Happy families?
Family relationships in the UK today
Contributors

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This report summarises information collected from online polling undertaken by YouGov of a UK sample of over 5,000 people aged 16 and over, weighted to account for representativeness. Any inaccuracies or errors in the further analyses of these data are the sole responsibility of Relate.

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Forewords

Tanya Byron, Clinical Psychologist and Patron of Relate

Welcome to the latest in our influential series of The Way We Are Now reports. Our family relationships are central to who we are and how we feel about ourselves, so exploring how the nation perceives and manages them is really important. Understanding people’s current attitudes will allow organisations like Relate and Relationships Scotland to offer the best possible support to individuals and families – both in preparing for important life stages like starting a family and dealing with problems as they happen.

It’s great that so many people feel positively about the relationships they have with their parents, siblings, partners and children. However, not everyone is enjoying good quality relationships with those so many think of as our nearest and dearest. With the age-old problems that come with running a busy household showing no sign of easing off and family set-ups changing significantly, now is a particularly important time to take stock of how we’re all doing and to look at what can be done to make things better.

Stuart Valentine, Chief Executive, Relationships Scotland

“Our greatest joy and our greatest pain comes in our relationships with others” – Steven R Covey.

This report reminds us that relationships are the beating heart of our lives. We share the most important times in our lives with our family, friends and loved ones, whether they be times of great happiness or great sadness. The quality of our relationships will also in large part determine how we see our lives as a whole. People who report that they have a high quality of relationship with others are also more likely to say they have higher levels of contentment and fulfilment in their lives.

These may be simple truths, however they also point to the importance of consciously prioritising our relationships, not just with our partners, but with all family members. Money worries, health problems and even the sharing of household chores can place significant burdens on all family relationships. Particular pressures also come from having children, and this report recommends that further support is needed to help people manage the transition into parenthood and beyond.

We need to care of our relationships. By understanding the key pressures on families we can begin to give the support where it is needed most, and this report will help guide us in the right direction.

Peter Morris, Partner, National Head of Family Law, Simpson Millar LLP

Simpson Millar are very proud to support this ‘The Way We Are Now’ report, which shines a valuable light on the nation’s family relationships. The support given to families by Relate and Relationships Scotland should be read against a background of significant challenges for families. As well as pressures caused by an uncertain financial climate, very little public funding is available to help address issues arising from relationship breakdown. Relate and Relationships Scotland go some way to filling that gap and all responsible family lawyers would encourage couples experiencing relationship breakdown to contact them.
Good quality family relationships are the lifeblood of a thriving society. They’re a vital source of life satisfaction and sense of wellbeing, and a wealth of evidence attests to the benefits of good quality relationships for adults’ and children’s mental and physical health. Similarly, we now have plenty of evidence from several decades’ international research which shows the negative impact of poor quality family relationships – for adults’ health, and also for children’s long-term outcomes and life chances.

We’ve seen major changes in family life over recent decades and years, and both the structure and processes of family life continue to change in the UK. But the importance of good quality family relationships, for all family members, remains constant.

This report – the second in a series of reports presenting findings from our landmark The Way We Are Now survey of over 5,000 people across the UK, which provides a unique window into the state of the nation’s relationships – examines the quality of our family relationships today and the pressures we’re facing.

Overall, there’s good news in that our family relationships are mostly in good health. For example, we found that:

- More than nine-out-of-ten (91%) of parents report good relationships with their children;
- More than eight-in-ten (81%) people report good relationships with their mum;
- Three-quarters (75%) report good relationships with their dad;
- 70% report good relationships with siblings;
- 88% of grandparents report good relationships with their grandchildren; and
- 71% of grandchildren report good relationships with their grandparents.

Digging a little deeper into these findings, however, revealed some unequal experiences in terms of gender, sexuality, relationships with biological versus stepchildren/parents.

Our survey also lifts the lid on the pressures family relationships are under today. We found, for example:

- Negotiating the division of labour within the home was a particular pressure for families with young children: across the whole sample 15% said that household chores were a source of strain on their relationships, but among parents with a youngest child aged 0-5 this more than doubled to 32%;
- Parents of children under 19 particularly identified money worries as the biggest strain on their relationships and were considerably more likely to identify this as a strain; and
- The top five strains on parents of 0-5s were money, household chores, low libido/differing sex drives, lack of work-life balance, and childcare/bringing up children – whereas for parents of 11-18s they were money, lack of work-life balance, low libido, not understanding each other, and childcare/bringing up children.

