both family form and working patterns have been driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, legal and cultural factors. Over the last two decades, we see the growth of more liberal attitudes to family life with a decline in the importance attached to marriage as a pre-cursor to having children, support for same-sex relationships and greater support for a more equal sharing of childcare and employment responsibilities.

Since 2000, there has been a small decline in the overall amount

3 A full breakdown of the measures of poverty used in this review can be found in Section 2.6.

of time parents are spending with their pre-school children. While women in the UK carry out the bulk of childcare within the home, there have been small shifts, with men increasing the time spent on childcare and women slightly decreasing the amount of time. **We know very little about *how* time with young children is spent.** Warm, responsive parent-child interaction is a key aspect of child development and clearly having time with children is one important dimension of this. So too are issues of poverty, and insecure and intermittent work, which shape the context and environment in which mothers and fathers parent.

Over the last two decades, the changing patterns of work and care for parents, particularly mothers, have profoundly altered the environment in which young children grow up. This is changing how and where children are looked after, and by whom. **The current generation of children in the UK is the first in which the majority are spending a large part of their childhoods in some form of formal early childhood education and care (ECEC).**[4] However, there appear to be clear patterns in the take-up of formal education and care according to area, family and child characteristics. More disadvantaged families and children from some ethnic minority groups are less likely to take up free early years entitlements.

Despite the norm for the majority of three and four-year-olds to be in formal early education, informal care remains an important part of how parents manage their working lives. Given that nearly all children experience early education and care, it is vital that this environment enhances their development, growth and learning. This is particularly so for the most disadvantaged children, where gaps in school readiness at national level remain wide, and progress in narrowing them has stalled. We will explore the issues of quality of early years provision and its impact in the third review in this series: *The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances*.

Alongside the issues of quality in early years provision there are also questions about the optimal balance between formal care and home care with a parent, guardian or carer. This is a highly contextual issue, often coming down to personal choice, financial considerations and the availability of services. As a result of all these changes, **early childhood has become a more varied, often enriching, but also complex experience as small children negotiate different settings and relationships.**

In other areas, labour market pressures and structures are affecting the context and spaces where children are being cared for and develop. In recent years, for example, the labour force participation rate for over 50s has steadily increased, with the largest percentage point increases occurring for women aged 60–64 years. If these trends persist, some grandparents may need to make a decision between going to work or caring

4 When referencing formal and informal care, we use the most recent definitions used by the Department for Education (DfE). Formal providers include: nursery schools, nursery classes, reception classes, special day schools, day nurseries, playgroups, childminders, nannies or au pairs, babysitters, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs. Informal providers include grandparents, older brother/sisters, other relatives, friends or neighbours. Estimates for the use of 'any childcare' and 'informal childcare' prior to the 2019 wave include ex-husbands/wives/partners as a form of childcare, and this should be borne in mind when making comparisons across survey years (DfE 2019).

for their grandchildren. This has important implications not only for how parents manage childcare, but also for inter-generational relationships.

Any piece of work assessing the changing lives of young children and their families would be remiss to ignore the impact of COVID-19. Research into previous crises suggests that **its impact is likely to be significant, particularly on those who are already disadvantaged or vulnerable.** Although the government has introduced various support packages, the economic shock precipitated by the pandemic is filtering into much higher rates of unemployment and with it, increased economic hardship among families with children. We know that COVID-19 is having a particularly severe effect on some Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, in both health and economic terms, exacerbating existing inequalities (Khan 2020; Platt and Warwick 2020).

The evidence on the differential impact of the lockdown measures, and the closure of formal childcare on employment patterns, suggests that it is mothers who have been particularly badly hit (Brewer et al. 2020a). While both parents have increased the amount of time spent on childcare, women are spending more time, thus further widening the pre-existing gender gap (Andrew et al. 2020).

And while there is no directly comparable precedent, the prolonged period of being out of early years settings, reception classes and in social isolation, unable to play and interact with other children, is likely to have profound implications for the well-being of children and their learning—especially for disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

This review draws on the emerging data on the immediate impact of the current crisis on family life with young children. However, this data is partial, evolving and cannot capture the longer-term impacts on children's lives. In many cases, COVID-19 exposes pre-existing issues that have dominated the early years landscape. We therefore use the existing data and research to highlight domains where children's lives may be acutely affected by the crisis as a result of the demographic or policy changes that have occurred in the last two decades.

Family policy is still playing catch-up with how rapidly family circumstances are changing, both before the pandemic and now in a heightened form. Our principal sources of data no longer reflect the reality of modern family life in the UK. As a result neither policy, resources nor services may be meeting the needs of young children growing up in different kinds of family. This has profound implications for the well-being and life-chances of today's generation of young children.

Key trends

Trends in family formation and fertility

Trends in parental age

- On average, parents are having children later in life than two decades ago (Figure 1, page 14).
- There has been a sharp reduction in the rate of teenage parents over the last 10 years, but the rate remains higher in the UK than in many European countries (Figure 2, page 15).
- While the gap has reduced in recent years, women on low incomes, and those with fewer qualifications, are more likely to have children at a younger age than women on higher incomes in the UK, particularly in certain regions (Section 1.2, page 15).

Family size

- Families are smaller than before. However, UK fertility rates have declined at a much slower rate than other European and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries (Section 1.3, page 17).
- Differences in family size by education level have widened over time with higher educated women having fewer children (Section 1.3, page 17).
- Women in the UK who have children at a later age have fewer children, on average, than their peers who had children younger. This differs to some Nordic countries where women go on to 'catch up' in terms of the number of children they have (Section 1.3, page 17).

Trends in family context and structure

Family structure

- There has been a decline in the proportion of children living in married couple families, alongside an increase in the number of cohabiting, blended and same-sex families (Figure 4, page 20).[5]

5 This review uses the term 'blended families' to describe a family unit where one or both parents have children from a previous relationship.

- However, the decline in the prevalence of married couple families with children has been slower among British Asian and Chinese households (Figure 5, page 21).
- The proportion of lone-parent families has stabilised over the last two decades at around 22% of all families.[6] This is a snapshot estimate. We can assume that a higher proportion of families will have been headed by a lone parent at some point (Figure 4, page 20).
- Public attitudes towards parenthood preceding marriage have relaxed significantly over the last two decades. The proportion of people supporting the view that marriage should be the starting point for bringing up children has almost halved in under 25 years (Figure 6, page 23).
- The number of same-sex families with children has risen in recent years—however this group still represents just under 1% of all families with children.
- There has been a downward trend in divorce rates since their most recent peak in 2003, which is broadly consistent with a decline in the number of marriages since 1989 (Section 2.2, page 19).

Wider economic context

- In 2018/19 more than half of the total 4.5 million children in poverty were living in families where the youngest child was aged under five—some 2.4 million children (Social Metrics Commission 2020). The risk of poverty is highest in families where the youngest child is under five (37%) (Section 2.6, page 26).
- There are higher rates of poverty among children from Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups. Rates of poverty are also higher for children living in families where there is a disabled adult or child (Section 2.6, page 27).
- Different family types have different risks of poverty too. Analysis by the Social Metrics Commission shows that almost half (48%) of people living in lone-parent families are living in poverty. This compares to 26% of those living in couple families with children (Section 2.6, page 27).

Trends in employment and care

- The employment rate for mothers with young children (aged under five) has increased dramatically in the last two decades—but is still lower than that of fathers or women without dependent children (Figure 7, page 30).
- Most children under five will grow up in a household where both resident parents work. Meanwhile, in a marked shift from the early 1990s, the employment rate for lone parents has also risen (Section 3.2, page 29).
- Mothers are returning to work more quickly after a child is born than in previous years (Figure 8, page 31).

6 We use the term 'lone' to describe a parent who is not married and does not have a partner, who is bringing up a child or children. As with any shorthand definition, it is not without its issues. It does not make any distinction between situations where a child has regular contact and/or partly resides with their other parent and a child who solely resides with and is cared for by one parent.

- The UK has seen a modest rise of 'non-standard' family working patterns, with changing 'breadwinning' responsibilities among mothers and fathers (though research suggests this is shaped by mothers' and fathers' education) (Section 3.2, page 33).
- Attitudes towards the traditional division of gender roles have softened over time, though substantial support remains for women remaining in the home and caring for their child full-time when children are under school age (Figure 10, page 34, and Figure 13, page 38).
- Overall, women in the UK still carry out much more childcare than men. However, there have been small shifts in recent years, with men increasing the time they spend on childcare for pre-school children by just over half an hour per week between 2000 and 2015, while the time women spend has slightly decreased (Figure 12, page 37).
- Apart from a slight drop in 2017, the number and proportion of young children in formal ECEC has increased steadily over the last five years. However, the take-up rates for state-funded entitlement vary by ethnicity, region and economic disadvantage (Section 3.7, page 36).
- While the use of informal care has decreased since 2004, the use of grandparental care has remained largely stable and the number of over 50s in paid employment continues to rise (Section 3.8, page 41).

The impact of COVID-19

- The combination of job losses, nursery and school closures, and home working is changing how parents spend their time and divide responsibilities for paid work, childcare and housework (Section 4.1, page 43).
- A large proportion of children under five will have missed six months of being in an early years setting or reception class. We do not yet know what the impact of this lost time will be on how children play, learn and interact with others (Section 4.1, page 44).
- There is growing concern about the sustainability of private and voluntary childcare provision. Vulnerable before the pandemic, they are now in danger as a result of long-term closure and, potentially, reduced demand as a result of the recession (Section 4.1, page 44).

Points for reflection and discussion

Below we outline some of the main questions and points that we feel require further reflection and discussion.[7] The list is not exhaustive but is seen as the beginning of an exercise to map key issues to be expanded during the course of each review in the series.

Family formation and fertility

- Given the association between teenage pregnancy and vulnerability for both parents and the child, what can be learned from local areas that have been more successful in reducing teenage conception?
- What are the implications of the growth of one-child families? We only have a partial understanding of how child outcomes are influenced by sibling relationships.

Family structure and context

- What role do non-resident fathers play in lone and blended families? What measures can support fathers' involvement in young children's lives after separation?
- How do changes in family form and socio-economic factors affect young children's social and emotional development?
- Does parental separation have a greater impact on children's well-being and outcomes if it occurs when they are under five?
- We have relatively little data on the growth of 'blended families' and the implications of this on young children's experiences. What research should be prioritised and how can public policy better support this growing group?

Employment and care

- What shapes the decision for new mothers to return to work?
- How are the fathers who are spending more time with children under five using this time?
- What would a more integrated experience of education and care look like for families with young children?
- How does balancing work and care affect parent-child interaction?

The impact of COVID-19

Given the limited data, we can only cautiously assess how COVID-19 and its social and economic consequences will affect families with young children over the long term.

- Will the economic and social consequences of COVID-19 have a transient effect on young children's experiences and life chances or will we see scarring that impairs their outcomes in later childhood and beyond?
- What impact will remote and home working have on the time families spend together, and how might this affect early child development?

7 While relating to our areas of interest, not all of the areas identified fall within the Nuffield Foundation's funding priorities at the time of writing (see: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/funding).

Introduction

This report, the first review in our *Changing face of early childhood series*, explores the changing family circumstances in young children's lives over the last 20 years. Young children today will experience a strikingly different childhood to their parents. The context in which parents are raising young children is shifting as changing family dynamics interact with a changing economy, creating new stresses and divisions as well as opportunities.

While we predominantly focus on trends from the last two decades and sometimes explore more recent demographic changes, where relevant and necessary we also look at long-term data. We focus on the UK, but in some cases the data is not available for the UK as a whole. We sometimes provide international comparisons where these are available. Much of our analysis focuses on mothers: not because childcare is a 'women's issue', but because our analysis reflects what is systemically embedded in data collection and social policy. We draw on the latest publicly available data, conducting our own analysis where necessary. We strive to use the most recent data available, though time periods may vary across data sources, and data is not always available for children under five.

This review is not primarily focused on the implications of COVID-19, the associated lockdown measures or the long-term economic impacts. However, it draws on the emerging data—including from the COVID-19 research funded by the Nuffield Foundation on the immediate impact of the pandemic on the lives of families with young children—to complement long-standing data and research.[8] In doing so, it highlights domains where children's lives may be acutely affected by the crisis as a result of the demographic or policy changes that have occurred in the last two decades.

The Nuffield Foundation has a well-established interest in funding research on family justice, early years and parenting. This review does not aim to comprehensively synthesise all available research in this sphere. Rather, it highlights key insights from research funded by the Nuffield Foundation—some 80 studies—and sets these within the context of other existing evidence. Wider research has been selected and included based on its relevance, findings and the robustness of its methodology.

In Chapter 1 we explore the changing patterns of family fertility and formation. Chapter 2 focuses on the changing family context, exploring family structures and issues of poverty in particular. Chapter 3 investigates how employment and care trends have changed for families with young children. Chapter 4 looks briefly at how COVID-19 is affecting the shape of family life today. By way of conclusion, we summarise the key takeaways from this large body of research evidence and data, outlining the gaps in this research and priorities for future study.

8 Nuffield Foundation. (2020). *Working to understand and address the social implications of COVID-19*. Available from: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/research/covid-19 [Accessed 24 August 2020].

1 Changing patterns of family fertility and formation

1.1 The age at which mothers and fathers have children, and the size of their families, are changing.

Mothers are having babies later, teenage pregnancies are in sharp decline, and families are getting smaller. But these broad demographic changes are marked by inequalities, shaped by maternal education, deprivation and in some cases geography. These differences matter because teenage parents are generally less likely to have the economic security and educational qualifications that are linked to better outcomes for children, and larger families are much more likely to be in poverty.

By recent estimates, 8 in 10 women born in 1973 in the UK had at least one child by the time they completed their childbearing (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2019a). We can be more certain about these conclusions for women than we can with men. Research from the fields of demography and urology suggests that men's fertility declines with age, but less predictably than women's fertility (Harris et al. 2011). So, while it is reasonable to predict that a 45-year-old woman is very unlikely to have more children, we cannot assume the same for a man. And though the percentage of women who do not have children is slowly increasing, most will experience some form of family formation in their lifetime, whether that is as a step-parent, lone parent or in a cohabiting or married couple. We know that the majority of young children are born to parents older than in previous generations. We also know that there are nuances within this story; research has shown that both family size and parental age are shaped by maternal education, income and geography.

