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# Support in Parenting: Values and Consensus concerning who to turn to

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## Abstract

Recent years have seen an explicit focus on parenting as a designated area of policy intervention. Parents are posed as in need of education and advice from 'experts', under conditions of social change. This article counterposes norms concerning who parents should turn to for support that government policies aim to inculcate with those held by parents themselves, drawing on a national representative sample of parents of 8–12 year old children. It uses a 'consensus baseline' approach to look at parents' perceptions of social change in parenting support, and whether or not they hold norms concerning whom to turn to and for what sort of help in parenting: practical, emotional, behaviour, health and education. Our results indicate that policy-makers have more work to do if they want to achieve a cultural step-change in norms held by parents about who is best placed to help and advice them. Family, followed by friends, are (still) regarded as the people to turn to for most childrearing issues, with 'experts' only providing practical help and advice about long institutionalised areas of children's lives. We also show that norms about parenting support are related to parents' differential social positioning regarding gender, class and ethnicity.

## Introduction

Families and parenting have long been a source of concern for politicians. This preoccupation has prompted a range of initiatives over the years, including the establishment of health visiting as a statutory service and the post-Plowden policies of the 1960s and 1970s for enhancing 'parental' (mothers) involvement in education (Abbott and Sapsford, 1990; David, 1993). The advent of the New Labour government in 1997, however, has seen an even more explicit focus on parenting as a designated area of policy intervention (Wasoff and Hill, 2002). Parenting practice has been pushed to the centre stage of the social policy curriculum, with perceived consequences for society generally, rather than vice versa:

> Government cannot duck responsibilities to help people make a success of parenting. This is essential if we are to achieve our goal of a stronger civil society, offering people more opportunities in life. Parenting is hugely important to creating the kind of society we want

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to live in. (Speech given by then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, 'Human rights and personal responsibility – new citizenship for a new millennium', 2 October 2000)

As Stephen Driver and Luke Martell (2002) note, the family exemplifies the concept of dutiful community through the practice of parenthood. Good parents are seen as fostering and transmitting crucial values to their children that protect and reproduce the common good. They are also posed as in need of help and 'support' in carrying out this crucial work, and from a particular source.

In policy contexts, the term 'support' has traditionally implied direct help in the form of material benefits (as in child support, income support, and so on). Ruth Levitas (1998) and Norman Fairclough (2000), however, have charted the New Labour government's shift from concerns about material poverty as a base towards a more communitarian focus on moral 'poverty' and cultural pathology. Thus, in relation to parenting, use of the word 'support' in policy interventions tends towards education and advice from experts in statutory/voluntary sector partnerships, inculcating norms and values in the practice of parenting that are perceived as fractured in contemporary society. Such support is posed as 'relevant to all parents regardless of their circumstances' (Home Office, 1998: 7), and the aim of government is to change cultural understandings so that 'seeking advice and help when it is needed is seen not as failure but as the action of concerned and responsible parents' (speech given by then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, on the launch of the Lords and Commons Family and Child Protection Group's report 'Family Matters', 23 July 1998).

In this article, we counterpose the norms concerning who parents should turn to for help that government policies aim to inculcate with those held by parents themselves. In other words, we are looking at whether or not there is an agreed, consensual set of values and assumptions among parents about 'the right thing to do' in the face of difficulties. In the next section we consider the thrust of government initiatives around parenting support as pedagogy, drawing out the underlying perspective on the state of contemporary society. We also consider alternative perspectives and what these might tell us about the nature of support in parenting. In the next two sections we describe the research framework for the empirical data that we use to examine parents' own norms, and also give some detailed consideration to how we analyse our data to identify normative consensus. We then focus on our data to look, firstly, at parents' perceptions of social change in parenting support, and then specifically the content of any norms in relation to who to turn to for practical and emotional support, and advice about children's behaviour, health and educational development. Finally, we consider the implications for policy aims concerning support in parenting.

## Experts know best?

Within the framework of 'support' promulgated by government, parenting is depicted not as an intimate relationship but as an occupation requiring particular

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knowledge and skills that are provided by 'expert' advice and training; the implicit message is that amateur parents need specialist help:

> Being a parent is a challenging job. Many parents get by through a combination of instinct, advice, reading and family support, but this is not always enough . . . By learning better parenting skills, [parents] can help to improve their child's health and educational attainment, as well as their own confidence and self esteem. (Home Office, 1998: 5)

The notion that parents must be supported pedagogically in their parenting practice has sustained a variety of initiatives that aim to widen access to advice and guidance on childrearing. The National Family and Parenting Institute has a remit to act as a 'centre of expertise', providing information and 'authoritative' advice on parenting 'good practice'. Parentline Plus provides a national telephone helpline advice service, information leaflets, workshops and courses. The Sure Start programme aims to involve local communities in supporting parents and to improve parents' access to information and advice. Parenting education and support classes are provided by a range of statutory and voluntary agencies for those who are already parents, as well as for those who are about to become parents (including education for parenthood in schools).