With costs of housing continuing skyward, we also look at the numbers of families with
adult children still living at home. While previous studies have found more people aged between 15 and 34 living at home, we look at this issue more specifically by age – and find almost one in ten parents with a youngest child over 30 have a child still living at home.

Finally, we shine a light on the formal or informal caring responsibilities which many families now manage. Over a fifth of respondents reported they cared for someone else besides their own children (if they had them), with the most common caring types being for grandchildren and for elderly parents. Many families are balancing these care responsibilities with work – 40% of respondents who reported any caring responsibilities were also in employment (a quarter worked full-time). Interestingly – and a stark indication perhaps of many carers’ additional support needs – 38% of carers reported they were themselves disabled or living with a long term health condition.

In light of the importance of family relationships across the life course to all family members, we need to invest in them – particularly where, due to the pressures we may all face at transition points in our lives, our relationships may come under particular strain. We highlight some areas where policy makers could take action to strengthen family relationships, with benefits for adults, children, and society at large. These include strengthening the way in which the impact of policies on families are assessed (through the ‘Family Test’ in Whitehall); developing pilots to coordinate family and relationship support locally to widen access to support through ‘Family and Relationship Centres’ and through training for professionals; embedding support for family relationships within mainstream services for new parents (such as antenatal, maternity, postnatal and health visiting services); and expanding access to support for carers, people with long term conditions, and their families.
Introduction

Family relationships matter

Family relationships matter to all of us. They’re often not easy and can sometimes be very hard work indeed, but in the end our family relationships are central to our wellbeing and life satisfaction. Indeed, when the Office for National Statistics (ONS) consulted the nation on things that matter most to our wellbeing, relationships with family and with friends were listed top, joint with health (89% of people selected each).\(^1\) The ONS subsequently identified relationships as a domain which influences subjective wellbeing\(^2\) and now includes satisfaction with family life and the extent to which people have a spouse, family member, or friend to rely on in its national wellbeing measures.\(^3\) The 2014 Commission on Wellbeing and Policy recognised that across the world, the quality of home life – which is ultimately based on family relationships – is a universal ingredient of life satisfaction.\(^4\)

There’s now a significant body of evidence documenting the benefits of good-quality, stable, supportive family relationships across the life course, for mental and physical health.\(^5\) Family relationships are central to children’s happiness,\(^6\) and studies show a strong link between parents’ relationship quality and positive outcomes for both parents and children.\(^7\) People in good quality relationships have lower blood pressure than those in poorer quality relationships,\(^8\) for instance, while relationship stress increases the risk of recurrent coronary events,\(^9\) and relationship quality even predicts patient survival among patients with chronic heart failure.\(^10\)

The benefits of good quality family relationships extend beyond parents, and evidence shows the relationship between parents directly affects the wellbeing of their children. The quality of the parental relationship is a critical factor in the environment in which children grow up and develop,\(^11\) and a large body of research now indicates the quality of relationship between parents affects interactions between parent and child as well as child behavioural and cognitive outcomes.\(^12\) There is a strong association between couple relationship, parenting, and child wellbeing, with mutually satisfying, low-conflict relationships being associated with positive parent-child relationships and positive child outcomes.\(^13\)

Children growing up with parents who have good-quality relationships and low parental conflict – whether couples or separated partners\(^14\) – enjoy better physical and mental health,\(^15\) better emotional wellbeing,\(^16\) higher academic attainment,\(^17\) and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours.\(^18\) Children who grow up within poorer quality relationships, however, have more of what psychologists call ‘externalising’ behaviour problems (e.g. hyperactivity, aggression),\(^19\) and studies show family conflict can result in impaired parent-child relationships and can affect children’s and adolescents’ wellbeing and development.\(^20\) Thus a recent evidence review by the Early Intervention Foundation found that the quality of parental relationships and family functioning have a significant impact on children’s wellbeing – both in intact and separated families – and concluded that the quality of the inter-parental relationship is a ‘primary influence’ on children’s outcomes.\(^21\)

The centrality of family relationships to children’s wellbeing is also seen in the fact that family relationship problems are the biggest problem for children and young people in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services\(^22\) and the largest presenting issue within
counselling in secondary schools (by a factor of almost two).  

