

Millennium Cohort Study Briefing 1

Parent relationships and child wellbeing

Based on Chapter 5 of *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*

Kathleen Kiernan and Fiona Mensah¹



About these briefings

This Briefing is one of 14 that distil the key findings of the first three surveys of the Millennium Cohort Study, as collected in *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*.

The study has been tracking the Millennium children through their early childhood and plans to follow them into adulthood. It covers such diverse topics as parenting; childcare; school choice; child behaviour and cognitive development; child and parental health; parents' employment and education; income; housing; and neighbourhood.

It is the first of the nationwide cohort studies to over-sample areas with high densities of ethnic minorities and large numbers of disadvantaged families.

For the first survey, in 2001–2, interviewers visited the families of nearly 19,000 children aged 9 months throughout the United Kingdom. It established the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as the families' social background. The second survey recorded how nearly 16,000 cohort children were developing at age 3. The third survey, when they were age 5, involved almost 15,500 children and provided a uniquely

detailed account of their physical, cognitive and social development in the year they entered school.

The study is housed at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London. It was commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, whose funding has been supplemented by a consortium of government departments.

Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years, edited by Kirstine Hansen, Heather Joshi and Shirley Dex, The Policy Press, 2010, can be ordered via www.policypress.co.uk

Briefing 1: Parent relationships and child wellbeing

Introduction

The 'traditional' family, headed by married parents, has become less common in the UK in recent decades. Rising rates of lone motherhood, cohabitation and parental separation have resulted in more diverse and transient family groupings that can create or exacerbate inequalities in early childhood.

There has consequently been growing concern about the instability of family life and the impact on children. This has triggered a plethora of inquiries, reports and initiatives, such as the Good Childhood Inquiry and *The Children's Plan* (DCSF 2007).

The effects of divorce and remarriage on British children have also been well-researched. However, much less is known about the potential consequences of being born into different family settings and the impact of subsequent changes in family structure (referred to here as 'trajectories'). This Briefing therefore maps – and analyses the consequences of – the family trajectories of Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) children born to various categories of married, cohabiting and lone parents.

Family context at birth and age 5

Fifty-nine per cent of MCS children were born to married couples, 25 per cent to cohabiting parents and 16 per cent to lone mothers (see Figure 1). Earlier research has highlighted the disparities between these family groups. For example, married mothers are more likely than unmarried mothers to have planned their pregnancies, given up smoking (if they ever did) and breastfed. They are less likely to suffer post-natal depression and are, on average, more educated, and much less likely to have become mothers at a young age. They also tend to have higher family incomes.

By age 5, slightly more MCS children were living in married-parent families than at nine months (60% compared with 59%); fewer had cohabiting parents (15% compared with 25%); and more were in a lone-parent family (19% compared with 16%). The remaining 5 per cent were in stepfamilies formed through remarriage or cohabitation. Only 75 per cent of cohort children were living with both their natural parents at age 5, compared with 90 per cent of those born

in 1970. The change in the proportion of children born to unmarried parents has been even greater – up from 8 per cent in 1970 to 41 per cent in 2000/1.

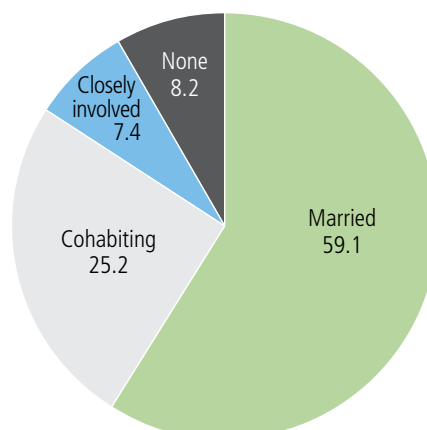
Family trajectories

At each of the first three MCS surveys, at 9–10 months, age 3 and age 5, information was collected on the type of parental relationship, if any. For those married at the time of the birth four trajectories were identified: stably married, currently married but had periods of separation, and two types of separated families – those headed by a lone parent, typically the natural mother, and those where a parent had re-partnered and the child had a social parent, usually the natural mother and a social father. For those cohabiting at the child's birth there is an additional category – couples who had married by the age 5 survey.

Five trajectories were identified for those who were lone parents at the time of the birth: stable lone motherhood; marrying the natural father and currently living with him; starting to cohabit with the natural father and currently living with him; living with a partner who is not the natural father; and currently a lone mother but has had periods living with a partner.

Parents who were married when the child was born were more likely to remain living together than those cohabiting at the child's birth. Eighty-eight per cent of married parents were still together when their child was age 5, compared with 67 per cent of those who had been cohabiting (43% continuing to cohabit and 23% having married).

Figure 1
Relationship between natural parents at birth



This is the first time that such detailed information on family changes has been available for a nationally representative sample of children. This is extremely useful as snapshots of children's living arrangements can disguise the complexity and instability of family dynamics. They do not, for example, identify periods of separation for subsequently reconciled parents.