A raft of further initiatives is also coming on-stream. A new Parenting Fund will build capacity for voluntary sector service provision for parents, and a website launched in autumn 2003 provides access to advice and information from the government on parenting issues (see *Hansard*, debate on Children and Parents, 26 March 2003, column 855 continuing). Sure Start is to be involved in developing 'extended schools' provision, which includes family learning and parenting support. In addition, the National Family and Parenting Institute initiated discussions about the introduction of a 'Parents' Code', in which the rights and responsibilities of parents would be clearly defined, detailing the practices and values that parents are expected to adhere to and informing 'a national consciousness of what it is to be a parent' (Henricson, 2003: 94).

The framework of pedagogical support proffered by government, however, shades into authoritarian control. If parents cannot see their need to turn to services for advice and education, then they must be made to see it. Those parents who are 'unwilling or unable to respond to support when offered' (Home Office, 2003: 9), who refuse to be advised and guided by experts to gain knowledge and skills 'voluntarily', will be named, shamed, fined and ultimately even imprisoned. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 compels parents of young offenders to attend weekly 'counselling and guidance' sessions to learn parenting skills. The recent White Paper 'Respect and responsibility: taking a stand against anti-social behaviour', and the accompanying Anti-Social Behaviour Bill, contain proposals for provision that enables local education authorities and schools to ask parents of recalcitrant children to 'voluntarily' sign a Parenting Contract, but

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if they refuse to sign or fail to comply with the conditions, a Parenting Order will then be imposed. This can include requiring parents to attend intensive support schemes or residential parenting classes (Home Office: 2003).

One factor in this perceived need for parents to turn to expert, sanctioned and authoritative, support is a perception of social change that has led to the fracturing of traditional support systems and of cohesive norms, and the rise of parental uncertainty. Changes in contemporary family relationships and a decline in traditional values of duty and responsibility are posed as making good parenting increasingly more difficult:

> Parenting is probably the most important task any of us will undertake, yet it comes with no instructions or training. As more is known about children's needs, so parents' aspirations and uncertainties grow about how to care for and educate their children. At the same time, changing patterns of work and the breakdown of networks of family and friends, increased divorce and repartnering rates, all combine to add to the complexities and pressures of parenting and family life. (Parentline Plus, *Who we are*, information leaflet)

This perspective highlights increases in cohabitation, divorce and separation, lone parenting and people living alone as evidence that isolation and individual self-interest have intensified at the expense of principles of responsibility and obligation. The values and identities associated with family life are undermined, thereby weakening social ties and damaging societal cohesion more generally. Some versions of this perspective also stress the destructive role of welfare state provision in promoting 'free-rider' norms. (Examples of arguments in this vein include Coleman, 1990; Davies, 1993; Dennis and Erdos, 1992; Fevre, 2000; Murray, 1994.)

Attempts to create a normative culture of turning to services for parenting advice, however, take place against a backdrop of what is said to be cultural globalisation. On the one hand, this globalisation can be evidenced in a convergence in lifestyle and values, but, on the other hand, it can equally give people greater awareness, knowledge of and access to a diversity of lifestyles and a variety of viewpoints and information (Beck, 1999). This access to diversity makes the claim to authoritative knowledge about the best way of parenting on the part of experts subject to questioning and critical evaluation. Generally, people are aware that opinions can be divided and contested among experts, and that there is a diversity of experts, so that they cannot rely on a single authoritative guidance (Giddens, 1994).

This sense of flux and diversity points to why institutions and governments might wish to (re)impose normative order, including in and through parenting support. It is argued that, under conditions of contemporary social change, governments, institutions and individuals can long to return to a vision of the security of the 'traditional' past, when it is supposed that norms were cohesive across society and experts were accorded respect (Beck, 1992, 1997).

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There are, though, also arguments that social change in itself creates new opportunities for support in parenting from different sources. Traditional notions of family and parenting are regarded as having lost their relevance, allowing people to create more fulfilling relationships and build new associations based on democratic values of respect and negotiation, rather than prescribed duty and obligation. Trends towards cohabitation, separation and re-partnership are interpreted as a consequence of a shift in family relations from a 'community of need' to 'elective affinities', whereby people organise their own circles of contacts and relationships. Friendships, in particular, are seen as being valued in a new way, providing egalitarian social and emotional support and a sense of collectivity. (Examples of such arguments include Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Beck-Gernsheim, 1998, 2002; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Pahl, 2000; Stacey, 1996; Weeks, 1995.)

Still another perspective, however, challenges the extent of social change and the supposed 'new' (for ill or good) complexity of parenting and family life as compared with the past (for example, Crow, 2002; Jamieson, 1998). The emphasis is more on continuing gender, class and ethnic divisions. Parenting practice and norms about who to turn to can be seen as developed not through conscious learning or ideological coercion, but through everyday lived practice – what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) has conceptualised as 'habitus'.[1] Practices and norms thus will be shaped by, and attuned to, parents' differential and specific social positioning and the resources available to them. Concomittantly, expert knowledge will also be derived in this way and, in being judged to be authoritative, will work to affirm the position of experts and to consolidate the dominance of privileged groups.