**Families are continuing to change**

Our families have seen significant change over the last few decades – and continue to change. Although the most common family type in the UK remains the married couple (or civil-partner) family, this is decreasing and we’ve seen considerable change in family structures. Over the past four decades we’ve seen the divorce rate rise following the 1969 Divorce Reform Act which made divorce easier – only to then fall again as marriage rates similarly fell, with people opting to marry later and live together before or instead of marrying.

In 2011, it was estimated that 42% of all marriages end in divorce rather than the death of a spouse – down from 45% in 2005. Relate’s 2014 *The Way We Are Now* research found that almost one-in-four UK adults have experienced the breakdown of their parents’ relationship. As of 2012/13, by age 16, 42% of young people were no longer living with both birth parents. On average across all ages, 70% of children were living with both parents, but for children in the lowest-income families only 45% lived with both. Research suggests that just over two per cent of partners are likely to experience a separation over the course of a year in the UK, and it’s been estimated that there are around 2.5 million separated families with dependent children (including 16-20-year-olds in education) in Britain.

As parental relationship breakdown has increased over the decades, we’ve also seen the rise of the ‘blended family’ as parents form new relationships. In 2011, stepfamilies accounted for 11% of couple families with dependent children, and nearly one-in-ten dependent children lived in a stepfamily in 2011.

The age at which we’re getting married is increasing, from 36.5 years for men and 34.0 years for women in 2012 having increased by almost eight years for both men and women since 1972. And as we’re getting married older, we’ve seen an overall long-term decline in the number of marriages as increasing numbers of men and women are delaying marriage, cohabiting before marriage, or cohabiting and not marrying at all.

Over the past 20 years, there’s been a big rise in the number of cohabiting adults in the UK, and cohabiting couple families doubled over 1996 to 2016 from 1.5 million to 3.3 million. Alongside this, attitudes towards cohabitation have also changed: the 2006 British Social Attitudes survey found two-thirds thought there was ‘little difference socially between being married and living together as a couple.’ Indeed, the cohabiting couple family (including both opposite and same sex couples with and without dependent children) continues to be the fastest growing family type in the UK.

We’ve also seen single people represent an increasing proportion of the population: in 2002 30% of the population was single, whereas in 2015 this was 35%. Similarly, in 2002, people who were “not cohabiting: never married or civil partnered” represented 22.9% of the population. By 2015 this had increased to around a quarter of the population at 25.0%.

We’re also seeing people opting to have children later – or not at all. Babies born in

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1 Currently this family type represents two-thirds of families with children, where in the 1990s it represented three-quarters.
England and Wales in 2014 were most likely to have a mother aged 25 to 34, with over a half (59%) of mothers in this age group. Since 1975 the average age of mothers has generally increased, and in 2014 was 30.2 years in England and Wales, while for first parenthood it was 28.5 years, up from 27.1 in 2004. More couples are remaining childless too – around one fifth of women are now childless at age 45, and the proportion of childless women at age 45 in the 1966 cohort is more than twice that of the 1946 cohort.

It’s not only family structures which are changing, of course. The nature of our family lives and relationships are also undergoing change. We’ve seen a major increase in the proportion of women in work over the last 40 years, and women’s earnings have become more important to households. While the male breadwinner is still the dominant model, one-in-three working mothers in the UK is now the main breadwinner for the family, and maternal breadwinning is the highest since records began, with over 2 million working mothers now the main family earner, a rise of 80 per cent in the last 15 years.

Family caring patterns are changing too. As the population continues to age and the pension age rises, grandparents are increasingly balancing working longer with caring responsibilities for their partners and for grandchildren to enable parents to return to work. With rocketing costs of social care, older family members, in turn, often receive care from their partners or adult children. Unpaid care by family members is thus becoming more and more important. Today there are seven million unpaid carers in the UK – and over the next 30 years, the numbers are expected to increase by 3.4 million to over 10 million.