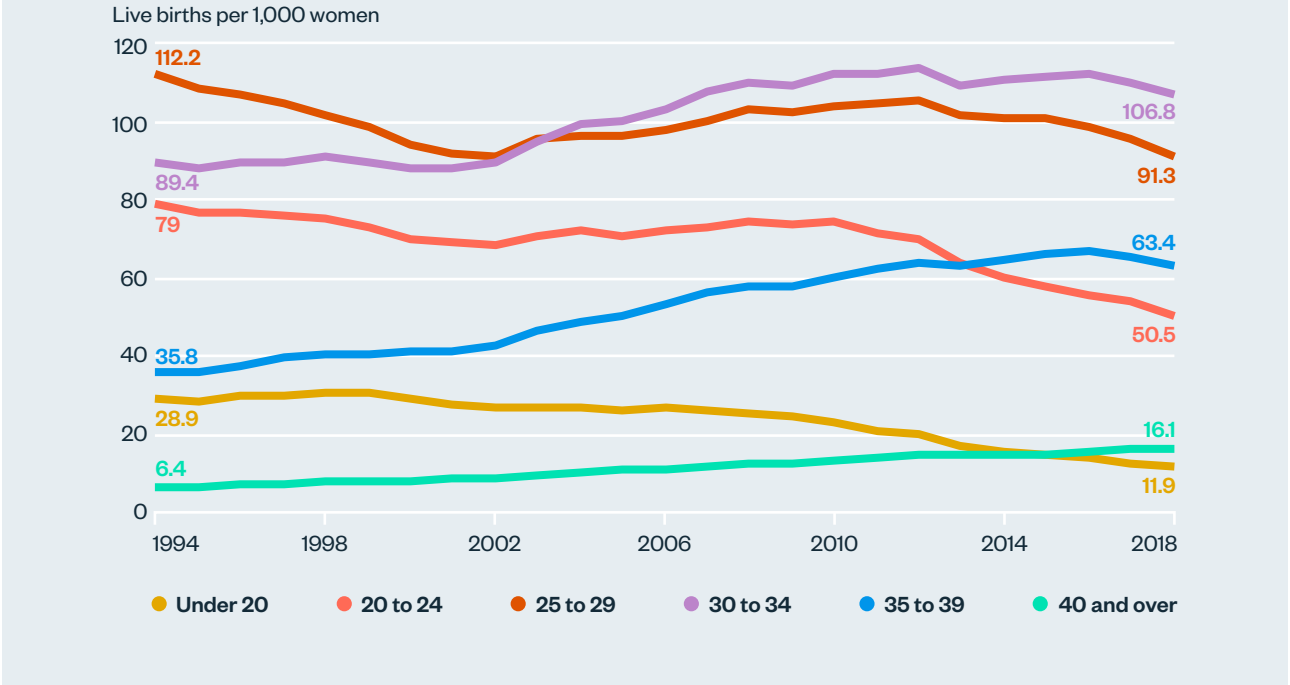
Since the early 1990s the birth rate among older women has markedly increased, with the number of live births among women aged over 40 more than doubling between 1994 and 2018, with similar increases for women aged 30 to 34 and 35 to 39 (see Figure 1). **This is a trend mirrored among fathers in the UK** (ONS 2019b)**.** In contrast, we have seen a long-term decrease in birth rates for women aged 20 to 24 and under 20 years. **In 2015, the fertility rate for women over 40 exceeded that of women under 20 for the first time—a trend that has been sustained in each of the last three years of recording** (ONS 2019b)**.** The reasons for this change are many and varied; research suggests that

Note to the reader: Inline references that are underlined are those funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

greater participation in higher education (ONS 2019c), a desire to have a longer working career before starting a family, and the overall trend of delaying marriage, cohabitation and other partnerships may all be potential drivers.

Research using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) has explored the impact of older parents on a child's health and development outcomes.[9] While most of the research in this area focuses on the immediate post-natal period, Sutcliffe et al. (2012) explore outcomes up to the age of five. After controlling for personal factors associated with being an older parent—such as higher family income, marital status and education level—they found higher maternal age was associated with greater child health and development outcomes. The analysis suggested that **having a child later on in life was associated with a host of better health and well-being outcomes in early childhood,** including fewer hospital admissions, fewer unintentional injuries, fewer social and emotional difficulties, and a higher likelihood of having all immunisations by age nine months (Sutcliffe et al. 2012). The study, however, is limited due to the shortfall in information on paternal age, as a significant proportion of children were living separately from their fathers.

Figure 1: Live births per 1,000 women by age group in the UK, 1994–2018.
Source: ONS (2019b).



9 The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a longitudinal, multi-topic survey tracking the lives of some 19,000 individuals (now aged 18/19) born in the year 2000/01 in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The MCS has been credited with being one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies in the UK to date (Joshi and Fitzsimons 2016), showing how experiences and circumstances in the early parts of a child's development can go on to influence outcomes later in life.

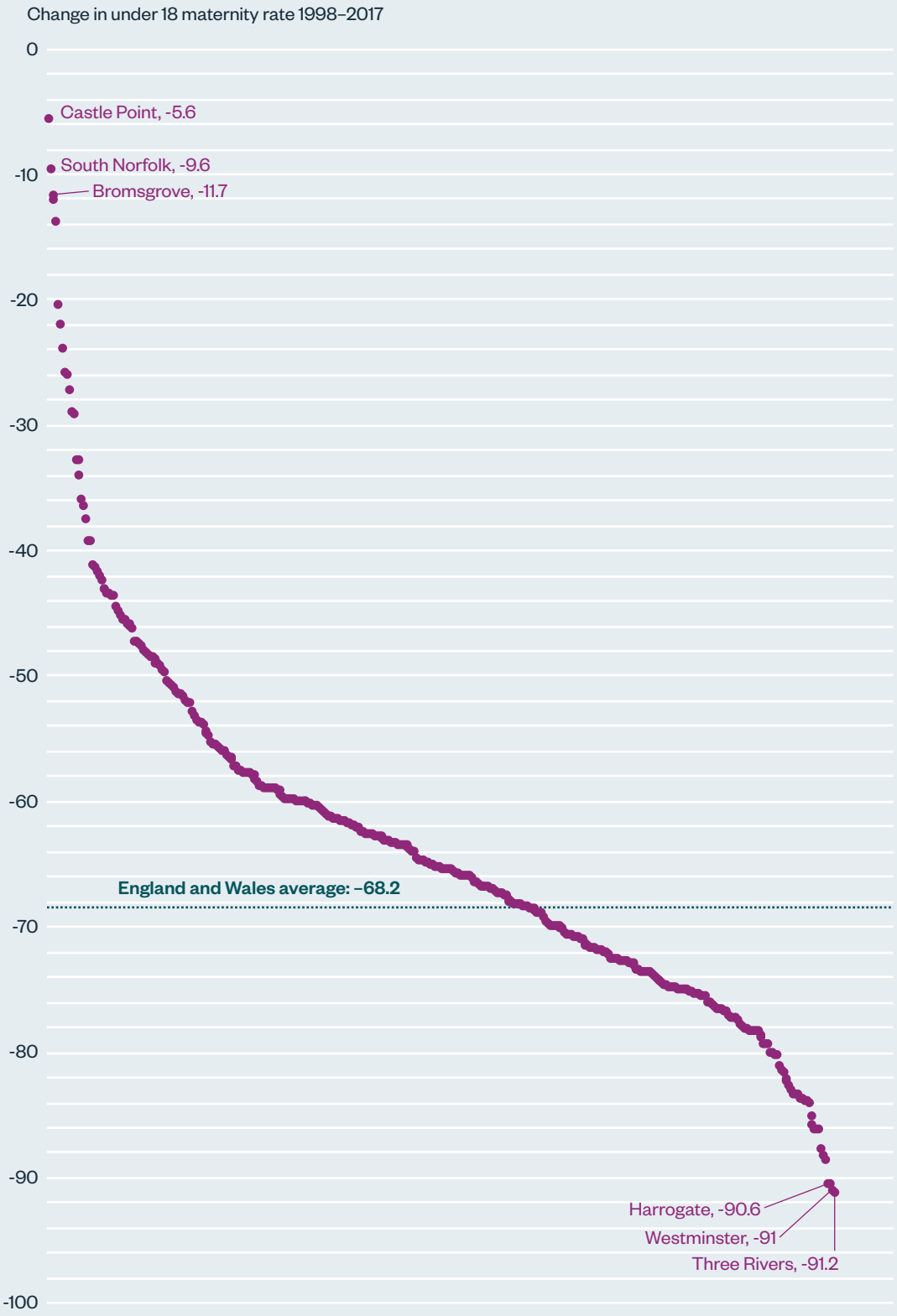
1.2 Are children born in certain areas more likely to be born to teenage parents? What is distinctive about the areas where the rate is still markedly higher than others?

Some of the change in the timing of family formation can be linked to the sharp reduction in the number of teenage mothers. **Rates of teenage pregnancy in the UK have halved in the past two decades and are now at their lowest levels since record-keeping began** in the late 1960s (ONS 2019d). Political support at all levels, long-term policy commitment, and changes to social norms are all behind the success of the public health strategy to reduce this number. However, as Figure 2 shows, the teenage maternity rate in the UK remains higher than a number of other European countries.

Moreover, there is considerable variation between different areas of the UK. The timing of family formation has been heterogenous along three key dimensions: deprivation, geography, and maternal education. Analysis of data from England and Wales suggests that on average **women from less deprived areas have their first child at an older age than those from more deprived areas,** though this relationship has weakened over time (Wellings et al. 2016). Figure 3, which shows the variations

Figure 2: Live births per 1,000 women aged under 18 in the European Union (EU) in 2007 and 2017. *Source: ONS (2019e).*

Figure 3: Reductions in under 18 maternity rate per 1,000 women across selected local authorities in England and Wales, 1998–2017.
Source: ONS (2019b); University of Bedfordshire (2019).



Note: The figure represents a selection of local authorities to illustrate the range in change in under 18 maternity rates. Each local authority is represented by the small purple dots. Outlier local authorities have been marked on the figure if they have had a much smaller or greater decrease in under 18 maternity rate between 1998 and 2017 compared to the average in England and Wales.

in the *reduction* of under 18 maternity rates in local authorities between 1998 and 2017, also highlights that the fall in the teenage motherhood rate has been inconsistent across England and Wales, with some local authorities having a much slower rate of change than others. The reasons for these differences are varied, with local circumstances, funding and initiatives all affecting the maternity rate in each local authority in different ways. Further research has shown that the timing of family formation has been, and continues to be, associated with maternal education. Mothers with higher education qualifications tend to start parenthood at older ages (Berrington, Stone, and Beaujouan 2015).

1.3 Are families having fewer birth children than before? [10]

According to the latest data, **the number of children a woman is likely to have while of childbearing age has fallen to the lowest level on record.**[11] Women who turned 45 in 2016 had an average of 1.90 children, down from 2.21 for their mothers' generation (born in 1945) (ONS 2019a). This decline, however, is slower than in many EU and other OECD member countries (Eurostat 2019). Again, there are clear patterns according to education level, with **mothers with lower levels of education having larger families with much greater risk of poverty as a result** (Berrington, Stone, and Beaujouan 2015; Social Metrics Commission 2020)**.** Research by the Centre for Population change has also shown that in the UK, women who have children at a later age have fewer children, on average, than their peers who had children at a younger age. This pattern is different to Nordic countries, where degree-educated women also have children later, but 'catch up' with their peers who became mothers at a younger age in terms of the number of children they have (Berrington, Stone, and Beaujouan 2015).

Research by Rochebrochard and Joshi (2013) has explored the effect of having multiple, one or no siblings on a child's early development. Drawing on data from the MCS, their research explored whether having siblings was associated with cognitive development and socio-emotional problems at age three, five and seven. They found **children living with two or more siblings showed greater odds of adverse development outcomes at age three.** These adverse effects were affected by maternal education level (used as a proxy for employment and financial circumstances), with the negative effects on cognitive and socio-emotional development scores being generally greater for children of mothers with lower qualifications. These findings echo research on the impact of resource being more thinly spread in larger families (Öberg 2017; Riswick and Engelen 2018). Proponents of this line of argument suggest parents have limited resources (often defined as time, emotional investment, and financial resources), and these are shared across all children in a household. If there are more children, there will be fewer resources available per child (Riswick and Engelen 2018). However, only children tended, for some outcomes, to score worse than those in two-child families

10 'Birth child' refers to any child conceived rather than adopted by a specified parent, and therefore carrying genes from the parent.

11 In ONS statistics, a woman's childbearing is assumed to start at age 15 years and end at the age of 45 years (the day before her 46th birthday) (ONS, 2019a).

(Rochebrochard and Joshi 2013). We only have a partial understanding of how the arrival and departure of step-siblings, the quality of the relationship between siblings, the impact of parental time investment, as well as the activities organised in the home learning environment, are associated with early child development. Moreover, there may be other gains from sibling relationships that are not necessarily captured in cognitive or behavioural outcomes. Future studies could also focus on a wider, and longer range, set of outcomes.

Comparative analysis of the impact of siblings on child outcomes in different countries suggests that these negative findings are not replicated in all contexts, with weaker relationships found in countries with more supportive policies for mothers and families (Kalmijn and van de Werfhorst 2016; Riswick and Engelen 2018). The country-specific policy context appears to determine under which conditions siblings matter for early development outcomes. This could be partly due to a lack of supportive policies—including welfare conditions, parental leave and child-care coverage—for mothers and families (Juhn, Rubinstein and Zuppann 2015). This could explain why economists have seen a trade-off between the number of siblings and negative child outcomes in some countries, but not in others.

The story of this first chapter is one of variation and inequality. Family fertility and size have changed for most, with mothers on average having fewer children at an older age. However, the timing of family formation and the completed family size has been, and continues to be, associated with maternal education. Research also suggests that the number of siblings is associated with negative early cognitive outcomes for children which are largely attributed to the spreading of family resources that comes with having multiple children. However, these adverse effects are graded by maternal education level (used as a proxy for employment and financial circumstances), with the negative effects on cognitive and socio-emotional development scores being generally greater for children of mothers with lower qualifications. Regardless of where support comes from—family, community or government—research suggests its effect is substantial in helping ease families' struggle to provide educational resources for their children (Gibbs, Workman, and Downey 2016). Also, support is not just money given to families; it can include anything from childcare to education initiatives (Juhn, Rubinstein, and Zuppann 2015). Comparative cross-country analysis has suggested that progressive family policy has the power to mitigate these potentially negative outcomes.

1.4 Points for reflection and discussion

The changes in family fertility and formation raise important issues for the well-being of young children.

- While teenage pregnancy rates have fallen substantially as a whole, certain areas of the country still have very high rates of young women giving birth under the age of 18. **Given the association between teenage pregnancy and vulnerability for both parents and the child, what can be learned from local areas that have been more successful in reducing teenage conception?**
- **What are the implications of the growth of one-child families?** We only have a partial understanding of how child outcomes are influenced by sibling relationships.

2 Changing family context

2.1 We have witnessed a growing variation in family living arrangements in the UK over the last 20 years, including the rise of cohabitation, re-partnering and blended families.

Today the terms 'family' and 'family life' may be taken to refer to a variety of family forms. They may mean: a family with one parent; a family with a married mother, father and children; or a cohabiting mother and father with children. The terms might refer to a family consisting of a couple and their children from previous relationships, or a same-sex couple with children (either from a previous relationship, adopted, donor-conceived or born through surrogacy). These changing family patterns have important implications for economic security, development, and the wider well-being of young children. We have only a partial picture of non-traditional families—the data on separated families, non-resident fathers, adoptive and step-parents is limited. We know little about transitions between family types and the implications for young children living in those families. This is important because it means that **our principal sources of data no longer reflect the reality of modern family life in the UK.** As a result, policy, resources and services may not be meeting the needs of young children growing up in different kinds of family.