As has been pointed out, predominant policy ideas about support in parenting translate into a form of interventionism characterised by explicit and implicit attempts to control and regulate the conduct of parents, and of mothers in particular. The advocated common norms and values through which (gender neutral) 'parents' fulfil their responsibilities and duties towards their children and thence society resonate most closely with the values and ambitions of White, middle-class parents, suggesting that working-class and/or minority ethnic families are the real targets of such interventions (for example, Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2005). In the rest of this article, we retain an interest in looking at the gendered, classed and ethnic nature of norms of 'who to turn to', but with a focus on the views held by parents themselves, using data from a recent study.

## The research framework

The data we are drawing on in this article derive from a survey carried out as part of the 'Resources in parenting: access to capitals' study.[2] This project aims to examine the micro processes of everyday family life focusing in particular on the resources that are available to parents of children aged between 8 and 12.

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It involves both extensive survey and intensive interview data collection. While a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is not unusual in social research, we have adopted a framework with a particular perspective on the relationship between the different sorts of data and role of survey data within this.

The research has been influenced by the methodology used by Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993) in their landmark study of adult kin obligations and responsibilities, which combined quantitative and qualitative data. Their quantitative survey was concerned with publicly expressed attitudes to family responsibilities: in other words, not what people did but what were the norms they held about what should be done. Finch and Mason argued that political debate, expressed through social policy in the field, was built upon an assumed 'natural' consensus about kin obligations for each other. In contrast, from their survey they found that there were few commonly held norms for attributing responsibility and courses of action. Their qualitative data were then concerned with the differently formulated question of what interviewees actually did, which they found to be contingent, contextual and negotiated rather than subject to prescribed imperative.

Our own focus is on resources and assistance in parenting children, which is quite different from adult kin obligations because prescribed imperatives are evident in how parents think about their practice (for example, Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003). The policy context for our work is also rather different, as can be seen from our discussion above. It is assumed that all parents need support at some time, and that there are many who are unskilled and uncertain both about their practice and who to turn to. In this supposed vacuum there are attempts to establish a pedagogic consensus that expert knowledge and intervention should be the norm. Nevertheless, the relevance of Finch and Mason's methodology still holds, in addressing public norms through quantitative data – the focus of this article – and everyday practices through theoretically sampled qualitative data. Our intention was to determine consensus or lack of it in publicly expressed norms about appropriate sources of 'parenting support' through an initial large-scale survey.[3]

Within our focus on resources in parenting, we have confined our attention to parents of 8–12 year old children, rather than covering 'children' *per se* from toddlers to teenagers. This is in some contrast to surveys and studies that start from a base of parents generally or general surveys that separate out parents of 'dependent children' at some analytic points (for example, the British Social Attitudes Survey and the Home Office Citizenship Survey), or a particular group of parents on the basis of their own characteristics (for example, their age in the National Child Development Study cohort). While we are not adhering to a developmental model of childhood, the trajectory 'stage' of 'middle childhood' is defined by 'expert' knowledge as one in which, among other things, children are

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in transition between being significantly embedded in and dependent on familial relationships and parents, and developing their own, relatively autonomous, peer relationships (for example, Borland *et al.*, 1998; Meadows, 1990; Terwogt and Harris, 1993), in a context where parents are still held firmly responsible for their children's behaviour and development at this age. Parents of children in 'middle childhood' are thus defined, and may understand themselves, as facing some different issues to those involved in the parenting of toddlers or teenagers.[4] Interestingly, thus far policy has tended to highlight toddlers (for example, Sure Start) or teenagers (for example, Connexions), but the proposed Parenting Fund has particularly identified the need for parenting support for children aged 5–10.

The survey part of our fieldwork was completed through commissioning a series of questions as part of the NOP Parentbus survey. This is an omnibus service conducting face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of parents, within which we were able to focus specifically on parents of 8–12 year olds. Four consecutive waves of the survey were conducted in October 2002, reaching a total sample of 1112 parents: of which 61 per cent were mothers, and 39 per cent fathers; and 62 per cent working class and 38 per cent middle class (based on occupation). As we will see in our discussion below, gender and class were important features of differential norms. In addition, 9 per cent of our sample were from minority ethnic groups. This obviously involves small numbers and so care must be taken here, but in our discussion below we draw attention to ethnicity where there are obvious points of normative difference.