But the quality of family life remains as important as ever

Despite these significant changes, what remains constant is the importance of good quality family relationships, for all family members. The evidence is clear that the quality of the child’s home and family environment and the quality of the relationship between the child and their parents are more important in facilitating positive child development than the type of family structure, and children’s cognitive, social and emotional development does not appear to be affected by their parents’ marital status – or indeed their sexual orientation.
Our family relationships today

So how are our family relationships faring today? The most recent ONS data (from 2013/14) show that, on a scale of 0-10, the average satisfaction with family life is 8.2, and 84% of people say they have a spouse, family member, or friend to rely on (‘a lot’). Our survey revealed a similarly positive picture, for the most part, with most people enjoying good quality family relationships.

Relationships with immediate family

Our survey delivered good news in that most of us have good quality relationships with parents, children, grandparents, grandchildren, and siblings. More than eight-in-ten (81%) said they had a good relationship with their mum (up from 78% when we asked this in 2015), and three-quarters (75%) have a good relationship with their dad (up from 72% in 2015).

Figure 1: Quality of relationships with mum

![Figure 1: Quality of relationships with mum](image)

Figure 2: Quality of relationships with dad

![Figure 2: Quality of relationships with dad](image)

Interestingly, while relationships with mum did not appear to differ according to respondents’ sexuality (82% of heterosexual respondents reported good relationships compared to 79% of those who identified with other sexualities), we did observe a slight difference here regarding relationships with dad (where 75% of heterosexual respondents reported good relationships compared to 71% for those who identified with other sexualities).
sexualities). Similarly, while relationships with mum did not differ by respondents’ gender, relationships with dad did: 77% of daughters reported good relationships with dad compared to 72% of sons. Relationships with dad also appear to improve with age in a way that those with mum don’t: 72% of respondents aged 16-30 reported good relationships with their dad but among those aged 31-50 this was 76%.

Our relationships with our siblings appears to be in similar good health: **70% reported good relationships with their siblings**. As with relationships with dad, however, we did observe a slight difference between heterosexual respondents and other sexualities: 70% of heterosexual respondents reported good relationships with siblings compared to 66% of those who identified with other sexualities.

**Figure 3: Relationships with siblings**

- Very good
- Fairly good
- Average
- Fairly bad
- Very bad
- Don’t know

Relationships with children are in very good health, with **91% reporting good relationships with children** and almost three-quarters (73%) saying these were very good. This mirrors the picture of our survey in 2015, when 90% of parents reported good relationships with their children.

**Figure 4: Relationships with children**

- Very good
- Fairly good
- Average
- Fairly bad
- Very bad
- Don’t know

However, we observed a bit of a gender divide here, with dads reporting slightly lower levels of good relationships with children than mums (by five percentage points), and the

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2 However, it should be noted that while this difference was statistically significant, due to the smaller sample size of alternative sexuality respondents who reported relationships with their dad (n = 355), the confidence level here is 93% rather than the 95% we use throughout the report.
difference between mums and dads in terms of those who reported ‘very good’ relationships with their children was nine percentage points.

**Figure 5: Relationships with children – by gender**

![Chart showing relationships with children by gender](chart)

Family relationships after parental separation

There was also some good news in that parents who were divorced or separated reported equally good relationships with their children, with 89% reporting good relationships (69% ‘very good’). Relationships with stepchildren, however, were reported to be of notably lower quality than with parents’ own children, with 61% of step-parents **reporting good relationships with their stepchildren** – in contrast to the 91% above who reported good relationships with their own children. This echoes our findings last year, where 58% of step-parents reported good relationships with their stepchildren compared to 90% of parents reporting good relationships with their children.47 These findings indicate some of the challenges families can face following the breakdown of a relationship and blending families.

**Figure 6: Relationships with stepchildren**

![Chart showing relationships with stepchildren](chart)

In contrast to the findings above regarding the gender difference in relation to parents’ relationships with their own children, among step-parents, it was men who were more likely to report good relationships with their stepchildren than women: 65% of stepdads
reported good relationships with their stepchildren compared to 57% of stepmums.³

Figure 7: Relationships with stepchildren – by gender

While six-in-ten step-parents reported good relationships with their stepchildren, the proportion of people who reported good relationships with their step-parents, however, was quite a bit lower, and significantly lower than for relationships with parents, with less than half (49%) reporting good relationships with step-parents.