2.2 Trends point towards both continuity and change in family structure.

The structure of family life has undergone substantial changes in recent decades. On the one hand, increases in separation, and blended families have resulted in **a diversity of complex family structures** (Eisendstadt and Oppenheim 2019)**. On the other, the traditional structure of married couple families remains the norm for large swathes of people** (ONS 2019f)**.** Looking at trends since the 1990s, we have witnessed a decline in the percentage of dependent children living in families headed by married couple parents (though the proportion of young children growing up in married couple families has not fallen since 2007), and a marked increase in the percentage of children living in cohabiting couple families. We have seen an overall downward trend in divorce numbers since their most recent peak in 2003. The fall in the number of divorces since 2003 is broadly consistent with a decline in the number of marriages since 1989 (ONS 2019f). There are, however, differences across the UK. In Northern Ireland, for example, cohabitation is still much less common; it had the lowest proportion of cohabiting couple families in 2019 compared to the other UK nations (ONS 2019f). Following a steady increase in the proportion of children living in lone parent families, the rate has now stabilised

at around 22% (Figure 4). Most official statistics only show the broad type of family in which a child is growing up at a single point in time however—they do not show whether children are living with birth, adoptive or step-parents.

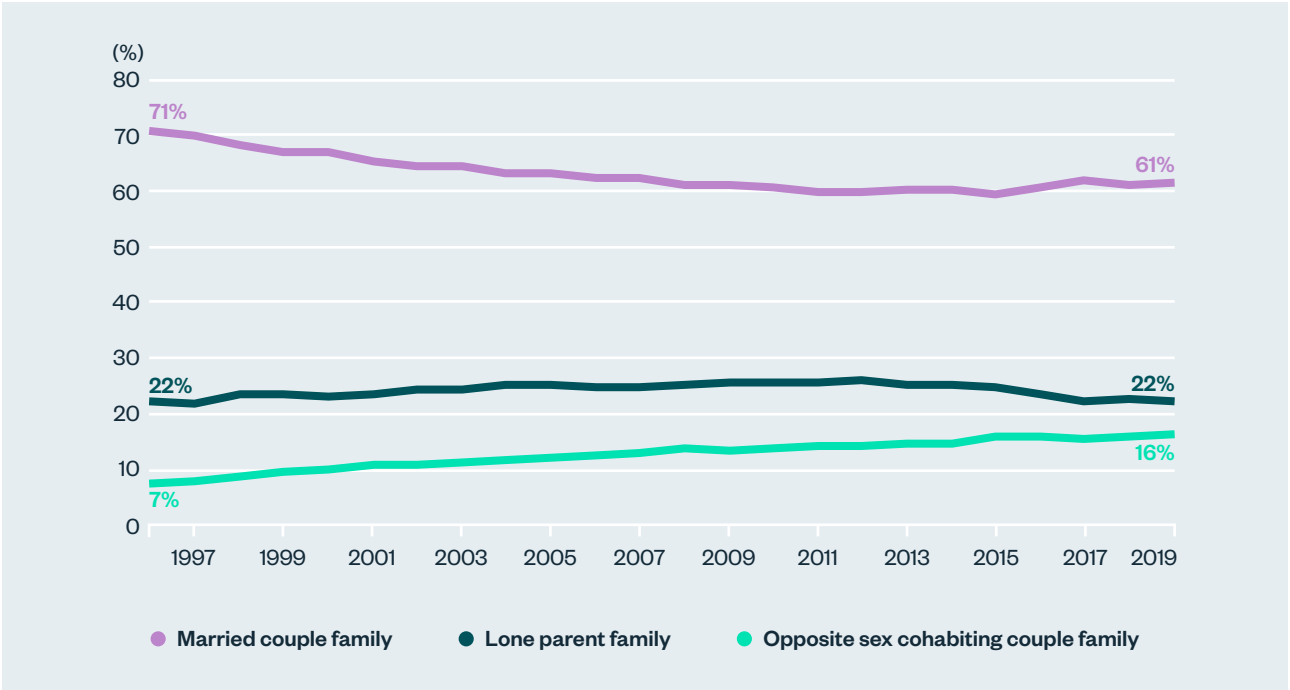
Meanwhile, the number of same-sex couple families with children has increased in recent years, from 15,000 in 1996 to 126,000 in 2018. Though this is a notable rise, same-sex families continue to represent under 1% of all families in the UK (ONS 2019f).[12]

It is also worth noting that this process of family change and transformation is not consistent across all ethnic groups. While the data here is patchy (the only publicly available trend data is from the 2001 and 2011 census), it suggests that **the decline in children living in married couple families has been happening at a much slower pace for those in the 'Asian/Asian British' and 'Chinese/Other' categories in this period** (Figure 5).[13]

2.3 Does marriage affect early child development?

In the UK, as in many other countries, debates have continued about whether

Figure 4: Dependent children in families by family type in the UK, 1996–2019.
Source: ONS (2019f).



12 The ONS defines a family as a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child, who live at the same address. Children may be dependent or non-dependent (ONS 2019f).

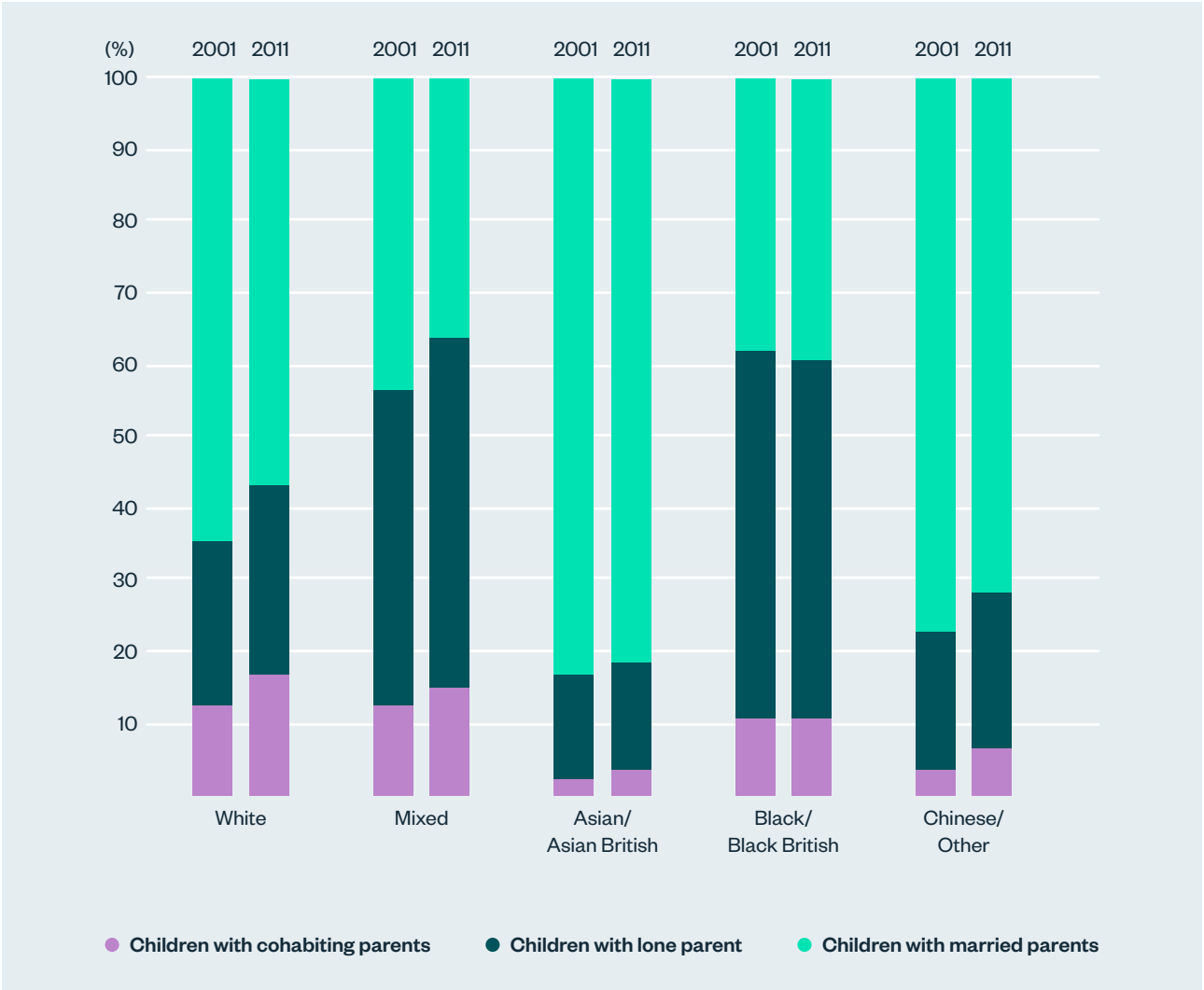
13 In a similar vein to Bywaters et al. (2019), these ethnic categories have been placed in inverted commas to recognise that these are artificial labels. As the authors note 'there is great diversity of background, history, culture and religion amongst 'Asian Indian' or 'Black African' children, as there is amongst 'White British' children. However, these categories are a useful starting place for seeing patterns of policy and practice affecting children' (Bywaters et al. 2019, p. 150).

parents' choice to cohabit rather than marry has a negative impact on their children's short- and medium-term development. A recent publication for the House of Commons usefully summarises the state of the evidence:

> *'Research into the effect of marriage on relationship stability and child outcomes is controversial because observed differences between married and unmarried couples often disappear when the research controls for differences in the characteristics of people who marry and those who don't.*
>
> *Put simply, people in more stable relationships are more likely to get married, and when this is taken into account the effect of marriage on relationship stability and child outcomes is not found to be very large, if it exists at all'* (Bellis et al. 2018, p. 7).

These conclusions have been drawn from recent research using longitudinal and cohort study data. The first of these

Figure 5: Dependent children in the UK by family type and ethnic group, 2001 and 2011. *Source: Authors' analysis of census data 2001–2011 (ONS; National Records of Scotland; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2016).*



studies by Goodman and Greaves (2010) suggests children of married parents on average have better early outcomes than the children of cohabiting parents, in relation to cognitive skills and social and emotional development at ages three and five. However this study also highlights that parents who are married differ from those who are cohabiting in very substantial and often structural ways, specifically in relation to their ethnicity, educational qualifications and economic circumstances, as well as their relationship stability and the quality of their relationship when a child is under the age of five. Using the MCS, they find that once differences in parents' education, occupation, income are housing tenure are controlled for, the gap in cognitive skills between children in married and cohabiting couples is greatly reduced and is no longer statistically significant. The gap in social and emotional skills between children in married and cohabiting couples is reduced by half once parental education and socio-economic status are controlled for. Once unplanned pregnancy and relationship quality are taken into account, the gap in social and emotional skills narrows further, and is no longer statistically significant. While differences in family structure and relationship quality could explain some of the gap in social and emotional skills, the authors say it is 'debatable':

> *'Our research here, however, cannot distinguish the extent to which these differences simply reflect those who choose to get married in the first place (since people are likely to choose to marry in part on the basis of the underlying quality of their relationship) and how much they are the positive product of marriage itself (possibly due to the additional social and legal protections provided by marriage)'* (Goodman and Greaves 2010, p. 5).

Research by Crawford, Goodman, and Grieves (2013) builds on this earlier work and extends it to older children aged 8 to 16. It confirms that gaps in children's cognitive and social and emotional skills are largely explained by differences in the socio-economic status of parents who chose to get married rather than marriage per se. However, they find differences in anti-social behaviour between age 10 and 16 that remain after controlling for a range of characteristics—although this does not prove that marriage is a causal factor. This later study also looks at the higher rates of relationship instability among parents who cohabit in comparison with married parents, and the impact on child outcomes. It finds that children born to cohabiting parents are, on average, significantly more likely to have experienced a period of separation before they are seven years old than children born to married parents. In turn, children who have experienced a period of separation before turning seven tend to have poorer cognitive and social and emotional skills than those growing up in families where there is no period of separation. However, the authors find that 'a sizeable proportion' of this difference in relationship stability and the 'vast majority' of the difference in child outcomes can be explained by the differences between the characteristics of those who choose to marry or cohabit. The study authors conclude:

> *'On the basis of this evidence, therefore, there does not seem to be a strong rationale for policies that seek to encourage couples to get married, at least not if the aim is to increase*

the measures of relationship stability or child development' (Crawford, Goodman, and Grieves 2013).

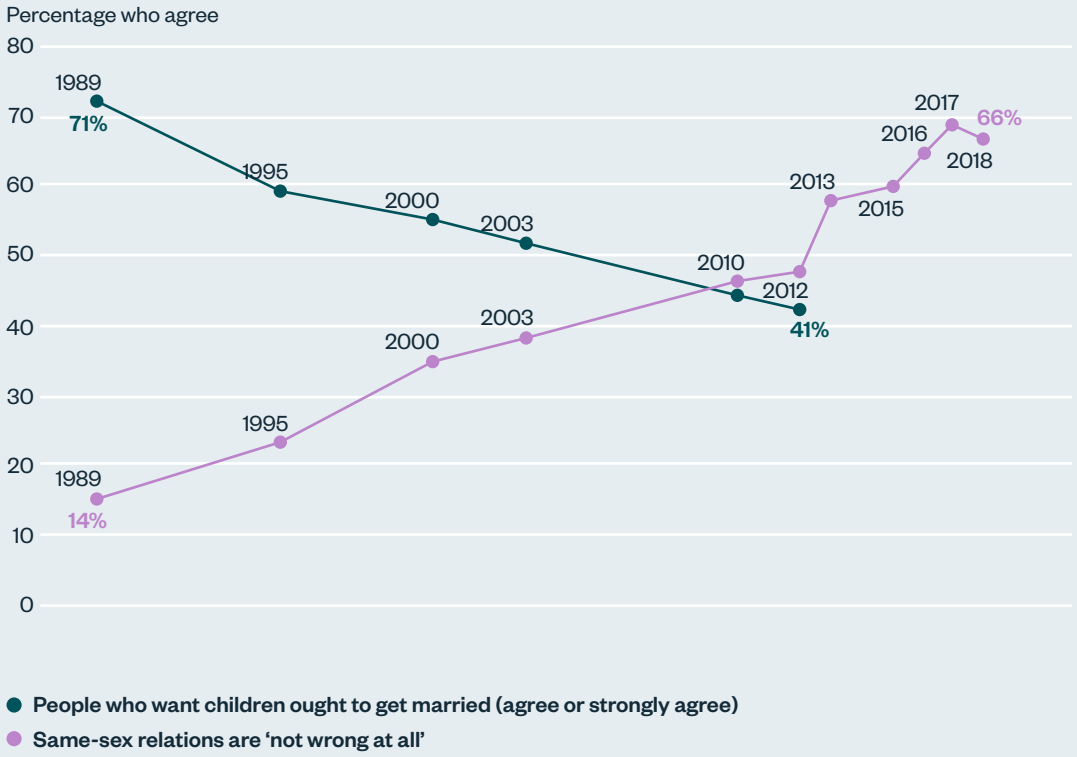
The policy discourse on families and early childhood has, until recently, focused on family structure, but there has been a growing acknowledgement of the importance of focusing on the quality of relationships within families, whether those families are intact, separated or re-partnered. Research evidence accumulated in recent decades has shown that the quality of the relationship between the parents and the presence of high levels of unresolved and hostile conflict affects child outcomes at an early age and through adolescence (Harold et al. 2013; Garriga and Kiernan 2014).