The questions that we asked in the survey focused on the sample's views of the types of help and assistance that contemporary parents might turn to from formal and informal sources. The sample were asked to compare the support that parents in general now receive from family and friends, compared with 'the past', to consider possible reasons for any decline, increase or continuity, and to consider the sorts of help that parents might need from these sources as well as formal organisations. The survey also explored the sample's views on the appropriateness of a range of informal and formal sources of assistance in relation to particular areas and circumstances of childrearing, including financial difficulties, housing, child care, behaviour, health and education. We used abstract multiple choice questions and also, like Finch and Mason (Finch, 1987; Finch and Mason, 1991), some brief and extended vignettes of parents facing specific hypothetical situations (though not their 'soap opera' cumulative scenarios) where the sample were asked to identify what they thought these parents should do in these circumstances.[5]

## What constitutes identification of a norm?

As Finch and Mason (1991) discuss, their – and our – approach to surveying attitudes reflects a theoretical stance on how norms may be conceptualised; that

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the data generated in answers to survey questions are judgements that may well be pulled towards what the sample feel is socially acceptable, rather than what they may themselves do in complex 'real life' situations. Indeed, this is precisely the strength of approaching the study of norms as consensus in this way.

This then raises the question of what constitutes a normative consensus? Finch and Mason developed a 'consensus baseline' as a starting point for understanding in the context of multiple choice questions:

> Clearly we are unlikely to find a total consensus but what level of agreement should we take as our baseline: over 90 per cent agreement? 75 per cent? 50 per cent? Whatever level we choose has to be related in some way to the number of choices offered in the question, since 75 per cent agreement clearly means something different when four options have been offered, by comparison with questions where there was a simple two-way choice . . . The logic that we have followed is to say that where our questions have offered two options, then for either option to accrue more than 50 per cent of responses would indicate a simple majority. If either option accrues half as many responses again (that is, 75 per cent for two-option questions), we will regard that as an initial indicator that we have a notable level of agreement. The corresponding figure for a three-option question is 50 per cent, for a four-option question it is 37.5 per cent and so on. We refer to this as our 'consensus baseline'. (Finch and Mason, 1991: 349–50)

In our analysis of our survey data, we too have adopted this consensus baseline. In using the data, we have also become aware of some qualifications. It is indeed only a starting point for interpretation, as Finch and Mason stress. The main consideration for us was that this approach assumes that the population represented in the sample is a meaningful whole entity: that is, in government policy, 'parents', and here specifically parents of 8–12 year olds. This may be true in a categorical sense, but it may also be the case that the sample is comprised of different social 'populations' (see, for example, Sayer, 1992, on 'chaotic concepts').[6] There may well be or not be a consensus baseline for the sample as a whole but, hidden within this, particular sections of the sample (mothers/fathers, working/middle class, majority/minority ethnic) may or may not reach the consensus baseline, or they may or may not reach it at a significantly higher or lower level than the rest (that is, as a social group within the taxonomic group, hold norms or not more strongly). Examining such distinctions proved especially important for us in identifying some gender, class and ethnic differences in norms.[7]

Another qualification in our case was that, for a few questions and some vignettes, we offered our sample the ability to choose more than one answer because we did not want to force what were likely to be multi-dimensional understandings into a single response. For example, following on a one-choice response question about whether they thought parents received less, more or the same levels of help and support from their family as they did in the past, we asked the sample why they thought that this was the case and gave them a relatively extensive list of reasons with no limits on the number of their choices in response.

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TABLE 1. Do you think parents receive less, more or the same levels of help and support from their family as they did in the past? (consensus baseline 50%).

| Option chosen: | All parents | Working class | Middle class |
|---|---|---|---|
| Less | 50% | 49% | 57% |
| More | 20% | 23% | 20% |
| The same | 25% | 28% | 23% |

Those choosing 'less' as the level of help and support, for example, had a choice of up to 13 reasons. A consensus baseline is difficult, if not impossible, to operate within these instances, so here we use a difference of proportion test. At points we also use correlation to identify whether certain answers are more likely to be chosen together.

In contrast to Finch and Mason's finding of no clear or straightforward normative consensus over adult kin obligations, we have identified key areas of normative consensus in relation to who to turn to and for what sort of help in parenting children aged 8–12, both in relation to our sample as a whole and significant differences for particular social groups within it. Nevertheless, there were also areas demonstrating an illuminative lack of consensus.

### Parents' perceptions of social change in parenting support

As we discussed earlier, a feature of the notion that parents must be supported pedagogically in their parenting is a perception of social change encompassing the fracturing of family- and friendship-based support systems. We were interested to know whether or not our sample agreed with this assessment of the state of contemporary society.

As we have already indicated, we asked the survey sample whether they thought parents received less, more or the same levels of help and support from family as they did in the past (Table 1). The sample thus had three options to choose from and so the consensus baseline here is 50 per cent.

On this basis there was only just normative agreement in the perception that parents receive less help and support in their answers. The rest of the sample was fairly evenly divided between saying the same or more. There were, however, some differences within the sample. Notably, consensus was stronger among middle-class parents, with working-class parents not reaching the consensus baseline.

There is further complexity if we look at the reasons the sample chose for their assessment of the extent of social change in parenting support (Table 2). In analysing reasons, we have to turn to difference of proportion as the sample was able to choose as many reasons as they wanted from a menu.