Figure 8: Relationships with step-parents

We also asked divorced and separated people about their views, looking back, on their separation. We found that 11% of people said that, with the right support, they would have been able to save their relationship and stay together (three per cent said ‘definitely’, eight per cent said ‘probably’). While this is not an enormous percentage, it has been estimated that between 200,000 and 250,000 parents separate every year,⁴⁴ and this suggests that we may be currently missing a significant number of opportunities to give people the support they need to work on and sustain their relationships and prevent their relationship from breaking down.

We also found that 14% said that, with the right support, they would have been able to make the ending of the relationship easier to deal with (four per cent said

³ Again, due to the smaller sample size of non-heterosexual respondents who reported relationships with their dad (n = 355), while the difference is statistically significant, the confidence level was 93% rather than 95%.
‘definitely’, and 10% said ‘probably’). Among divorced people only, this was 18%. We know that separation can be a stressful and fraught time, yet the information and system of support for families is all too often fragmented, hard to navigate, and patchy. The information meeting and counsellor meeting provisions of the 1996 Family Law Act, which supported participants who were uncertain to become more focused and knowledgeable, and to move forward – whether into working on saving their relationship or going into divorce – in a more open-eyed way, demonstrated that support for people immediately before separation may help couples to become clearer about the way forward. With greater provision of and signposting to such support, this suggests many families could benefit from the opportunity to pause, reflect, and move forwards in a more informed and positive way – whether together or apart.

Family relationships and wellbeing

We also looked for any patterns between the quality of our immediate family relationships and our wellbeing. Analysis of the data showed small correlations between good relationships with mum and dad and feeling good about ourselves \(r = 0.18\) and \(0.19\) respectively for mum and dad), and feeling optimistic about the future \(r = 0.14\) for both), while bad relationships with mum and dad are associated with feeling lonely \(r = 0.12\) and \(0.15\) for mum and dad respectively) and feeling down, depressed or hopeless \(r = 0.14\) and \(0.17\). Thus, people who reported better relationships with their parents were more likely to feel optimistic and feel good about themselves, while those who reported worse relationships were more likely to feel lonely or down. For example, 77% of those who reported good relationships with both mum and dad reported feeling good about themselves some, often or all the time, compared to just 62% of those who reported bad relationships – so people with good relationships with parents were 25% more likely to feel good about themselves at least some of the time.

Similar associations held between relationships with siblings and children and respondents’ reporting of the extent to which they felt good about themselves, optimistic, lonely, and down, depressed or hopeless. Relationships with children were mildly positively correlated with feeling optimistic \(r = 0.12\) and with feeling good about oneself \(r = 0.19\), and negatively correlated with feeling lonely \(r = 0.14\) and feeling down, depressed or hopeless \(r = 0.14\). Thus, people who reported good relationships were more likely to feel optimistic and good about themselves, and less likely to feel lonely or down. Relationships with siblings, too, were positively correlated with feeling good about oneself \(r = 0.19\) and feeling optimistic \(r = 0.16\) and negatively correlated with feeling lonely \(r = 0.14\) and feeling down \(r = 0.15\). Whilst these correlations were all statistically significant, the effect sizes are all relatively modest (generally, 0.10 represents a small correlation, 0.30 a medium one, and 0.50 large), and the strongest correlations were between relationships with mum, dad, children and siblings, and feeling good about oneself.

Inter-generational relationships

Grandparents have always played an important role in family life. However, with grandparents increasingly relied upon to provide childcare to enable parents to return to work, grandparents are becoming more and more central to family life in the 21st century.

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4 n = 366, confidence level = 94%
Families’ reliance on practical care across the generations – upwards to elderly parents and grandparents, and downwards to grandchildren – has grown considerably over recent decades. Happily, in our survey, relationships with grandparents and grandchildren were also of high quality, with 88% of grandparents reporting good relationships with their grandchildren.

**Figure 9: Relationships with grandchildren**

![Graph showing the distribution of relationship quality among grandchildren and grandparents](image)

Just as with relationships with children, however, there was a gender difference here, with 92% of grandmothers reporting good relationships with their grandchildren compared to just 84% of grandfathers.