This research suggests that improving parental education and socio-economic status, as well as improving the quality and stability of relationships, are more fruitful avenues to improving children's outcomes than encouraging marriage.

2.4 Have public attitudes changed towards marriage and same-sex relationships?

In the last 20 years we have witnessed significant changes in marital behaviour in the UK, with an increasing proportion

Figure 6: Attitudes towards family formation and structures over time, 1989–2018. *Source: Park et al. (2013); Curtice et al. (2019); Huchet-Bodet, Albakri, and Smith (2019). NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey.*



Note: NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey asks different questions in each wave. Therefore, in some years questions on family structure may not have been asked.

of people either delaying getting married or not marrying at all. Given the indirect relationship between attitudes and behaviours (Ajzen 1991), it would be surprising if such changes were not accompanied by a similar shift in public attitudes towards marriage and its role as a foundation for childbearing.

The proportion of people supporting the view that marriage should be the starting point for bringing up children has almost halved in under 25 years (Park et al. 2013)**.** This change marks a shift in attitudes towards marriage and family formation, though opinion is still reasonably divided (Figure 6). **There has also been a substantial rise in the proportion of people who think that same-sex relations are 'not wrong at all'.**

Indeed, 41% of those interviewed as part of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes series at the most recent point of surveying these questions (2012) stated that marriage should precede parenthood (Park et al. 2013). The authors also compared responses from different age groups and found that younger people, on average, appeared to have a more relaxed attitude towards marriage as the starting point for childrearing than older people. Taking a longer-term view, the study also suggests that older generations are taking a more relaxed attitude compared to previous years. The gap between the oldest and youngest generations on the question of marriage is half what it was when the question was first asked 30 years ago.

2.5 What do we know about blended and dynamic families, and the impact of separation on early development?

A near-continuous increase in the number of cohabiting couples, same-sex couples with children and blended families in recent decades has given rise to a wide range of family structures and formations. For children growing up in the UK, family structures can also be transient in nature—parents, children and other family members may experience a number of different family structures over time. As a result, **networks of family relations have in turn become more complex.** Blended families bring their own opportunities and assets in the form of wider sources of social, economic and cultural capital (Rothon, Goodwin, and Stansfield 2012).

Research suggests that lone parenthood, often measured through single motherhood, is still associated with negative socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes for children. Research by Harkness, Gregg, and Fernández-Salgado (2019) suggests that differences in the cognitive skills of young children in lone mother and two-parent families are largely driven by differences in their economic circumstances rather than parenting practices. Their research also suggests that these poorer outcomes are related to the age of the child, with children who were younger at the time of parental separation experiencing larger effects.

These findings, however, differ from those emerging from recent work by Fitzsimons and Villadsen (2019). Their study also drew on data from the MCS and explored whether the timing of paternal departure matters for early socio-emotional development, examining the heterogeneity of effects by gender, parent relationship quality and maternal education level. The analysis suggests that children of parents who separate in early childhood (aged 3–5) demonstrated no short-term impacts and limited mid-term impacts, whereas children of parents who separated in mid-childhood (aged 7–11) had a greater likelihood of increased internalising

and conduct problems (Fitzsimons and Villadsen 2019). There are a number of potential reasons for these differing results. They may differ because the two studies measured different outcomes; Harkness, Gregg, and Fernández-Salgado (2019) assessed differences in verbal development, while Fitzsimons and Villadsen (2019) assess socio-emotional well-being. Further research is needed to disentangle these factors and to further test these associations.

It is also important to bear in mind the research referred to earlier (p. 23), which shows that persistent, hostile and unresolved conflict is a critical factor in influencing family relationships and child outcomes rather than family structure per se (Harold et al. 2016). Children growing up with separated parents in a stable and harmonious arrangement may fare better than children who are growing up in a couple where there is a high degree of conflict. This suggests that public policy needs to support family relationships and children's development regardless of family structure and importantly, as families go through transitions—whether that is separation, forming a new partnership, or facing other challenges such as bereavement or financial difficulties (see Section 2.7).

Research has also started to explore the financial and mental health implications of family breakdown. In their 2014 work, Brewer and Nandi explored the impact of separation on employment patterns, levels of income, housing tenure, mental health and life satisfaction change in the years following family breakdown. The authors drew on 17 years of data from 18 waves (1991–2008) of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS)—an annual longitudinal survey that interviews every adult member of a nationally-representative sample of around 5,000 households. The study suggested that children and their mothers see their incomes and living standards fall by more after separation, on average, than fathers (Brewer and Nandi 2014). They find that while mental health and life satisfaction fall at the time of separation, both return quickly to pre-separation levels, and that this is mostly not related to what happens to income following separation.

In thinking about the implications of relationship breakdown, research has started to explore the ways in which shared or co-parenting after separation is organised (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019). In their study, Haux and Platt (2015) explored associations between pre-separation involvement of fathers and post-separation contact. The study suggests that fathers who were 'actively involved' in supporting their young children (in the study this refers to changing nappies, putting the child to bed, reading and playing with them) were more likely to stay in regular contact with their child after separating from their partner. Turning to mothers, the study found that those who separated from their child's father tended to have a poorer view of their own abilities as a parent than those who stayed in their relationships (Haux and Platt 2015).

Both studies cited above rely on survey data, due in part to the deficiencies of existing administrative data. These sources, in particular, have very limited ability to identify more complex family structures, or the impact these structures may have. We cannot use administrative data to identify separated families—only those that come into contact with the statutory or court service. With no obligation for parents to centrally register that they live apart or have separated, administrative datasets in the UK are of limited value for identifying non-resident parents. Even if we could identify separated

families through such datasets, they often do not collect the data necessary to assess the effect of separation on children, such as child development outcomes.

While there has been an increased recognition in the academic and policy communities to reflect more diverse family structures in data collection tools, data collected about other family types remains limited. For largely practical reasons, the focus continues to be on the household that children live in, with non-resident parent families treated as 'secondary' (with data on them often collected by proxy from the resident parent) (Bryson and McKay 2018). As noted by Bryson, Purdon, and Skipp:

> *'All in all, in order to strengthen the evidence base on families we need to reflect on how we approach data collection on family separation'* (2017, p. 6).

2.6 The changing financial context for young children and their families

The last two decades have also given rise to increased concern about the persistence and impact of child poverty. As noted throughout this review, socio-economic circumstances are closely entwined with changes in family structures, as well the timing of family formation, and their impact on a number of key child development outcomes. Therefore, understanding how the financial circumstances of families with young children have changed is essential if we are to design more supportive policies in the future.

Inequalities in household income are a key feature of family circumstances and are explored alongside other inequalities in the work of the IFS Deaton Review. Analysis by Blundell et al. (2020) and Brewer et al. (2020a) shows that income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, rose steeply in the 1980s and that, apart from a notable rise in inequality between 2004/5 and 2007/8, there has been relatively little movement since the early 1990s, with flat inequality before housing costs and a drifting up of inequality after housing costs.[14] According to the OECD's data, the UK's Gini coefficient of 36% is higher than the vast majority of nations in the European Union, including Germany, Ireland, Sweden and Norway, but slightly lower than that of the United States (Brewer et al. 2020a).

In 2018/19 more than half of the total 4.5 million children in poverty (using the Social Metrics Commission relative measure of poverty) were living in families where the youngest child is aged under five—some 2.4 million children (Social Metrics Commission, 2020).[15] **The risk of poverty for families is highest where the youngest child is under five (standing at 37%).** This is the result of a combination of factors including the working patterns of mothers of young children and changes to benefits/tax credits for this group (Social Metrics Commission 2020). The evidence suggests that exposure to poverty and hardship poses a greater risk to children's cognitive and social and emotional development in their first year

14 The Gini coefficient is a commonly used measure of income inequality that condenses the entire income distribution for a country into a single number between 0 and 1. The higher the number, the greater the degree of income inequality.

15 The Social Metrics Commission measure of poverty is a relative measure that includes a wider range of resources and costs than the measure that is derived from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)'s *Households below average income* series (see Social Metrics Commission (2020)). See next footnote for further detail on *Households below average income*.

of life (Schoon et al 2013), so we should be especially concerned if child poverty rates are higher among families where the youngest child is under five.

In 2018/19, 33% of *all* children in the UK were living in poverty—a similar rate as in 2000/01 using the Social Metrics Commission measure (2020). This was a slight fall in comparison with 2017/18, after having risen over the previous three years.

The rate of child poverty has fluctuated over the last two and a half decades, shaped by changing policy priorities and economic conditions (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019). These fluctuations vary somewhat depending on what measure of relative poverty is used. Using *Households below average income* John Hills (2013, 2015) shows that the substantial rise in benefits and tax credits, alongside other factors reduced relative child poverty between 1996/7 and 2004/5. Child poverty rates then rose in the run up to the financial crash, falling again in 2010/11.[16] (Hills 2013; Hills 2015). Over this same period child poverty rates for children under five particularly improved (Stewart 2013).

Recent estimates by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), which draw on *Households below average income*, show an increase in relative child poverty from 27% in 2011/12 to 30% in 2018/19.[17] According to Bourquin, Joyce, and Norris-Keiller:

> *'This is due to rises in relative child poverty between 2011/12 and 2016/17, followed by essentially no change between 2016/17 and 2018/19. Although relative child poverty increased more sharply between 2004/05 and 2007/08, this was then reversed in the following years'* (2020, p. 18).

The authors argue that overall, the increase in relative child poverty since 2011/12 is the first increase sustained over such a substantial period since the early 1990s (Bourquin, Joyce, and Norris-Keiller 2020).

According to recent analysis by the Social Metrics Commission, poverty rates are higher for Black and ethnic minority families compared to White families. **In 2018/19 nearly half (46%, 900,000 people) of all people living in families where the household head is Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British were in poverty, compared to just under one in five (19%, 10.7 million people) of those living in families where the head of household is White** (Social Metrics Commission 2020).[18] Child poverty rates also vary for different groups, with higher rates of poverty among children from Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups (Vizard et al. forthcoming). Rates of poverty are also higher for children living in families where there is a disabled adult or child (Social Metrics Commission 2020). There is well established evidence of the impact of income poverty on child outcomes (Cooper and Stewart 2017, Stewart and Reader forthcoming). Given the high rates of child poverty and the impact of the deep recession induced

16 The fall in child poverty rates in 2010/11 reflects increases in benefits/tax credits as well as a fall in median incomes.

17 Note that the *Households below average income* measure produces a lower overall proportion of children in poverty in 2018/19, standing at 30% in comparison with 33% using the Social Metrics Commission measure. This reflects differences in the definition and measure used; these issues are explored in Review Two, *Changing patterns of poverty and vulnerability in early childhood*.

18 'Household head' is classified as the highest income householder without regard to gender.

by the COVID-19 pandemic, we would expect these to influence children's well-being and life chances now and in the future across a number of domains.

Different family types have different risks of poverty. Analysis, again by the Social Metrics Commission, shows that almost half (48%) of people living in lone-parent families are living in poverty. This compares to 26% of those living in couple families with children. However, the poverty rate of lone-parent families has fallen substantially —it is 14 percentage points below the rate seen in 2000/01 and ten percentage points below the rate seen pre-recession in 2007/08 (Social Metrics Commission 2020).

Poverty is not just about money but also about the stresses and strains in family life that shape the environment children grow up in (Joyce and Xu 2019). Looking at the last two decades prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the proportion of children growing up in families without work and in poverty has declined, reflecting improved employment rates and welfare reform policies including tougher work conditions for parents with children. In parallel there has been a sharp rise in the proportion of families in poverty who are also in paid work (Hick and Lanau 2017). The growth of the gig economy, as well as increases in flexible working, self-employment and zero-hour contracts, have led to more precarious employment for many, including those with young children. Recent research from the United States shows that children living with parents with non-standard hours of work are less likely to access nursery provision (Perez 2019). Economic insecurity is a growing feature of working life and we need a better understanding of the way insecure working impacts on parenting, the ability to access childcare provision and child outcomes. These patterns of poverty are likely to change in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 4) as unemployment rises sharply as a result of the economic recession.

The second review of this series, *Changing patters of poverty and vulnerability* will use Nuffield-funded research, as well as other key studies, to explore the issues of poverty and vulnerability in early childhood in greater depth.

2.7 Points for reflection and discussion

Family arrangements in the UK are increasingly varied with the decline in marriage and rise of cohabitation, separation and blended families. But we know comparatively little of the implications of some of these changes for children's well-being.

- What role do non-resident fathers in lone and blended families play? What measures can support fathers' involvement in young children's lives after separation?
- How do socio-economic factors and changes in family form affect young children's social and emotional development?
- Does parental separation have a greater impact on children's well-being and outcomes if it occurs when children are under five than when they are older?
- We have relatively little data on the growth of blended families and the implications for young children's experiences. What research should be prioritised and how can public policy better support this growing group of children and families?

3 Employment and care

3.1 Over the last two decades the changing patterns of work and care have profoundly altered the environment that young children grow up in.

They are changing how and where young children are looked after, and who by. Mothers, and to a lesser extent fathers, are juggling work and home responsibilities. For the first time, the majority of the current generation of children growing up in the UK are spending a large part of their early childhoods in some form of early education and childcare (ECEC) rather than with their own families in their own homes. As a result of all these changes, early childhood has become a more varied, often enriching, but also complex experience as small children negotiate different settings and relationships.