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TABLE 2. Reasons chosen for saying 'less' help/support from family than in the past.

| Menu of reasons: | Percentage of parents answering less* |
|---|---|
| Families are not as close-knit as they used to be | 52% |
| Different family structures nowadays, more divorce, single parents etc. | 48% |
| Greater geographical distance, families tend to live further apart | 47% |
| People are more stressed and under pressure | 35% |
| Children are brought up differently now | 34% |
| Parents are more independent | 30% |
| Decline in community spirit | 27% |
| People are more selfish | 24% |
| Decline in religious/moral values | 19% |
| Parents tend to get more support from friends | 19% |
| Families are smaller nowadays | 17% |
| Better state provision | 10% |
| Families trust each other less | 8% |

* Parents gave more than one answer.

Of those parents who said that there was less family support, 52 per cent felt that families were not as close-knit as they used to be, 48 per cent felt that the rise of separation and divorce had been instrumental, and 47 per cent suggested that families tended to live further apart geographically. These reasons tended to be selected together. Within this, middle-class parents were more likely to cite them, especially when it came to geographical distance,[8] and fathers were significantly more likely than mothers to suggest that there was also a decline in community spirit and in religious or moral values.[9] Interestingly, few parents felt that a decline in support was attributable to welfare state provision taking over.

Although there was no consensus baseline for there being more support available to parents from their family, it is useful to note that family change also underpinned the reasons identified by those parents who chose this option (Table 3). The rise of separation and divorce, and changes in childrearing practice were the most common answers, followed by parents now being felt to be under more stress and pressure.

Those who chose the option of there being the same level of support tended to feel both that family members had always helped each other out (61 per cent) and that family ties continued to be strong (41 per cent). Thus, if we take the interpretive liberty of amalgamating the more and the same response choices, where both pose parents as generally receiving family support, then the minimal normative consensus among the sample for less family support because of fracturing social change is challenged.

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TABLE 3. Reasons chosen for saying 'more' help/support from family than in the past.

| Menu of reasons: | Percentage of parents answering less* |
|---|---|
| Different family structures nowadays, more divorce, single parents etc. | 43% |
| Children are brought up differently now | 42% |
| Parents are more stressed and under pressure | 37% |
| Families are smaller nowadays | 23% |
| Families are more close knit than they used to be | 21% |
| Parents are less independent | 19% |
| Increase in community spirit | 17% |
| Reduced state provision | 16% |
| Stronger religious/moral values | 14% |
| Families are more trusting nowadays | 11% |
| People are less selfish | 4% |

* Parents gave more than one answer.

TABLE 4. Do you think parents receive less, more or the same levels of help and support from their friends as they did in the past? (consensus baseline 50%).

| Option chosen: | All parents |
|---|---|
| Less | 30% |
| More | 24% |
| The same | 35% |

Turning now to support from friends in parenting, there was no consensus baseline for there being either less, more or the same help available from this source (Table 4).

This finding across the sample as a whole does not resonate with either perspectives on a 'breakdown' of networks of friends or their increased importance, as discussed earlier. If we again take the interpretive liberty of amalgamating the same and the more answers, though, where those parents choosing these options similarly saw the closeness of friendships as important, then a different picture emerges. This upholds, if not perceptions of the increased importance of friends, then their importance for parents in contemporary society. Once again, though, middle-class parents were significantly more likely to regard geographical distance as a reason for there being less support.[10]

In sum then, in relation to assumptions of social change in the support available to parents, while the sample just about reached the consensus baseline for perceiving there to be less support from family available (though this is not

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TABLE 5. Family and friends are the most appropriate source of support for parents (consensus baseline 75%).

| Option chosen: | All Parents |
|---|---|
| Agree | 86% |
| Disagree | 11% |
| Don't know | 3% |

clear-cut), there was no consensus about the state of change in relation to support from friends although their importance was underlined. While there is a view that there has been social change, there does not seem to be much concurrence with the presumption of this comprising only undermined support from family and friends that is contained in political debate. Indeed, changes in contemporary family life were similarly regarded as reasons for the opposite options of there being less and there being more support available to parents from their family. Further, a view of fractured family life and friendships seems to be stronger among middle-class parents, with fathers being more likely to perceive a general social decline too. These classed and gendered differences probably reflect the differential lived experience of parenting, with middle-class parents experiencing less close-knit, more geographically dispersed, families (for example, Boyle and Halfacre, 1995), and mothers in particular still being more involved in everyday childrearing practices with each other, despite the apparent shift to more 'hands on' fathering (see, for example, Bell and Ribbens, 1994, and review by Lewis, 2000).

### Who to turn to for what sort of help

Whatever the perceived state of support in contemporary parenting from family and friends, there was a clear norm that they were the most appropriate source of help for parents: 86 per cent of the sample agreed with this statement.

In contrast, there was no normative agreement about whether or not parents need professional advice and guidance to help them in bringing up their child (although most – 61 per cent – felt that they did not).