**Figure 10: Relationships with grandchildren – by gender**

![Bar chart showing the distribution of relationship quality by gender](image)

Similarly, most people reported good relationships with grandparents. **More than seven-in-ten (71%) of grandchildren reported good relationships with their grandparents.** Interestingly, however, the data suggest a bit of a mismatch between grandparents’ and grandchildren’s perception of the grandchild-grandparent relationships, with a lower proportion of grandchildren reporting good relationships with grandparents than vice versa. One possible explanation for this might be that the value of our family relationships increases to us in later life – perhaps grandparents may be slightly more invested in the grandparent-grandchild relationship than grandchildren are? Although in our survey
grandchildren’s reporting of their relationships with grandparents was a bit lower than grandparents’ reporting of their relationships with grandchildren, the good news is that most of these relationships are of good quality.

**Figure 11: Relationships with grandparents**

![Diagram showing relationships with grandparents]

- Very good
- Fairly good
- Average
- Fairly bad
- Very bad
- Don’t know
Under pressure

While, overall, our family relationships appear to be in good shape, managing family life isn’t easy, and there are a number of pressures on family relationships. We asked respondents about what strains they experienced on current or past relationships (respondents were asked to select up to eight strains out of a possible 23), and we observed a number of interesting differences in the ways in which different families responded.

Families with children

We found, for example, that parents of children under 19 were considerably more likely to list money worries as a strain on their relationship, with 41% of people who had a child under 19 reporting money worries caused strain on their relationships, compared to 26% of those without a child under 19.

Figure 12: Money worries as a relationship strain, by presence of child under 19

There were other pronounced differences too. As we would expect, childcare or bringing up children was particularly identified as a relationship strain by parents of children under 19, with almost a quarter (24%) selecting this as something which caused strain on their current or past relationships – parents of under-19s were twice as likely to identify childcare/bringing up children as a strain (on current or past relationships) as were people without children under 19.

Figure 13: Childcare as a relationship strain, by presence of child under 19
We also observed a stark contrast in terms of the extent to which respondents identified household chores as a relationship strain. Negotiating the division of housework between parents was a particularly pronounced pressure for families with children under 19, with **26% of parents with a child under 19 reporting household chores as a strain on their relationship compared to just 16% of those with no child under 19.** This echoes our finding in *The Way We Are Now 2015* that parents of under-fives were more likely to rank household chores as a top strain on relationships.52

**Figure 14: Household chores as a relationship strain, by presence of child under 19**

And when we looked in more detail at the age of children in families, we observed a clear picture: parents with younger children were more likely to identify household chores as a strain on their relationships. Among parents of children aged 11-18, 16% identified negotiating household chores as a relationship strain. Among parents of very young children, however, this jumped up considerably: **almost a third (32%) of parents of children aged 0-5 identified household chores as a relationship strain.**

**Figure 15: Household chores as a relationship strain – by age of children**

Looking at the top identified relationship strains altogether, for parents of children aged 0-5 (**n = 445**) in our survey, the top (most-selected) five relationship strains were money worries, lack of work-life balance, household chores, low libido/differing sex drives, and childcare/bringing up children.
For parents of older children, however, whilst money worries, low libido/differing sex drives and childcare/bringing up children all featured in the same order (although the latter two were lower than for parents of 0-5s), household chores dropped out of the top five, lack of work-life balance climbed into second place and not understanding each other entered the top five most-selected strains.

These findings regarding parents’ (and particularly parents of younger versus older children) reporting of money worries, childcare, and household chores all indicate the difficult juggling act so many parents have to manage, in the face of the competing demands of earning a living, raising children, running a household. Whilst all families face pressures, families with young children can come under particular strain. Wider evidence shows that the demands of adjusting to caring for a new baby 24/7, for example, can often lead to reduced relationship quality for many parents. Becoming a parent is one of the most stressful life events – ranking alongside bereavement and moving house\textsuperscript{53} – and as a result, it’s also one of the life events most likely to reduce relationship quality.\textsuperscript{54} First-time parents are at risk of experiencing personal and marital distress,\textsuperscript{55} and many new parents engage in less positive interactions and argue more due to exhaustion and continued sleep disturbances,\textsuperscript{56} while also typically spending significantly less time together, which can impact on their relationship.\textsuperscript{57}