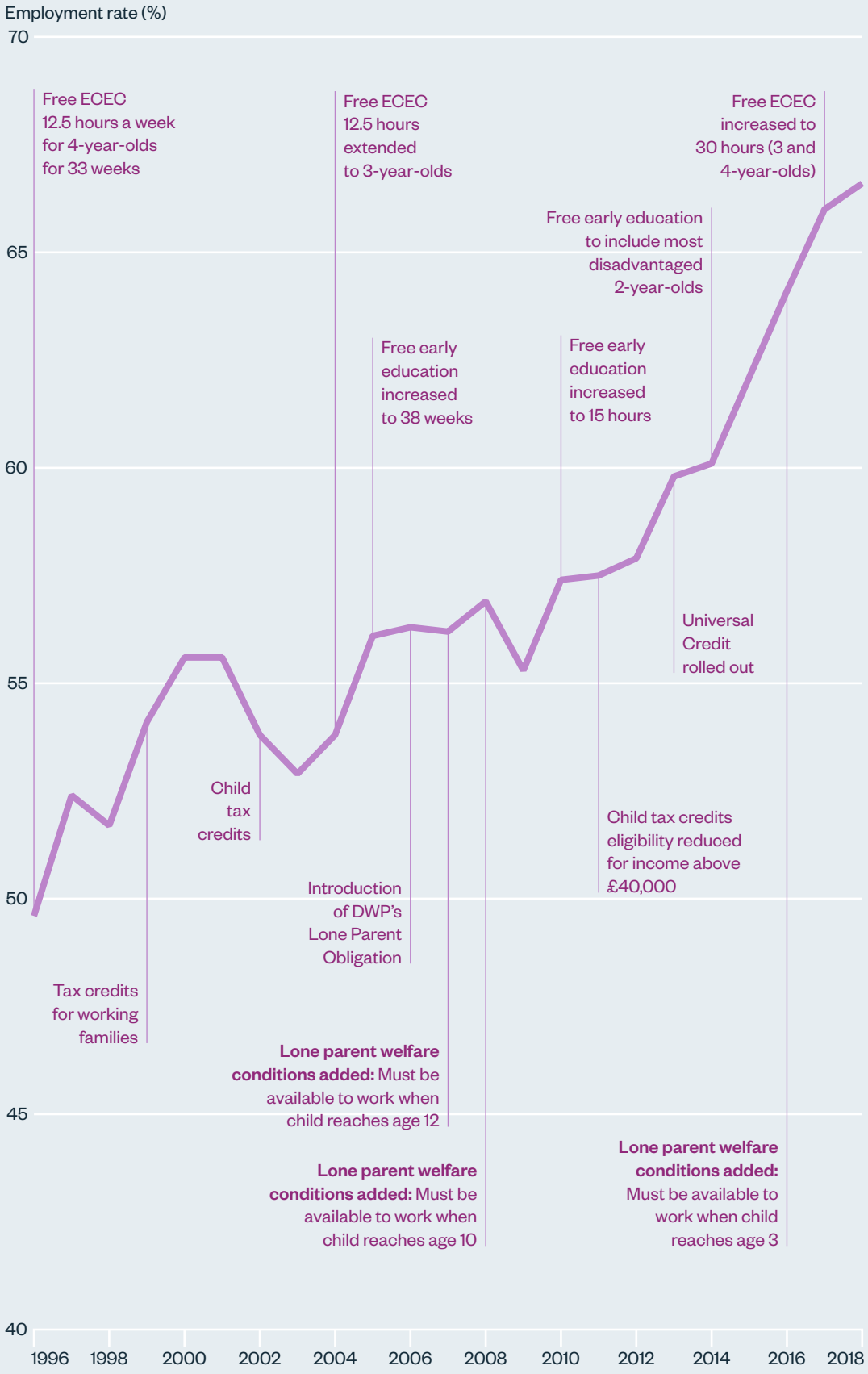
The expansion of ECEC has accompanied this change; it has also provided learning, social and emotional development opportunities for children. However, there are inequalities in the take-up of early years places by area, social-economic group and ethnicity.

3.2 Are mothers returning to work sooner?

Following the birth of a child, mothers tend to make an almost immediate decision about whether to return to work, and how soon to do so (Coram 2019). Often the decision to return to work is a personal choice—but economic opportunities and pressures can significantly impact decision making. The changing nature of the UK labour market—such as the growth of flexible contracts and part-time working—has encouraged mothers to get back into work following birth. And, as we explore below, attitudes towards mothers working when their children are very young have changed markedly in the past few decades. Moreover, the squeeze on household incomes due to both welfare reform and wage stagnation has affected how parents engage with the labour market, including the need for both parents, and lone parents, to be employed to maintain living standards (see Section 2.7). **The majority of children under the age of five will now be growing up in a household where either both resident parents, or a lone parent, are working—a marked shift from the mid-1990s.**

There are, however, variations within this trend. Employment rates for women differ by ethnicity, for example. While we do not have data of employment rates for mothers of young children, we do have broader figures of employment rates for women in general. Research by Corlett (2017) found that employment rates for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were far below the rate for White women. However, there has been a steady catch-up,

Figure 7: Employment rates of mothers of young children (under four) in England, 1996–2018. *Source: Based on Conboye and Romei (2018) and ONS (2019g). Used under licence from the Financial Times. All Rights Reserved.*

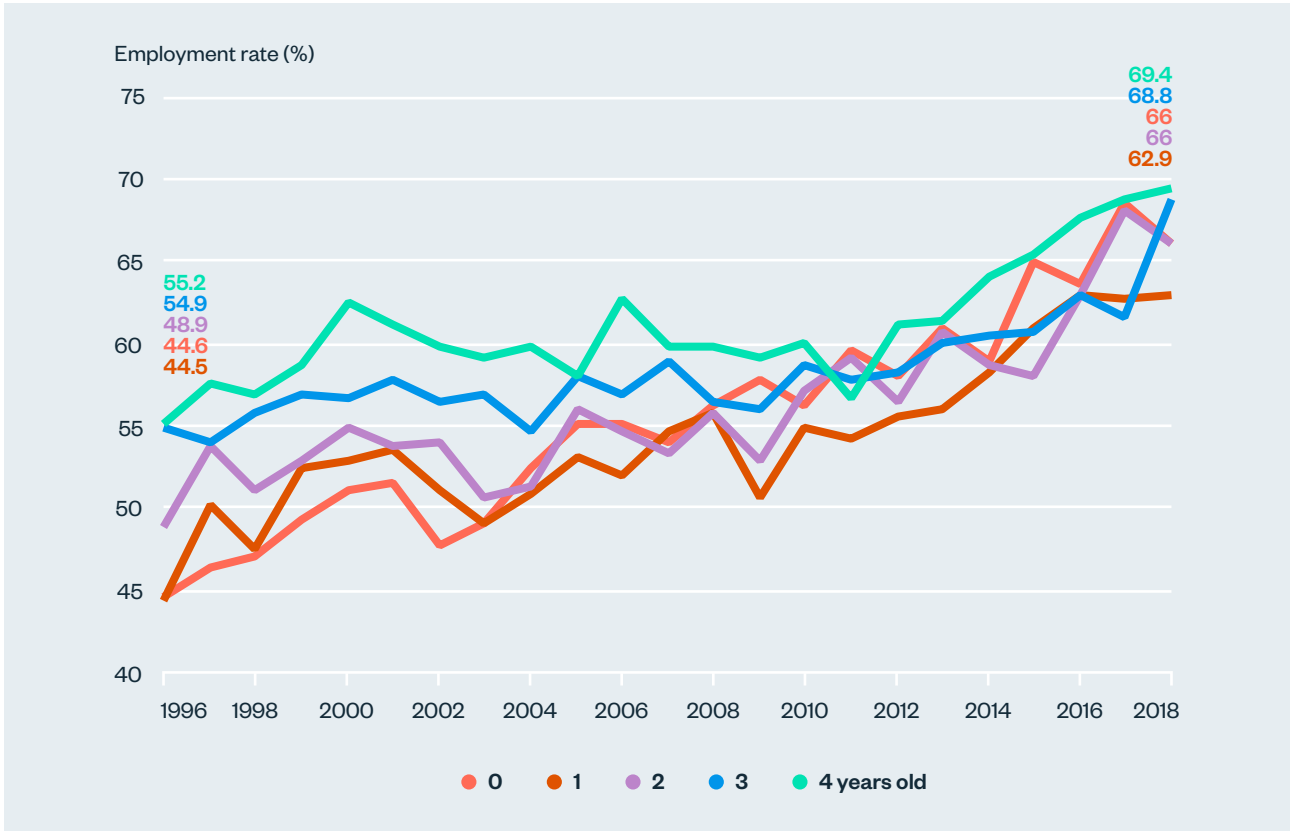


with increases in recent years. In the same period the employment rates for Black African women also increased substantially, while the Black Caribbean women's employment rate—always high—rose too, exceeding that of Black Caribbean men for a period after the financial crisis in 2008 (Cortlett 2017).

In the past two decades we have also seen a growing proportion of women with younger children (aged under four) returning to work (Figure 7), rising from 50% in 1996 to 67% in 2018. As the graph illustrates, this rise in employment has been accompanied by significant policy changes with a major expansion of free early years provision, financial support through child tax credits, and increasing conditionality for lone parents with younger children to be available for work.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, policies in all devolved nations initially sought to support and incentivise the voluntary return to work. In recent years, however, policy has shifted towards mandating availability of lone parents for work. This has involved adding 'conditionality' to employment benefits, including the use of financial sanctions for perceived failure to meet work-related requirements. These recent welfare and benefit reforms have sought to encourage lone parents back into employment at earlier points in their parenthood, with different thresholds of 'job-seeking activity' introduced depending on the age of a lone parent's youngest child (lone parents with a youngest child aged three now have to be available for work). **Yet, despite this recent growth, the UK's employment rate of lone parents is one**

Figure 8: Employment rates for all women by age of youngest dependent child in England, 1996–2018. *Source: ONS (2019h).*

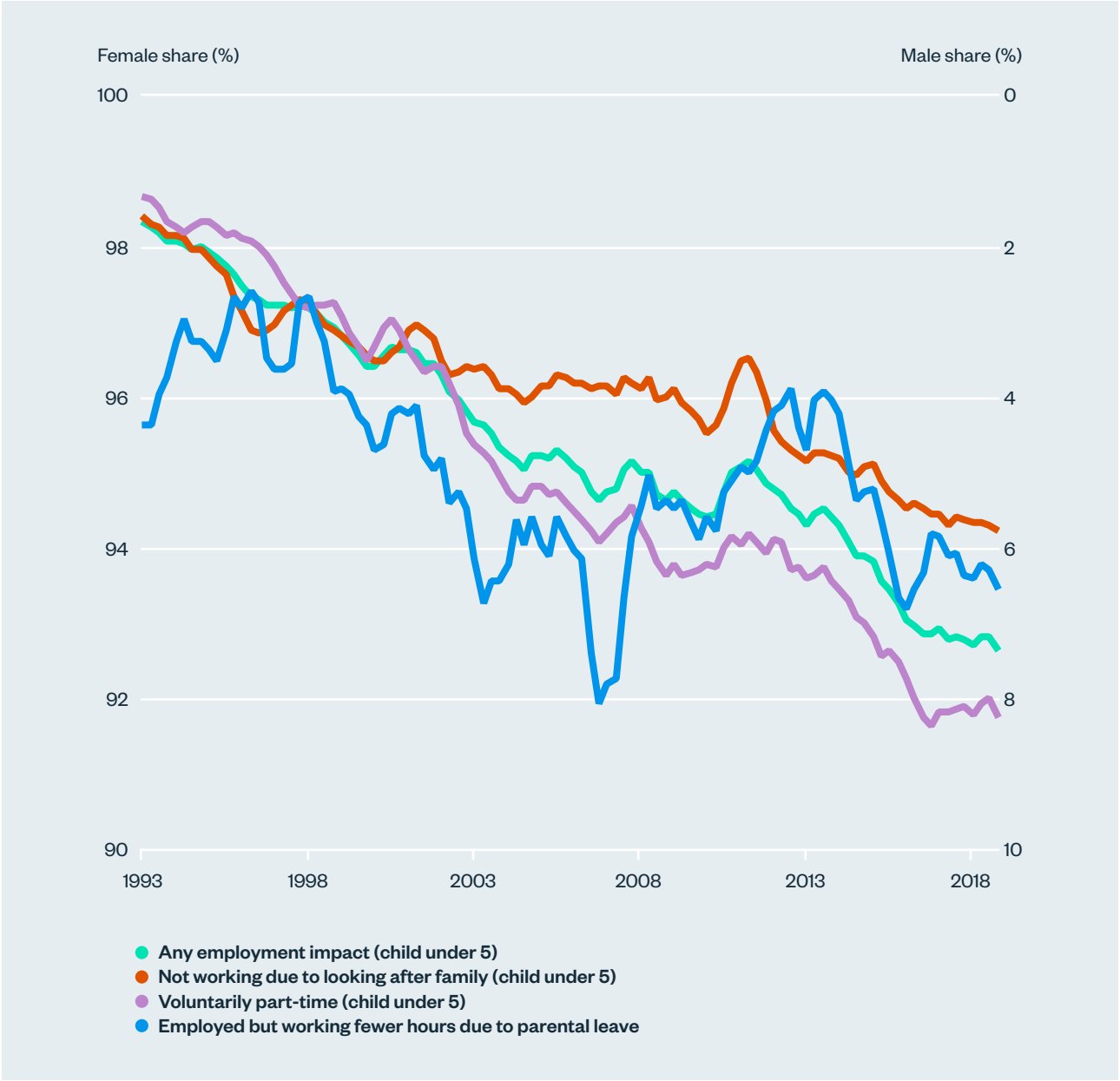


of the lowest of any major EU economy. According to Eurostat (2019)**, it ranked 22 among the 28 EU countries.**

When we look more closely at employment rates of all women by the age of their youngest child (Figure 8) we see significant increases for all ages, though mothers with children aged two and under have seen the largest increase.

A growing body of research has suggested a broad association between women's education, skills, seniority and the time taken to return to work following the birth of a child (Newton et al. 2018). In a recent study using UK household survey

Figure 9: Gender split of people whose labour market status is affected by parenting a child under 5 in the UK, 1993–2018. *Source: Analysis of ONS Labour Force Survey, Corlett (2019). Reproduced with permission from the Resolution Foundation.*



data, the authors found an association between the number of days per week that women returning to employment worked, and their age and level of highest qualification (Easter and Newburn 2014). Further research, in this case using longitudinal data, has suggested that **mothers in managerial or professional occupations are more likely to remain in full-time work during pregnancy and also to return to work sooner following childbirth.** Using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, the research also suggested that **new mothers who return to work part-time, as opposed to full-time, are more likely to be in self-employment or semi-routine or routine occupations** (Fagan and Norman 2012)**.** And while there has been a change in social attitudes regarding the acceptability of mothers with dependent children working (see Figure 11), there is still a prevailing attitude that mothers of children under the age of five should either not be working, or working part-time (Phillips et al. 2018).

As noted by Newton et al. (2018) in their rapid review of the evidence on parents returning to work, there are significant data and research gaps. Research on the information parents use when making decisions, or even the factors that are taken into account, is sorely lacking. Further research exploring the influences on such decisions more explicitly would help to illuminate the discussion and policy response.

3.3 Are mothers and fathers changing their working patterns following the birth of a child?

Due to the large gender disparities in the time dedicated to parenting, the share of parenting responsibility by women and men has been a growing area of demographic research in recent years. Figure 9 gives a new indicator of how this has changed over time. Using the Labour Force Survey, researchers from the Resolution Foundation (Corlett 2019) have explored the gender split of parents who are:

- not working due to looking after family
- working part time but do not want a full-time job
- employed but working fewer hours due to maternity/paternity/parental leave.