Nevertheless, the sample still saw a particular role for the state and professionals. Indeed, there were clear indications of who the sample felt should be turned to for what sort of help. The sample were posed a series of generalised questions about the likely reasons that parents might need help from various sources, and then more specific questions relating to particular circumstances, especially through brief and extended vignettes giving contextual data. These asked about the need for support in parenting in relation to practical and

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TABLE 6. All parents need professional advice and guidance to help them to bring up their children (consensus baseline 75%).

| Option chosen: | All Parents |
|---|---|
| Agree | 36% |
| Disagree | 61% |
| Don't know | 3% |

emotional aspects of parenting, and in relation to children's behaviour, and health and educational development.

### Practical support

As we noted earlier, in policy terms, 'support' has traditionally implied direct help from the state in the form of material benefits. Our survey addressed practical support for parents in relation to financial help, temporary housing and child care.

Across the sample generally, there was no normative consensus that family and friends were an appropriate source of financial assistance, either in the generalised sense of a likely reason for parents needing help from them or in specific circumstances. Friends were particularly unlikely to be regarded as a source of financial support; for example, only 2 per cent thought that friends could be turned to for a loan to buy a new school uniform. Other studies have also noted that friends are rarely seen as someone to turn to in financial difficulties (Pahl, 2000: 38). Perhaps this sort of help (and other practical support as discussed below) would disrupt the notion of egalitarian friendship affinity noted earlier (Allan, 1989).

While there was also a lack of normative consensus that financial help was a likely reason that parents would need help from formal organisations in unspecified circumstances, the sample generally did feel that financial help from social services was appropriate in the specific circumstances of needing a loan to buy a new school uniform (32 per cent with a consensus baseline of 30 per cent), and that in the case of parents who cannot afford to pay the lump sum for a school trip that their daughter wants to go on, they should ask to pay the school in instalments (65 per cent with a consensus baseline of 30 per cent), with loans from family or friends not normatively regarded as appropriate. Broadening the practical focus, the local council or government was also regarded as the most appropriate source of help for parents in need of temporary housing (53 per cent with a consensus baseline of 30 per cent), rather than family or, even more so, friends or the voluntary sector.

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There was a normative consensus among minority ethnic parents,[11] however, for turning to financial help from family and friends, and as the most likely reason parents would need help from services (22.5 per cent and 27.9 per cent respectively, both with a consensus baseline of 21.3 per cent), in non-specified circumstances. This normative focus on monetary assistance from family, friends and services may well relate to the greater likelihood of being in poverty among many minority ethnic groups (Platt, 2000), and/or in the case of turning to formal organisations that their extended family may be resident in another country and perhaps reliant on them for remittances (Boyd, 1989; Goulbourne, 2002).

Another distinction within the sample concerns gender, revealed by looking at difference of proportion. Fathers were significantly less likely than mothers to recommend turning to the school in the case of payment for the school trip,[12] being more likely to say that the parents should tell their daughter that she could not go on the trip.[13] Fathers' identity and role in family life is still very much tied up with a status as breadwinner (Lewis, 2000) and so it may be that making 'public' their 'inadequacy' in this respect is normatively unacceptable.

Alongside attempts to shift norms about who to turn to for parenting support, government is also attempting to promote an 'adult worker family model', where both mothers and fathers are seen primarily as workers in the labour market. Our survey did not pay explicitly framed attention to this, addressing child care in a generalised sense rather than for what purposes. Norms around child care nonetheless mirror other, employment-focused, findings about appropriate sources, highlighting family in particular rather than formally provided services (discussed in Edwards *et al*., 2002). Family was the normative preference in the case of parents needing regular help with child care across all social groups by gender, class and ethnicity (in all 40 per cent, with a consensus baseline of 30 per cent). Friends, and the voluntary sector especially, fell lower below the consensus baseline than did statutory services.

### Emotional support

There was a normative consensus that family and friends are sources of emotional support. It was identified as a likely reason that parents might need help from family and friends (22 per cent with a consensus baseline of 21.3 per cent). Few parents regarded any formal organisations as a help in this respect (8 per cent). Although the circumstances under which parents might need emotional support were not pursued, further light may be thrown on this by considering the sample's norms around who to turn to in particular situations concerning children's behaviour and development.

### Support and advice about children's behaviour

A specific aspect of children's behaviour was addressed through a brief vignette concerning the parents of a boy who are worried because he is spending

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time with a group of older boys and has started staying out late without their permission. Here the sample were able to choose a number of sources of advice that they considered appropriate for the parents to turn to, including family, friend, doctor, teacher, social worker, health visitor, telephone helpline, book. A family member, and a friend with children of their own, were the most common answers (46 per cent and 44 per cent respectively) among the sample overall. There were gender and class differences in the responses here, however. Mothers were more likely than fathers to identify professionals as the people to approach (especially an education welfare officer), while fathers were far more likely than mothers to say that parents should not need to seek help or advice in such circumstances. Indeed, in the case of parenting teenagers, mothers have been found to emphasise various sources of support as an important resource, while fathers were more likely to see their partner as the person to turn to when discussing parenting worries (Gillies *et al*., 2001). This difference may be related to mothers' continuing responsibility for liaising with services concerning family and children's welfare and development. It is interesting to note that those working in the field of parenting education often remark that it is easier to reach mothers and more difficult to get fathers to attend parenting classes,[14] while callers to Parentline are overwhelmingly female (Parentline Plus, 1999).