New parents do not all experience the transition to parenthood in the same way, of course, and some show a stabilisation or even increase in relationship quality.\textsuperscript{58} However, it has been estimated that 40-70\% of couples experience a decline in relationship quality in their first year of parenthood.\textsuperscript{59} Relate’s recent research into the prevalence of relationship distress across the UK revealed a similar picture of the additional strain which parenting younger children can place on a relationship: the proportion of parents of

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Figure 16: Top five relationship strains for parents of 0-5s

![Bar chart showing the top five relationship strains for parents of 0-5s: Money worries, Household chores, Low libido/differing sex drives, Lack of work-life balance, Childcare/bringing up children.]

Figure 17: Top five relationship strains for parents of 11-18s

![Bar chart showing the top five relationship strains for parents of 11-18s: Money worries, Lack of work-life balance, Low libido/differing sex drives, Not understanding each other, Childcare/bringing up children.]

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\textsuperscript{53}\textsuperscript{54}\textsuperscript{55}\textsuperscript{56}\textsuperscript{57}\textsuperscript{58}\textsuperscript{59}
under-16s in distressed relationships was 22.31%, compared to 17.98% across the whole sample of people in relationships.\textsuperscript{60}

We also identified a difference here in terms of the extent to which parents of children under 19 reported arguing with their partners: \textit{51% of parents with a child under 19 reported at least occasionally arguing with their partner} – compared to 46% of people without a child under 19.

\textbf{Figure 18: Frequency of arguing, by presence of children under 19}

There were also observable differences between families with young and older children in terms of the extent to which low libido or differing sex drives were identified as relationship strains: 28% of families with a youngest child aged 0-5 identified low libido/differing sex drives as a strain on their relationship, whereas among families with a youngest child aged over six this was closer to a fifth.

\textbf{Figure 19: Low libido/differing sex drives, by age of youngest child}
The ‘boomerang generation’

The rise in recent years of adult children living at home with parents – the so-called ‘boomerang generation’ – has been well-documented, as young people are staying in education/training for longer and delaying leaving or returning to the parental home as record house prices, soaring rents and the rising cost of living have reduced housing options for many young adults. Today, young adults aged 20 to 34 in the UK are more likely to be sharing a home with their parents than any time since 1996, and there were 3.3 million adults living with parents in 2015 – 618,000 more than in 1996.61

Figure 20: Adults aged 15-34 living with parents (millions)

Source: ONS (2015) Families and Households 2015

Our survey found that almost one-in-ten (9%) of parents whose youngest child is over 30 have at least one adult child living at home with them. This shows a similar result to the ONS data on people aged 30-34 who are living with their parents, where eight per cent reported living at home with parents in 2015.62 For parents whose youngest child is over 25, this increases to 12%, and among parents with a youngest child over 21, 17% had a child living with them.

Figure 21: Parents who report adult children living at home with them

When we surveyed the nation in 2014, we were encouraged to find no difference between parents of adult children who lived at home and those whose children had moved out, in terms of relationships with their children.63 Other research, however, has suggested that families with adult children living at home can experience tensions around the clash of different lifestyles, and this may have negative impacts on young adults’ wellbeing and self-esteem stemming from lost independence, for example.64
Caring responsibilities

We asked respondents about their caring responsibilities besides for their own children (if they had any children). Across our sample, four per cent of respondents said they cared for a parent, three per cent for a partner, nine per cent for grandchildren, one per cent for a neighbour, two per cent for friends, three per cent for children of relatives or friends, and one per cent for their siblings. Taking all of these together, 21% said they had caring responsibilities for at least one of these groups. The figure below shows the relative caring responsibilities of respondents who reported caring for people besides their own children.

Figure 22: Proportion of people who report caring responsibilities other than for one’s own children

As the graph above shows, by far and away the most common care responsibility reported besides for respondents’ own children, was for grandchildren. Among those who reported any care responsibility (besides for their own children), 38% care for grandchildren, and across our sample, 33% of grandparents said they provide care for their grandchildren. We know many grandparents help out with caring for grandchildren – often to enable parents to return to work (particularly with the rise of dual-earner households) – and a 2009 study commissioned by the Department for Education found that grandchild care is commonplace in the UK, with 26% of parents responding to the survey receiving help from grandparents in the previous week. It has also been estimated that 14.3% of children aged 0-15 receive informal grandparental childcare at a value of £7.3bn a year and that 63% of grandparents provide any level of childcare, equating to eight million grandparents. This is obviously considerably above what our data shows, but the reason for this disparity is not clear. One reason could be the way in which respondents are asked about this (for example some may not describe looking after grandchildren occasionally as ‘formal or informal care’ arrangements, and our questionnaire could not discriminate between different levels of care provided).