The study found that **among families with a child under five, there has been a slight and gradual movement in terms of fathers changing their working patterns when compared to fathers in the 1990s. In contrast, mothers have experienced a slightly reduced impact on their labour market status following the birth of a child. It must be emphasised that these changes are small.** Overwhelmingly it is mothers who continue to make an employment sacrifice after having a child. These figures account both for gender divisions within couples as well as the overwhelming gender divide of lone parents (Corlett 2019).

3.4 Have societal attitudes towards 'traditional' gender roles and female employment shifted?

In the UK, public attitudes towards gender roles are changing in favour of a more equal sharing of household, childcare and employment responsibilities (see Figure 10)**.** Recent data from NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey suggests that support for 'traditional' division of roles and labour (i.e. the father acting as the main breadwinner) is more prevalent

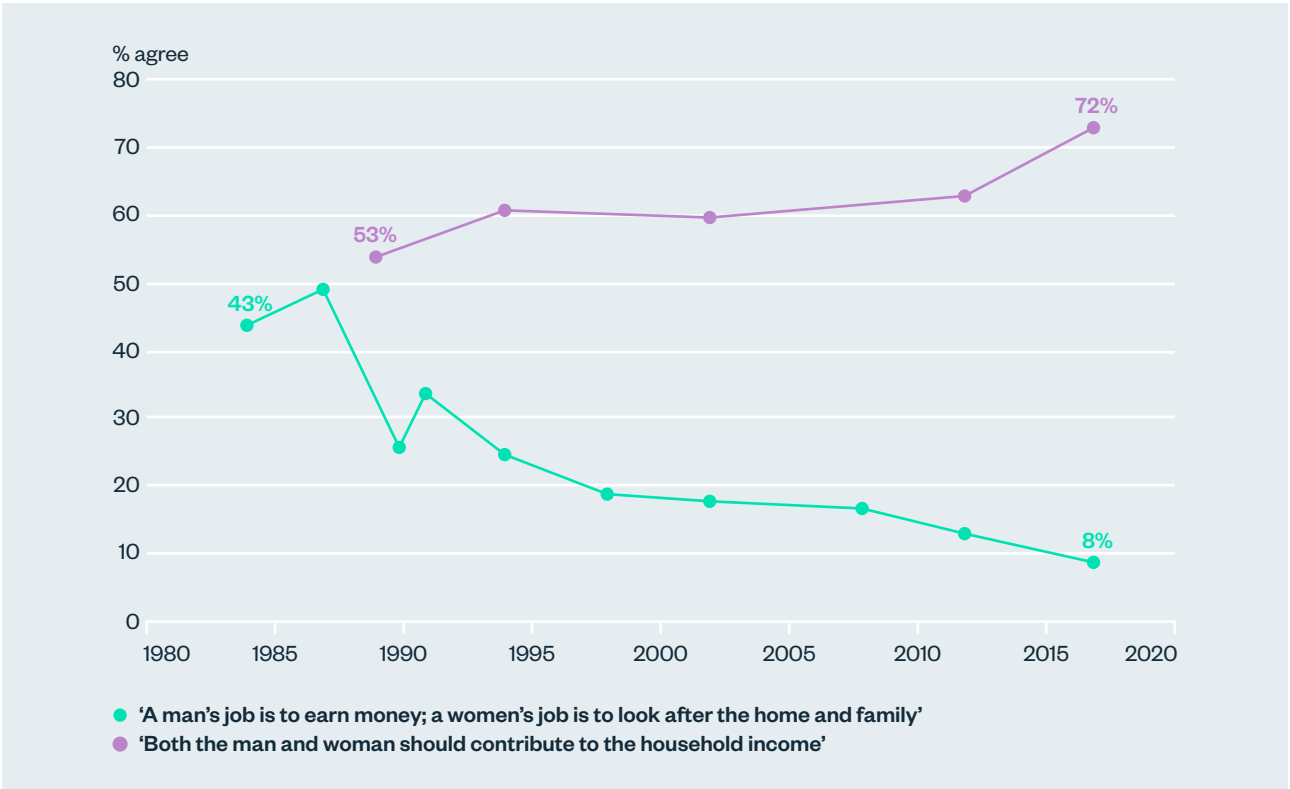
among those aged over 65, with younger age groups much more likely to agree that sharing of responsibilities should be split more evenly (Phillips et al. 2018). Research funded by the Nuffield Foundation is exploring the circumstances of families with equal sharing or role-reversal of caring responsibilities, with the aim of informing policy to support more fathers to share caring responsibilities more equally (Gaunt and Tarrant forthcoming).

However, as Figure 11 shows, some attitudes are still entrenched regarding new mothers returning to full-time work, though there has been a softening of views in recent years. Using data from NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey, Phillips et al. (2018) show that a dwindling portion of people now feel that mothers should remain at home full time when a child is under school age. In 1989, when this question was first posed to a section of the population, some 64% of those surveyed agreed that a mother should stay at home with pre-school children; by 2017, this had dropped to a third. The proportion thinking that a mother should work part time rose from 26% in 1989 to 43% in 2012, though this has since dropped back to 38%. While support remains rare for the idea that a mother with a child below school age should work full time, it has more than doubled from 2% in 1989 to 7% in 2017 (Phillips et al. 2018).

3.5 How have the roles, responsibilities and working patterns of fathers changed?

Our common understanding of being a father is, according to some

Figure 10: Attitudes to female employment and 'traditional' gender roles, 1984–2017. *Source: Phillips et al. 2018. NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey.*

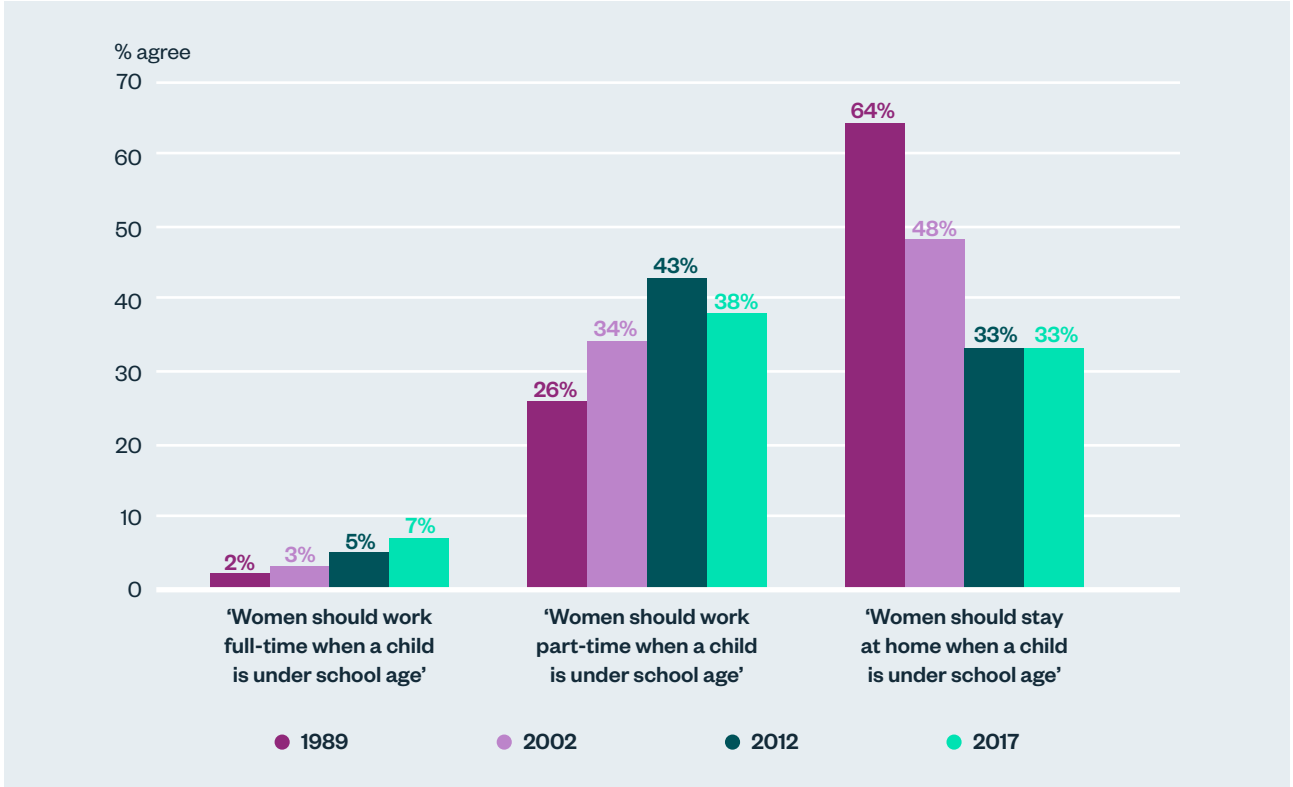


commentators, going through a period of change in which the received wisdoms about paternity are being revisited (Poole et al. 2013; McLaughlin and Muldoon 2014). Indeed, there is a growing body of research on the increased role fathers are playing in children's lives, as well as a new focus on the impact fathers may have on child development. **In the UK, fathers are spending more time with their children than the previous generation of men, especially if they have a child under the age of five** (Haux and Platt 2015)**.** However as the authors note, a considerable minority—around a fifth of fathers—no longer have contact with their children two years after separation.

A new concept of the role of fathers and fatherhood has slowly made its way into both research and public discourse (Gregory and Milner 2011). **Fathers are now expected to be more involved and engaged in their children's first few years than was the case in earlier decades.** In their review of the contemporary evidence on fatherhood, work and care, Burgess and Goldman (2018) suggest that fathers in the UK are now more likely to be involved in antenatal visits, present at the birth of their child, to request paternity leave following the birth, and to play a greater part in the upbringing of their child compared to fathers in previous generations (Burgess and Goldman 2018).

Although there has been some change in the roles of fathers, it is worth remembering that less than a third of fathers are currently taking up their statutory two-week paid paternity leave—a figure that has declined year-on-year since 2014/15 (EMW 2019). The level of take-up is also likely to

Figure 11: Attitudes to mothers' employment in different circumstances, 1989–2017. *Source: Phillips et al. (2018). NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey.*



be related to the relatively low rate of pay and other practicalities while on paternity leave.

Central to the many debates around parental and paternity leave is the importance of fathers' involvement in young children's lives, with the exception of where there is a risk of domestic violence. There is considerable research exploring the scale and impact of absent fathers, especially following separation and divorce. Haux, Platt, and Rosenberg (2015) have shown mothers who separate are more likely to experience maternal depression and higher rates of child behavioural problems, which in turn, makes them feel less competent as parents.

3.6 Are young children seeing more of their parents compared to twenty years ago?

There have been measurable increases in the time parents are spending on childcare across Europe and North America since the middle of the 20th century. However, it appears there is a social gradient to these new parenting arrangements. Those with higher formal education qualifications (one proxy for social class) have increased the time they dedicate to childcare more than those who have lower formal qualifications (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016). Moreover, it appears in the UK at least, that **this trend may be changing. As Figure 14 shows, between 2000 and 2015 there was a small decline in the overall time parents spent on childcare.** These changes have taken place against the background of increasing availability of ECEC. However, the research does not explore the relationship between the time parents spent on childcare and access to formal childcare provision.

The data also shows that although women in the UK still carry out much more childcare as a whole than men, there have been small shifts in recent years. Men increased the time they spent on childcare for pre-school children by just over half an hour per week between 2000 and 2015, while the time women spent slightly decreased. **Longer-term trend data is needed to explore whether increasing female employment will continue to be associated with decreasing time spent on childcare or indeed its opposite** (see Chapter 4)**.**

We know that the time fathers are spending with their children is increasing, but we know very little about how this time is spent. The measurements used to explore shifting care arrangements within households is broad, and largely focuses on self-reported hours spent on specific tasks. **Further research is needed to explore what exactly these new care and work arrangements look like, and what effects these arrangements have on the development and well-being of children.** We also need to know what happens in both intact and separated families. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted existing patterns of employment and childcare (see Section 4). The fourth review in this series, *Parents and the home*, will include a more substantive discussion of the research and evidence on parent-child interactions.

3.7 Are more young children now in regular formal ECEC settings?

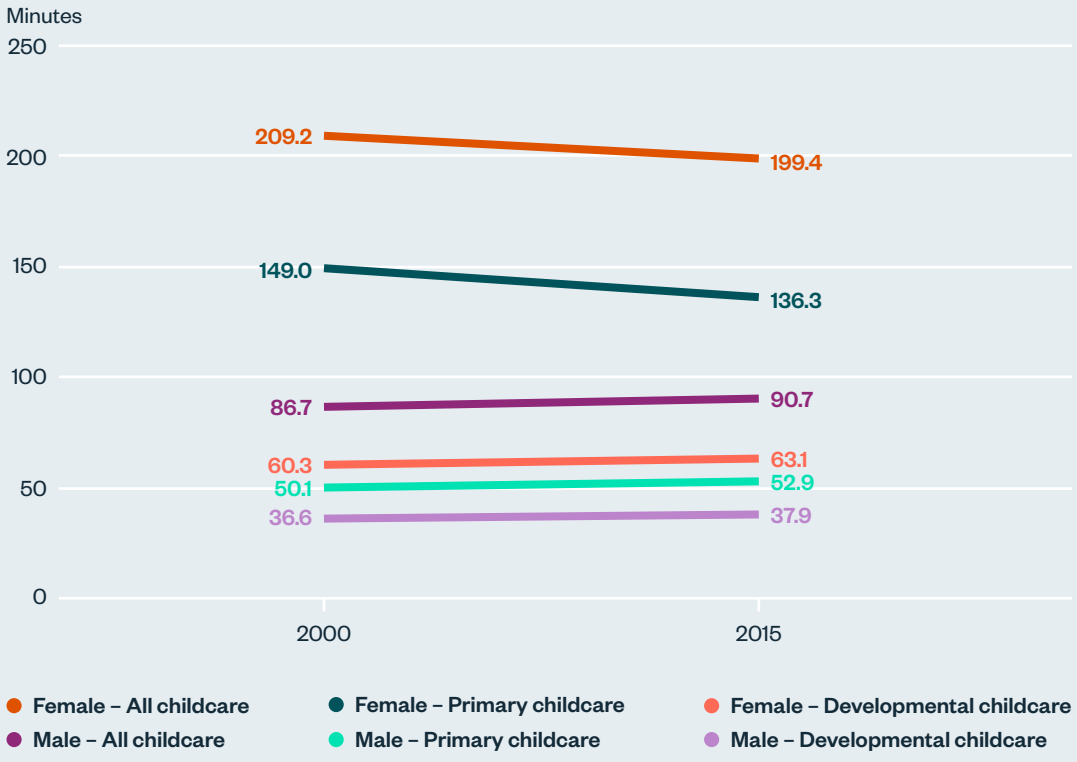
The marked changes in women's work patterns are closely linked to the expansion of ECEC. The creation of what is effectively a new area of service provision with a mixed funding model is perhaps the biggest change in family life in the past

two decades. Since the late 1990s pre-school education and care has been progressively encouraged by state interventions, with a greater number of funded hours being offered by successive governments (Brewer et al. 2014; DfE 2019b; Britton, Farquharson, and Sibieta 2019). These same governments have sustained a commitment to a mixed economy of providers and the promotion of parental choice (Hillman and Williams 2015). The provision of this early care continues to try and balance three key aims:

- improving the educational and developmental outcomes for all young children
- increasing parental particularly women's employment
- addressing disadvantage.