There were also important class differences in the sort of professional identified among those who included them as a source of advice. Middle-class parents were significantly more likely to recommend a teacher.[15] In the context of successive governments' policies posing parents as 'consumers' rather than 'clients' in relation to education, middle-class parents may well feel themselves in a position of power in relation to approaching teachers. In addition, middle-class parents were more likely to see a friend with children of their own as an appropriate person to turn to,[16] and it may well be that this is because middle-class parents' networks include friends in relevant professional occupations who are also parents (Pahl, 2000: 147). We will consider further these sorts of class differences in which type of professionals are regarded as sources of advice below.

### Support and advice about children's health and educational development

The areas of children's health and education were explored though several brief and extended vignettes. These concerned whom parents should approach for advice and support in preparing a daughter for starting her periods; in dealing with a daughter who was withdrawn and did not want to go to school; and in helping solve dilemmas about choosing a secondary school for a son. The choices available, as above, covered a range of informal and formal sources. In the case of the health and one of the education vignettes, multiple choices were available to the sample, but in the case of the school choice vignette a single answer was required.

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Parents commonly identified family and professionals as people to turn to for help or advice on the matter of child health. These answers were fairly evenly dispersed: 35 per cent of the sample recommending a family member, 35 per cent a doctor, and 29 per cent a health visitor. As in relation to children's care and behaviour, however, there were gender and class differences in responses. Fathers seemed to see advice about a daughter's periods as a medical problem and tended to plump for a doctor,[17] while mothers took a broader view of it as a health issue, for example by turning to a health visitor. The sorts of issues that we noted above concerning consumerist and clientist approaches may also be relevant here, with fathers perhaps seeing consulting a doctor from a position of consumer power and mothers used to liaison with and surveillance from health visitors. Middle-class parents were also more likely to recommend turning to a friend with children of their own.[18]

In relation to educational problems, notions of parents as consumers again seem relevant. The majority of parents recommended asking a teacher for help or advice about a child who was withdrawn and unhappy and did not seem to want to go to school (77 per cent), but this was more the case for middle-class parents.[19] Once again, middle-class parents were also more likely than working-class parents to identify a friend.[20] There was a normative consensus that, to solve dilemmas about choosing a secondary school in a situation where most schools in their area had a bad reputation and a poor academic record, parents should visit the school that their son wanted to go to but about which they had concerns and talk to the teachers (32 per cent with a consensus baseline of 16.6 per cent), with checking out OFSTED reports and league tables and picking the school with the best results just about reaching a consensus baseline (17 per cent).

### Overview

Overall then, our sample did hold norms about who to turn to for what rather than demonstrating multitudinous uncertainty. Family are seen as an appropriate source of support when parents were in need of child care, emotional support, and advice about aspects of children's behaviour and health. Friends generally are also seen as providing emotional support, and for those who have children of their own, advice about children's behaviour. Friends in particular are not regarded as sources of practical help. In this respect, there are norms about welfare state services (rather than the voluntary sector) being the most appropriate for providing practical resources for parents, and also in relation to aspects of children's health and education, which are longstanding institutionalised welfare areas of children's lives.[21]

As we have seen, however, there were also some significant differences between social groups within these overall norms. These include ethnic differences concerning the appropriateness of family and friends as sources of financial support, and some gender and class differences concerning whether

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to turn to family, friends and, if professionals, which professionals, for advice and help about children's behaviour and development. Gendered experiences in parenting seem important, with fathers as 'self-sufficient' breadwinners and mothers used to liaison with, or surveillance from, services concerning children's welfare. These gendered parenting experiences also overlap with class differences. Middle-class parents identify professionals as sources of support who are posed within the 'consumerist' rather than 'client/surveillance' model of welfare provision, and perceive their own friendship networks as useful in relation to institutionalised areas of children's lives.

## Conclusion

The particular aim of our survey of a nationally representative sample of parents of 8–12 year old children was to identify extensive normative views about support in parenting and their content. We want to emphasise that our data do not, and cannot, tell us anything about what parents think is the right course of action for themselves in the complex and specific circumstances that face them in their own lives or what courses of action they would themselves pursue. That aspect of our research, following the methodology and rationale established by Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993), is pursued through theoretically sampled intensive in-depth interviews. Moreover, in order to gain an understanding of our data we have at points had to move beyond a simple normative consensus baseline to indicate and interpret the differential social positioning of parents. Indeed, in order to gain access to the 'whole picture' concerning support in parenting of children in 'middle childhood', we need to combine our quantitative and qualitative data. For the purposes of this article, however, we wanted to counterpose the norms concerning who to turn to that government initiatives seek to inculcate with those held by parents themselves.