Ethnic diversity in family trajectories

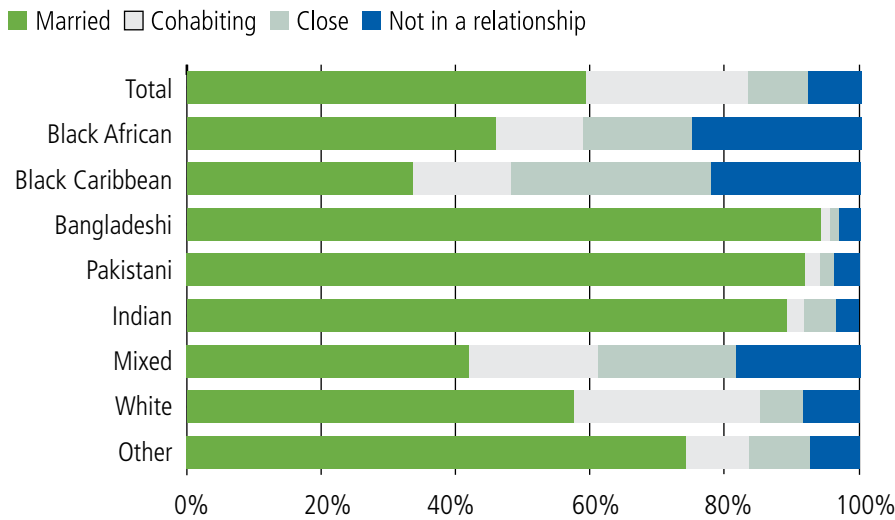
MCS mothers had categorised themselves as white (89%), South Asian (6.1%), black (2.6%), mixed race (1.0%) or other ethnic group (1.7%). South Asian mothers were much more likely to have been married at the time of the cohort child's birth than either white or black mothers. Having a child within a cohabiting union was less common amongst black mothers than white mothers. However, black and mixed-origin mothers were least likely to have had partners when their baby was born, and those of Caribbean origin had the highest proportion of non-partnered births. Half of these mothers were not living with a partner when their baby was born. See Figure 2.

Becoming a lone mother following marriage break-up was also most common amongst black mothers. Twenty per cent of married black Caribbean mothers had become lone parents by the time the cohort child was age 5, compared with 8 per cent of white mothers. Black Caribbean mothers were also most likely to split from a cohabiting partner and become a lone parent.

This MCS analysis also identified a subset of mothers who, although lone parents at both the original and age 5 interviews, had lived with a partner for periods since their child was born. Around one in five lone mothers of white, black and mixed origin fell into this category.

Overall, black-mother families, particularly those of Caribbean origin, were the most unstable, regardless of whether the mother was married or not when the baby was born. Marriage is central to South Asian family life but these families were no more stable than white married families, at least over the first five years of the MCS children's lives.

Figure 2
Relationship between natural parents at the time of birth by ethnicity



Family environment at age 5

Research shows that incomes decline when parents split and increase when they re-partner, and that separations can lower mothers’ mental wellbeing while re-partnering can enhance it. Poverty and maternal depression, often interrelated, have also been found to be important in accounting for variations in children’s cognitive and emotional development, as was the case for MCS children at age 3.

Poverty

At age 5, 30 per cent of MCS children were estimated to be in income poverty.² Those who had lived with both natural parents, either continuously married or initially cohabiting but then married, were far less likely to be in poverty (15% and 16% respectively of these families) than other children. Unsurprisingly, lone motherhood raises the chances of being in poverty, but this association is less straightforward than it might seem. Previously married lone mothers were less likely to be in poverty than those who had cohabited (52%:67%) and the latter were less likely to be in poverty than mothers who had been single since the child’s birth (79%). Solo mothers who later married the father were less likely to be poor than those cohabiting with the father (35%:43%). This analysis suggests that the chances of living in poverty are associated with both the family context at the child’s birth and subsequent partnership.

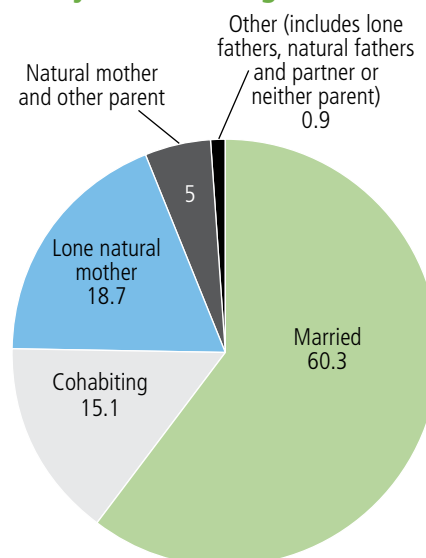
Maternal depression

This was assessed from responses to a

questionnaire measuring psychological distress (Kessler et al. 2002), completed by 92 per cent of mothers. One in seven mothers (14%) was exhibiting high levels of distress.