Indeed, evidence suggests **that ECEC is central to parents' decisions about whether to enter the labour market and how many hours to work** (DfE 2019a)**.** This is particularly true for second earners and lone parents, who are usually women. Despite a decrease in 2017, there has been **an increasing**

Figure 12: Average daily minutes of (pre-school) childcare provided by gender of parent in the UK, 2000 and 2015. *Source: ONS (2016b).*



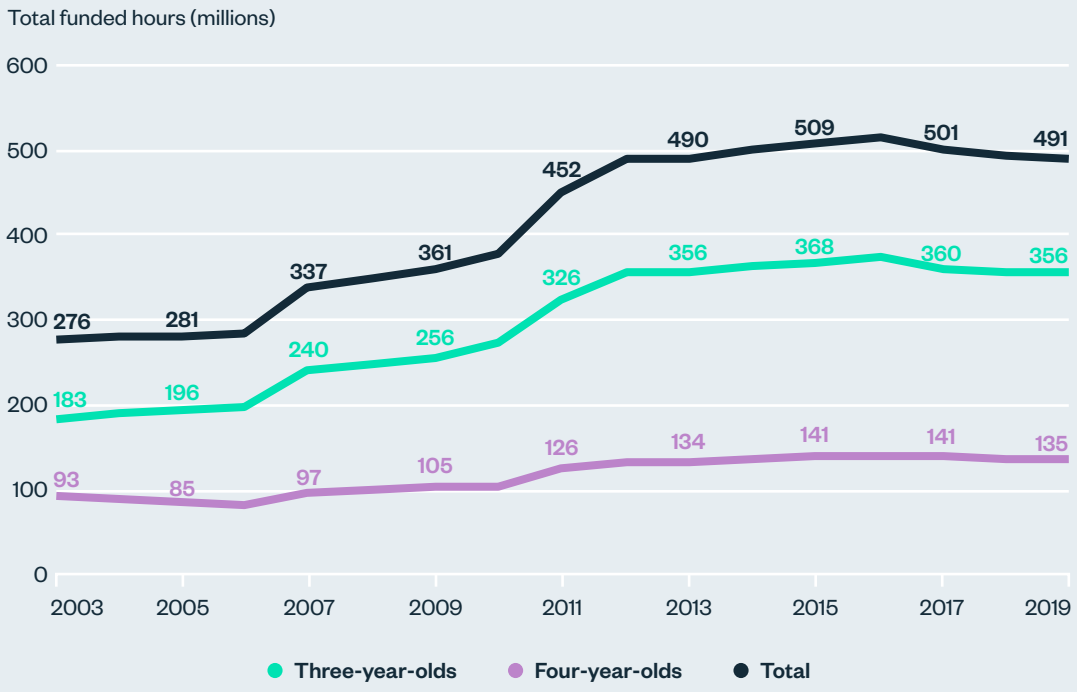
Note: 'Primary childcare' refers to activities such as: feeding, waking, supervising at the playground; looking after a sick child and other unspecified childcare. Developmental care refers to activities such as: reading to or playing with children; helping children with homework.

number and proportion of young children experiencing formal care provision as more women and men are in paid work (and full-time work) when children are aged two and under (Figure 14)**.** In terms of transforming the early experiences of young children, state-financed and provided formal care is arguably one of the biggest changes to have occurred in the last two decades (Figure 13).

For children in England, we only have broad estimates as to the number of children accessing paid formal childcare. Data from the DfE's early years survey found that just under two thirds (64%) of families using formal ECEC provision reported paying for some proportion of this childcare—a very minor decrease from 65% in 2017 (Department for Education (DfE) 2019a).

There appear to be clear patterns in take-up of the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds according to area, family and child characteristics (Mathers 2016; Albakri et al. 2018; Campbell, Gambaro, and Stewart 2019). Using data from the National Pupil Database, Campbell et al. (2019) found that **children from the most disadvantaged families were least likely to access their funded entitlements.** The study showed lower attendance among the children who went on to become eligible for free school meals in primary school (Campbell, Gambaro, and Stewart 2019). Turning to ethnicity and language, a growing body of research has suggested that **children who speak English as an additional language are less likely to take up formal early education and care.** In a study

Figure 13: Number of free entitlement hours for three- and four-year-olds in England, 2003–2019. *Source: NAO (2012); DfE (2019b).*

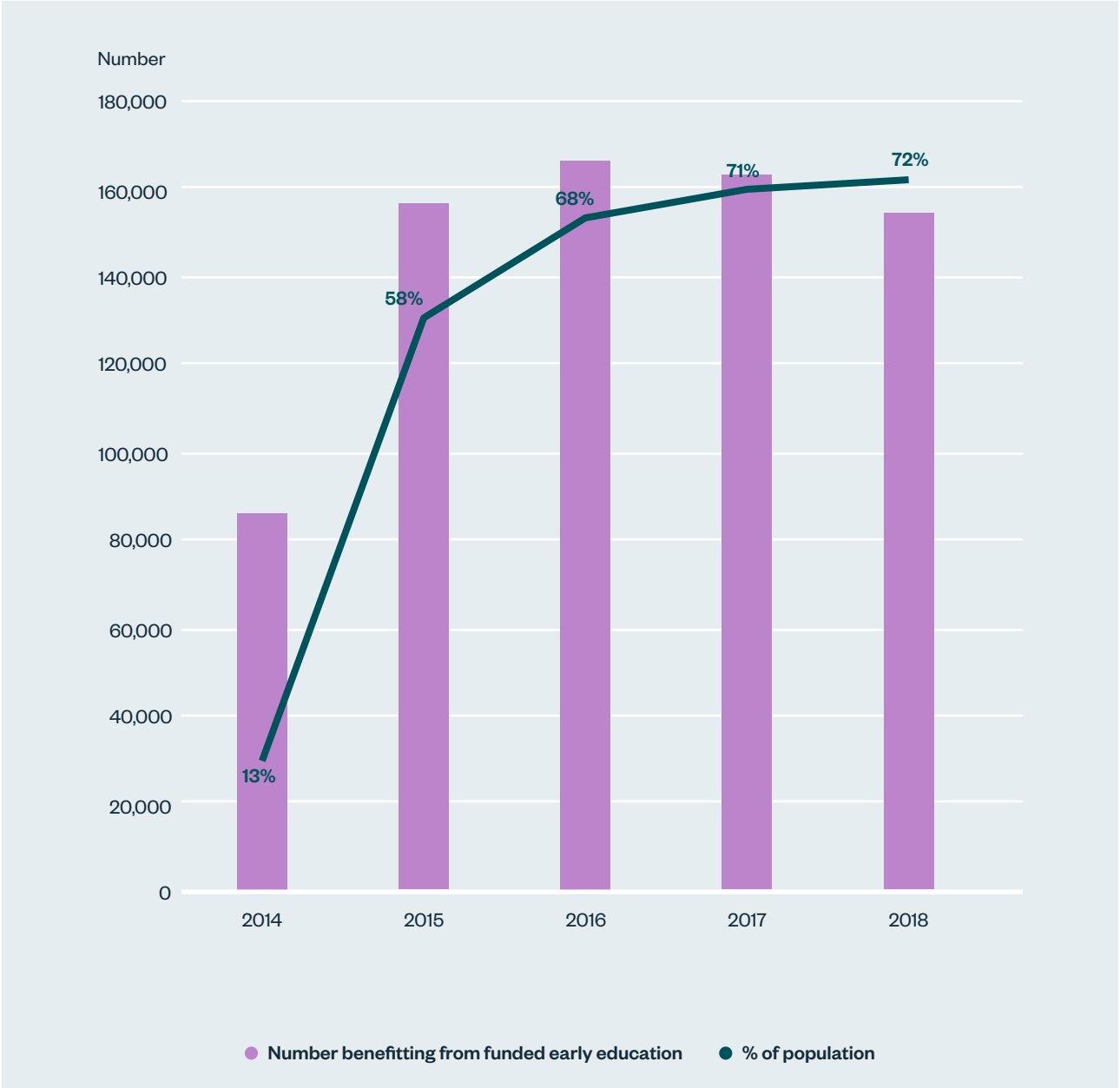


Note: Excludes four-year-olds in reception classes, not funded as part of the entitlement. Numbers may not sum due to rounding. This figure does not capture the substantial increase in ECEC provision between 1997 and 2003.

of three-year-olds, Campbell, Gambaro and Stewart (2018) found children who spoke English as an additional language were almost three times less likely to take up their full five terms of eligible pre-school compared to children with English as their first language. The study also found that take-up was lower among children from Black African, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Gypsy/Roma/Traveller backgrounds, compared to their White British peers (Campbell, Gambaro, and Stewart 2018).

Since September 2013, two-year olds from disadvantaged households in England have been entitled to 15 hours of free childcare per week—known as the 'disadvantage entitlement'. This policy

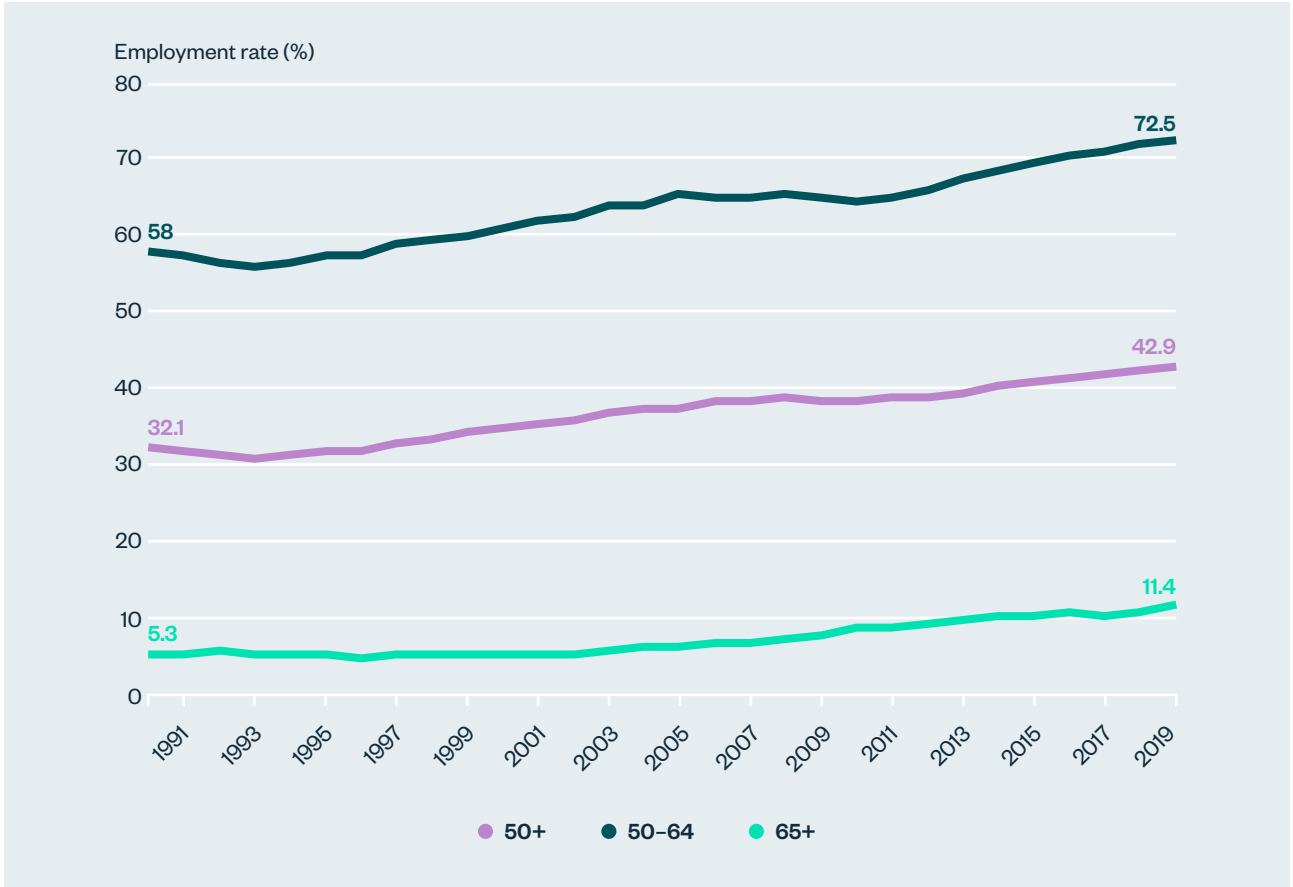
Figure 14: Number and percentage of two-year-olds benefiting from funded early education in England, 2014–2019. *Source: DfE (2019b).*



significantly expanded the pre-existing provision of publicly funded childcare for disadvantaged households with young children. Take-up was initially low, but by January 2018 had increased to around 72% nationally. However, there remains considerable local variation (Teager and McBride 2018). According to recent analysis by the National Audit Office (NAO), take-up ranged from 39% in Tower Hamlets to 97% in Stockport in 2019. Take-up was low in many London boroughs. NAO analysis also suggests that there is considerable variation within local authorities. In Essex, for example, take-up rates ranged from 58% to 99% (National Audit Office 2020).

As discussed above, public investment in both universal and targeted ECEC has sought to juggle different objectives: mothers' labour market participation, improving child outcomes and addressing disadvantage. In this context, increased attention has been paid by both parents and policy makers as to the importance of early experiences for children. And while there are doubts as to the efficacy of such policies in encouraging mothers and fathers into employment (see Brewer et al. 2020b for a recent analysis), questions have emerged as to how early maternal employment may impact upon children's development. Do babies suffer when mothers return to work? What can we confidently say from the current evidence? Over the last two decades a number of influential UK and international studies have

Figure 15: Employment rates of the over 50s in the UK, 1990–2019.
Source: ONS (2020).



investigated the associations and potential causal relationships between maternal employment, ECEC and outcomes in early childhood.

The research in this area is complex and nuanced, with differing results based on different data sources and cohorts. In one of the most fraught areas of social policy and research any one scientific study is unlikely to be capable of providing definitive answers to complex quandaries such as the impact of employment and childcare on children and their families. However, a growing consensus is beginning to form about the ways in which employment type and duration, socio-economic factors and childcare quality intertwine to shape children's early outcomes and well-being. These issues are explored in depth in our third review, *The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances*.