This offsetting of the pedagogic culture of support from experts that the government wishes to cultivate among parents and the norms held by parents about both the state of contemporary sources of support and who is best placed to help and advise in relation to what issue shows that policy-makers certainly have a lot more work to do if they want to achieve a cultural step-change. To put it at its simplest, family largely are (still) regarded as the people to turn to if parents are experiencing child-rearing difficulties and, along with friends, for emotional support. While parents hold norms about the role of the state and professionals, this is in providing practical help and advice about longstanding institutionalised areas of children's lives rather than the broader skills-based support addressed by parenting education classes.

As we noted initially, it has been argued that advocated common norms about parental behaviour reflect White middle-class parents' values. With regard to norms concerning who to turn to for support, our evidence leads us to argue

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that this is only true in some aspects. The premise for government's focus on expert support for parenting practice – the fracturing of cohesive networks of family and friends – does seem to resonate more strongly with middle-class parents' views of the nature of social change. Middle-class parents in our survey were also more likely to advocate turning to particular experts in universal services for advice about some aspects of children's behaviour and education, but not for others. Nonetheless, in relation to gender and ethnicity as well as social class, our data have indicated that, whatever the view on the consequences of parenting for society, society has consequences for parenting support norms, in the form of social divisions. The taxonomic population of parents of children aged 8–12 years is internally cross-cut by different social populations and it would seem that norms about parenting support are related to these groups' differential and specific social positioning. This begs the question of whether or not a cultural engineering of norms of who to turn to for support in parenting is possible without addressing broader social divisions in society.

## Notes

1 Bourdieu has been criticised for being reductionist in not explicitly incorporating disinterested normative judgement as to whether some practices are better than others (Sayer, 1999). Whether or not this is the case, it is not our focus here.

2 This study is part of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group programme of work, funded by the ESRC under award no. M570225001. Details about the Group's remit and specific projects can be found at www.lsbu.ac.uk/families.

3 Both the 'family networks and parenting support' module of the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (Attwood *et al.*, 2003) and the 'kinship and friendship' module of the British Social Attitudes Survey 1995 (McGlone *et al.*, 1996) largely focus on behaviour rather than norms and so are not directly comparable with our work in this and other ways.

4 Indeed, the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (Attwood *et al.*, 2003: 131) notes that parents are aware of different sources of formal support according to their child's stage of development.

5 We are grateful to Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason for making their survey instrument available to us, which helped inform the development of our own.

6 Our thanks to Lynn Jamieson for helping to clarify our thinking on this point.

7 Our thanks to Anne Gray for statistical help and advice with using a difference of proportion test to establish significance.

8 62 per cent of middle-class as against 38 per cent of working-class parents, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.9 per cent.

9 51 per cent of fathers as against 49 per cent of mothers, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.2 per cent.

10 60 per cent of middle-class parents as against 40 per cent of working-class parents, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.9 per cent.

11 The term 'minority ethnic' covers a range of different ethnicities (including Bangladeshi, Black African, Black Caribbean, Chinese, Indian and Pakistani). This is also true of the term 'White'. Differences within minority and majority ethnic samples deserve more nuanced attention, and we will be able to do this through our qualitative data. Nevertheless, we feel

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that the distinctive normative consensus for minority ethnic parents around the sources for financial help is worth noting.

12 39 per cent of fathers as against 61 per cent of mothers, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.92 per cent.

13 55 per cent of fathers as against 45 per cent of mothers, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.92 per cent.

14 Discussion during the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and National Family and Parenting Institute's 'Government and parenting seminar: is there a case for a policy review and a parents' code?', London, 18 March 2003. It may, however, also be the case that efforts to include and involve fathers need to be developed (Lewis, 2003).

15 52 per cent of middle-class parents as against 48 per cent of working-class parents, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.2 per cent.

16 54 per cent of middle-class parents as against 46 per cent of working-class parents, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.9 per cent.

17 51 per cent of fathers as against 49 per cent of mothers, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.9 per cent.

18 57 per cent of middle-class parents as against 43 per cent of working-class parents, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.2 per cent.

19 The higher proportion of working-class parents in our sample means that the difference is not reflected in the percentage figures: 41 per cent of middle-class parents as against 48 per cent of working-class parents. However, these percentages equal 400 out of a total of 418 of all middle-class parents, and 411 out of a total of 694 working-class parents. Thus, middle-class parents were more likely to give the answer teacher, a difference that was statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.2 per cent.

20 54 per cent of middle-class parents as against 45 per cent of working-class parents, statistically significant at a confidence level of 99.9 per cent.

21 Preference for universal services was also a feature of the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey in relation to parenting support (Attwood *et al.*, 2003: 134).

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