All the married mothers, regardless of whether they were married, cohabiting or solo at the time of the birth, had similar levels of depression, which were the lowest of any group. It cannot be concluded, however, that marriage lessens the chances of depression. It may be the less depressed women who marry. Cohabitation, however, does not appear to bestow the same benefit. It is also apparent that women who became lone mothers after the break-up of a marriage or cohabiting union, or at their baby’s birth, had relatively high and similar rates of reported depression when their

Figure 3
Family structure at age 5



child was 5. The highest levels of depression occurred amongst solo mothers who had been living with a partner for periods but were single again by the age 5 survey. Thirty-three per cent of these mothers had high levels of distress, compared with 25 per cent of lone mothers who had always been on their own.

Children’s emotional wellbeing

Do different family experiences make children more or less prone to emotional and behavioural problems? MCS provides some insight into this issue because mothers answered the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a 25-item assessment of their children’s conduct problems, inattention-hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer problems and pro-social behaviour (Goodman 1997). Kiernan and Mensah, authors of the book chapter on which this Briefing is based, looked at the externalising (behavioural problems and inattention-hyperactivity) and internalising dimensions (emotional problems) of children’s behaviour. They found that children in stable, married families were said to have fewer externalising problems at age 5 than virtually all of those with different family histories. The most marked differences were seen for children born into cohabiting families where parents had separated, and to solo mothers who had not married the natural father. These children were three times more likely than those in stable, married families to exhibit behavioural problems, judging by mothers’ reports.

However, depressed mothers may be more likely to report negatively on their children’s behaviour. The association between maternal depression and child behaviour problems is therefore not clear-cut. Taking account of mothers’ mental wellbeing and family poverty reduced the differences between children in various family types. Even so, it appears that children born to cohabiting parents who separate, and to solo mothers who later cohabit with the natural father or another partner, are more likely to exhibit behaviour problems.

The analysis of emotional problems, however, revealed that there were no significant differences between children in different family groups, after taking into account income level and whether the mother had depressive symptoms.

Family status at age 5 and children's wellbeing

Would we get similar insights into children's wellbeing by simply considering family structure at age 5? MCS children in married-couple families were less likely to have internalising emotional problems at that age than those in cohabiting, lone parent and step families. However, after again taking family poverty and mothers' depressive symptoms into account, there were no significant differences across families.

Children in married-couple families were also less likely to exhibit problem behaviour than those in other family groups. Furthermore, behaviour problems were said to be more common among children in lone mother and step families than those in cohabiting families. The differences between children in married families and other groups are again reduced when background factors such as poverty are taken into consideration but they remain statistically significant. Children in stepfamilies were most likely to have behaviour problems, as other studies have found.

The additional insights derived from the family trajectories are that:

- the greater emotional distress observed amongst children in stepfamilies born to unmarried parents occurs regardless of the route taken to this family form
- children of lone mothers who previously cohabited exhibit lower emotional wellbeing than children in other lone-mother families
- children of cohabiting parents reunited after separation also have lower levels of emotional wellbeing
- children in stepfamilies formed after cohabitation have increased risks of behaviour problems, as do those with lone mothers who previously cohabited and with cohabiting parents who have temporarily separated.

Key statistics

41 per cent of Millennium cohort children were born to unmarried parents (25% to cohabiting parents and 16% to lone mothers).

75 per cent were still living with both natural parents at age 5.

88 per cent of married parents were still living together when their child was 5.

67 per cent of parents cohabiting at the child's birth were still living together five years later.

Conclusions

Unsurprisingly, the most economically disadvantaged Millennium cohort families are headed by lone mothers. However, formerly married lone mothers were less likely to be poor when their child was aged 5 than solo mothers who had cohabited. The latter were, however, better off than never-partnered lone mothers.

Mothers living with the cohort child's father tend to have better mental health than those living with another partner, and lone mothers are the most likely to have poor mental health, which is associated with less engaged parenting. This, in turn, can affect their children's psychological/emotional wellbeing.

Children from cohabiting families that had broken down were said to exhibit relatively high levels of behaviour problems, as were those born to solo mothers who subsequently cohabited with the natural father or re-partnered. The most common explanation for such findings is that new partnerships increase stress amongst parents, partners and children. Tensions can rise as families adjust to new relationships, the mother focuses on the new partner and children compete for their mother's attention. This may also help to explain the increased level of child behavioural problems in less stable Millennium cohort families, along with the psychological and economic pressures on parents which can often affect children too.

References

- DCSF (2007) *The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures*, Department for Children Schools and Families, www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/childrensplan
- Goodman, R. (1997) 'The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38(5), 581–586.
- Kessler, R.C., Andrews, G., Colpe, L.J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D.K., Normand, S.L., Walters, E.E. and Zaslavsky, A.M. (2002) 'Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress', *Psychological Medicine*, 32(6), 959–976.

¹Kathleen Kiernan and Fiona Mensah, University of York. This text has been adapted and shortened to suit the format of these Briefings. Responsibility for any errors therefore rests with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies rather than the chapter authors.

²Poverty was defined as below 60 per cent of equivalised median income.