A growing body of empirical evidence has indicated that formal ECEC can have a positive effect on a variety of children's outcomes in the short and long term, particularly if the quality is good (Sylva et al., 2010; Melhuish et al., 2015; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018; Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019). There is significant evidence on the beneficial effects of childcare for children over two (Smith et al., 2009; Sammons et al., 2002). However, more recent research has found that educational benefits of ECEC were modest and were not sustained over the longer-term (Blanden et al. 2018). The evidence on the benefits of care for children under two, is somewhat inconclusive, with some negative effects, some null effects and some positive effects. Some studies have suggested that high levels (i.e. long hours) of ECEC, particularly group care in the first two years is associated with poorer behavioural outcomes (Eryigit-Madzwamuse & Barnes, 2013). However, subsequent research by Melhuish and colleagues (2015) suggests that these negative outcomes may in fact be partially explained by high amounts of poor-quality ECEC, particularly in group care and in the first two years (Melhuish et al., 2015). Further research is needed to fully investigate the benefits of early years education for children under two years of age.

3.8 Given the rise in the use of formal care, is informal care (particularly grandparental care) still an important source of support for parents of preschool children?

While the use of informal care has decreased since 2004, the use of grandparental care has remained largely stable through this period (DfE 2019a; Speight et al. 2008). As noted by Bryson et al. (2012), families often use informal care as part of a 'package' that includes both formal and informal care, particularly when it comes to pre-school children. Due to its flexibility, it is more likely to be used to cover non-standard work or study hours than formal care. This type of unpaid work is often hidden but it is fundamental to the way that society functions. In recent years the labour force participation rate for over 50s has steadily increased, with the largest percentage point increases occurring for women aged 60 to 64. **If these trends persist, it may be that grandparents will need to make a decision between going to work and caring for their grandchildren.** This will not be an easy choice. They may feel a moral obligation to provide this care, but it will have a financial and often physical impact on them. Moreover, grandparents in the UK are more likely to be in paid work compared to the rest of Europe—only

Denmark and Sweden have a higher percentage of working grandparents (Eurostat 2019).

3.9 Points for reflection and discussion

These marked shifts in employment and care patterns have changed, and are changing, the context in which mothers and fathers look after, parent and interact with their young children. The expansion of early years provision is fundamentally changing young children's everyday experiences of care, learning and playing. Key questions arise from these changes.

- What shapes the decision for new mothers to return to work?
- How does balancing work and care affect parent-child interaction?
- What needs to change to enable fathers to take up their parental leave entitlements and increase their parental engagement?
- What would a more integrated experience of education and care look like for families with young children?

4 The impact of COVID-19

4.1 The global pandemic, and its economic and health consequences, has sent shock-waves through our economy and society, exposing and in many cases exacerbating existing inequalities in the lives of young children.

The Nuffield Foundation is funding a range of projects exploring the social implications of COVID-19, including the impact on different aspects of family life. There are four principal ways in which the pandemic and its economic aftermath are affecting families with young children:

- rising unemployment and poverty
- changing patterns of care at home
- the partial closure of nurseries and reception classes
- the fragility of the childcare sector.

First, COVID-19 is forecast to cost millions of adults their permanent employment. The government has introduced a very substantial package of emergency measures to protect the incomes of many of those in low income households and those affected by the lockdown. However, some have missed out. This follows significant reductions in working-age benefits over the previous decade (Blundell et al. 2020). A new project is investigating how families with children on a low income navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, while also tracking how the social security system responds (Patrick et al. forthcoming). We know that COVID-19 is affecting Black, Asian and ethnic minority families particularly severely, intensifying existing inequalities (Khan 2020; Platt and Warwick 2020), as well as younger generations and women. Given the exceptional nature of the crisis, the way in which the wider economy as well as specific groups are affected is likely to look very different from previous economic crises and recessions. The social distancing rules and lockdown measures have hit service industries particularly hard, with sectors that involve and rely on social contact, including hospitality and retail sectors, completely shut down. As the participation of men and women varies in these sectors, the impacts of these sectoral shutdowns on family responsibilities are likely to be felt differently by mothers and fathers (Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020).

Second, the combination of huge job losses, nursery and school closures, and home working is changing how parents spend their time and divide responsibilities for paid work, childcare, and housework (Andrew et al. 2020). Early findings show that mothers who were in paid work prior to lockdown were one-and-a-half times more likely than fathers to have subsequently either lost or left their jobs. They were also more likely to have been

furloughed. In all, mothers who were in paid work in February 2020 were 9 percentage points less likely to be currently working for pay (either remotely or on-site) than fathers by April. Mothers are looking after children for 10.3 hours of the day (2.3 hours more than fathers) and are doing housework 1.7 more hours than fathers. However, more positively, fathers have also increased the time they spend on housework and childcare—they are doing nearly twice as many hours as in 2014/15. Mothers are also much more likely to be interrupted during paid working hours than fathers. Work by the Resolution Foundation (Brewer et al. 2020a) confirms the differential impact of lockdown measures and the closure of formal childcare on employment patterns, showing that it is mothers who have been particularly badly hit.

Third, a large proportion of children under five will have missed around six months of reception class or being in an early years setting. We do not yet know what the impact of this lost time will be on how children play, learn and interact with others. And while a number of children have started to return to formal ECEC, a large proportion of parents are choosing not to send their children back into childcare settings (Early Years Alliance 2020). Given the differential take-up of early education for disadvantaged groups, and the initial data showing that parents with children on free schools meals are less likely to want to send their children to school than parents with children who are not on free school meals (National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) 2020), the concern is that this will be reflected in the take-up of early years provision. Gaps in school readiness are significant and likely to widen as a result of a combination of reduced early education, as well as inequalities in the home learning environment and access to digital resources and experiences.

Fourth, there is growing concern about the sustainability of private and voluntary childcare provision. Vulnerable before the pandemic, the sector is now in danger as a result of long-term closure and potentially reduced demand as a result of the recession (Pascal et al. 2020). The pre-existing challenge of sustaining childcare provision and improving its quality is particularly acute in the current context, with implications for children's welfare and parents' ability to return to work. We will explore these issues in depth in our third review. The difficulty of being able to access childcare and early years provision now and in future is compounded by the impact of COVID-19 on grandparents, many of whom have had to shield and stay within their own homes, unable to see their grandchildren or provide the informal care that many parents rely on.

Finally, given the lack of robust data, we can only cautiously predict the long-term impact that remote and home working, prompted by COVID-19, will have on family time, and the subsequent effects of this on early child development. Previous research suggests that how parents and children use the larger amount of extra time at home will have a significant impact on children's outcomes (Hiniker, Schoenebeck, and Kientz 2016). These changes are likely to have a significant influence on children's development and the inequalities therein, ultimately with long-term implications for society. Research by Andrew et al. (2020) aims to understand the impacts of recent isolation measures on children's outcomes and the outcome gaps that may form between children of different economic groups. With linkage to other datasets, the researchers explore the impact of COVID-19 on pupil achievement, and other outcomes such as attendance rates, and school exclusions, in the short- and medium-term.

5 Conclusions

In this review we have attempted to plot the major changes that have influenced the parental, familial and caring context that children have grown up in over the past two decades. We provide a broad but not exhaustive analysis of the **changes and continuities** that have helped shape early childhood and family life over the last 20 years, focusing on major demographic changes. These issues have a particular significance at a time when issues of social well-being and inequality are thrown into sharp relief by COVID-19.

The pressures and dynamics of family life are fundamental to consideration of how we might build a more resilient, productive and cohesive society. Without understanding the complexities of families today, the policies and initiatives that seek to address other key areas of our society— including education, productivity, health and mental health—will falter. And securing the future, through the successful development of the generation of children now in their earliest years, will also be at risk.

When painting a population-level picture of children's lives it is also important to highlight the variation in their experiences: improvements and deteriorations have not been universal. Generally speaking, the experiences of parents and their children can vary greatly based on their qualification level, geographic location, deprivation and ethnicity. **A recurrent theme in this review is inequality and gradients between advantaged and disadvantaged families.** Place and immediate local context are also increasingly playing a role in the lives of young children.

Our understanding of what is meant by 'family' in early childhood has changed.

Family living arrangements in the UK are increasingly varied, with the growth of cohabitation, re-partnering and blended families. Children are more likely to be living in a more fluid family form. However, many children in the UK continue to grow up in married couple families. In this context, the 'family' has been a heavily debated and ideologically contested subject, with diverging views about the importance of marriage and the impact of separation on children's well-being. In the UK, we have not yet reached a broad political and ideological consensus on this issue, despite the growing evidence base.

Our knowledge of how family structure, parental conflict, and family breakdown influence early childhood development has grown.

While the evidence here is complex, there has been a growing understanding, underpinned by research, that the quality of the relationship within a couple, whether together or apart, influences both how mothers and fathers parent and children's outcomes and life chances (Harold et al. 2016). The presence of unresolved and hostile conflict in a family, regardless of family structure, is damaging for early childhood well-being and outcomes.

Research has also suggested that gaps in children's early development (measured by impairments to cognitive and social and emotional skills) between children with married parents and cohabiting parents are largely explained

by differences in the socio-economic status of parents who chose to get married rather than marriage itself.

Turning to lone parenthood and family breakdown, research suggests that lone motherhood is associated with poorer early cognitive outcomes for children, but not because of parenting issues. Instead, deficits can largely be attributed to the worse economic circumstances that come with lone parenthood, which may reduce the resources available to families. However, the research evidence is mixed regarding the age at which we would expect to see the impact on the child. Further research is needed to disentangle these factors and further test these associations, particularly in relation to social and emotional development.

There have been significant changes to the lives of mothers of young children.

In many respects, the changes we report can also be seen as part of the transformation that occurred in the lives of mothers in the second half of the 20th century. There has been a marked rise in the proportion of mothers in paid employment when their children are younger in both lone and dual parent families. In recent decades women have continued to make numerous advances in educational and occupational achievement. Meanwhile patterns of family formation suggest that 'traditional' life trajectories of having children early and forgoing career success are declining. However, patterns differ by socio-economic status, maternal education and geography.

There have been smaller, but also significant, changes to the lives of fathers of young children.

All these wider changes have simultaneously influenced the lives of fathers. Not only have societal attitudes towards the traditional 'breadwinner' role become more liberal, behaviours have changed too. The working patterns of fathers, the use of paternity leave, and the time spent on childcare, all signal a small shift to a more egalitarian parental relationship in early childhood. However, certain elements of traditional structures remain. While paternal working and childcare patterns have certainly started to change, it is overwhelmingly mothers who return to work in a part-time capacity rather than fathers. Mothers also continue to spend almost double the amount of time than fathers on caring for very young children.

These changes have influenced the times and spaces in which parents interact with their children.

Changes in family form, and in the work and care patterns of parents, have important implications for how parents engage and interact with their young children. These shifts have occurred alongside a major expansion in early years and childcare provision and financial support over the last two decades. This is the first generation of children who are spending a large part of their early childhoods in some form of ECEC rather than with their own families and in their own homes. This changing landscape of family life is also marked by inequalities and gradients between advantaged and disadvantaged families. As a result of all of these changes, early childhood has become a more varied, often enriching, but also complex experience as small children negotiate different settings and relationships.

Alongside the issues of quality in early years provision are also questions about the optimal balance between formal care and home care with a parent, guardian or carer. This is a highly contextual issue, often coming down to personal choice, financial considerations and the availability of services.

The implications of COVID-19 for the youngest children and their families is still largely unknown.

As we write this review, COVID-19 continues to change the world for young children and their families beyond all recognition. Lockdown measures and the disruption they bring to intergenerational relationships and participation in early years settings are likely to have both immediate and long-term implications for the youngest children. As we have noted, the crisis is likely to worsen child poverty as the economic fall-out continues, leading to increased stress and economic burden for families and their young children (Conti 2020). Meanwhile existing inequalities are likely to be exacerbated by the social and economic consequences of the virus. In other areas the impact is less certain. We do not yet know how the youngest children will be affected by the prolonged period of home learning as opposed to some form of formal early education and care. Further research is needed to explore the implications for young children and their families.

Points for reflection and discussion

As noted throughout this review, there are numerous areas relating to early childhood that we simply do not know enough about. Below we outline the key questions that have arisen based on the research evidence and data included in this review. Though related to our areas of interest, some of these questions do not fall within the Nuffield Foundation's current funding priorities and are therefore not necessarily within the remit of research that we as a Foundation would fund at this time. Instead, they offer a broad picture of the gaps in our existing knowledge, as well as some of the pressing questions that arise from the evidence gathered in this review. This list should not be seen as exhaustive, rather it is the beginning of an exercise to map these key questions that will be expanded through each review in this series.

Family formation and fertility

- Given the association between teenage pregnancy and vulnerability for both parents and the child, **what can be learned from local areas that have been more successful in reducing teenage conception?**
- **What are the implications of the growth of one-child families?** We only have a partial understanding of how child outcomes are influenced by sibling relationships.

Family structure and context

- **What role do non-resident fathers play in both lone and blended families?** What measures can support fathers' involvement in young children's lives after separation?
- **How do changes in family form and socio-economic factors impact young children's social and emotional development?**
- **Are younger children more affected by parental separation than older children in terms of early development?**
- We have relatively little data on the growth of 'blended families' and how they affect young children's experiences. What research should be prioritised, and how can public policy better support this growing group?

Employment and care

- **What shapes the decision for new mothers to return to work?** We only have partial information on the interplay of different factors

(for example, the nature of the job, and other financial considerations) in shaping families' decisions around returning to work after having children. Further research exploring the influences on such decisions more explicitly would help to illuminate the discussion and policy response.

- **Fathers are spending more time with their children when they are under five, but how are they spending this time?** The measurements used to explore shifting care arrangements within households is broad, and largely focuses on self-reported hours spent on specific tasks. Further research is needed to explore what exactly these new care and work arrangements look like, and what effects they have on the development and well-being of children. We also need to know what happens in both intact and separated families.
- **What would a more integrated experience of education and care look like for families with young children?** Young children often have to deal with complex family arrangements between home, early years settings, childminders and some informal care in any given week or day—how could that experience be more integrated and holistic?
- **How does balancing work and care affect parent-child interaction?** As more people turn to remote working as a result of COVID-19, there is renewed interest in how parents balance their work and care responsibilities.

As has been noted by researchers such as Bryson et al. (2017), some national, official and longitudinal surveys have not been designed to collect data about certain groups. In the UK, for example, we still do not accurately collect data on separating families or paternal mental health, making comment on trends and patterns extremely difficult. These gaps are important: they suggest that our principal sources of data no longer reflect the reality of modern family life in the UK. As a result, policy, resources and services may not be meeting the needs of young children growing up in different kinds of family. Certainly, it appears that the data infrastructure needs to be used or improved to better understand and explain outcomes for our youngest citizens, and how policy and society can better support them.

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The content and conclusions of the series are not necessarily endorsed by members of the advisory group.

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The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance educational opportunity and social well-being.

We fund research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare and Justice. We also provide opportunities for young people to develop skills and confidence in science and research.

We are the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and the Ada Lovelace Institute.

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