We can see that the next most common caring responsibility reported after this was for a parent – 17% of people who provide care do so for a parent, and overall, seven per cent of people with a parent alive provide care for them. We can expect this proportion to increase: it is estimated that, as the population continues to age, the number of people who provide care to older parents (in England) will increase by over 20% from 2007 to 2032 – reaching 485,000.
What was quite eye-opening was our discovery that a surprisingly high number of people who provide this formal or informal care for others are themselves limited by a long-term condition or are disabled: **38% of formal and informal carers in our sample reported that they were limited either a little or a lot by a long-term condition or disability.** This indicates the potentially high levels of need for support among such carers – not only for their role as carers but also for themselves. Other studies have similarly indicated that many carers are themselves disabled or have poor health. The NHS Information Centre Survey of Carers in Households 2010 found that 27% of carers were in receipt of Disability Living Allowance as a result of their own disability or ill health, and the 2011 Census showed that in England and Wales almost 390,000 carers reported being in bad health. The finding that four-in-ten carers is limited by a disability or long term condition, however, presents stark evidence of the likely substantial support needs of many.

**Figure 23: Proportion of carers who are limited by a long term condition/disabled**

And many of these carers are also balancing this with work. In our sample, while 43% of carers were retired, **40% of those who reported informal or formal care responsibilities other than for their own children also reported work responsibilities** (25% full-time and 15% part-time). We also found – as we noted in the *The Way We Are Now* work report – that a quarter of grandparents who provided informal or formal care for grandchildren were balancing this with some (full-time or part-time) work responsibility.
Recommendations

As we’ve seen above, there is clear evidence that the quality of our family relationships is important to all family members’ health and wellbeing. So what can policy makers do to improve these relationships?

1. Give the ‘Family Test’ a statutory footing

The ‘Family Test’ was launched in October 2014 and requires all new domestic policies across Whitehall to consider the impact they might have on family relationships. This has been an important step forward for more joined-up, family-friendly policy, ensuring that potential impacts of policies on family relationships and functioning are made explicit and recognised. However, a review of implementation of the Family Test a year after its introduction by the Family and Childcare Trust, Relate, and the Relationships Foundation found that the response of government departments had been patchy and the majority had shown limited commitment so far to implementing this. In order to maximise the effect of the Family Test, transparency – i.e. routine publication by departments of impact assessments of policies against the Family Test – is now needed, and government should give the Test teeth by putting it on a statutory footing, requiring all departments to publish records of assessments.

2. Pilot Family and Relationship Centres/Hubs

The strong evidence on the links between family relationships and adults’ and children’s wellbeing presents a compelling case for joining-up services, coordinating family and relationship support from Family and Relationship Centres or ‘Family Hubs’: universally-recognised one-stop shops for support for families. Coordination, co-location or integration of existing family support services into a single identifiable local centre in the heart of communities would help to make the support landscape more navigable for families. In England and Wales (in Scotland, ‘family hubs’ already exist in certain forms), government could work together with local authorities to pilot coordinating services in this way through children’s centres, for example, bringing together a holistic, integrated, wraparound system of support within the community, providing an accessible, local and non-stigmatised hub for a range of support all in one place. This would involve not creating new infrastructure within communities, but rather promoting more efficient and joined-up use of existing community resources. In addition to children’s centres, other community resources such as voluntary sector organisation centres could be brought together with mainstream family support. Making full use of existing resources in this way would mean investment would be primarily in the brand and outreach rather than infrastructure. Joining-up services in this way could create greater efficiency in the system by breaking down the barriers to support, encouraging people to access help earlier, and enabling a wider range of professionals to promote and support healthy family relationships.

In recent years a number of organisations have joined the call for family and relationship hubs, with the Centre for Social Justice calling for family hubs which “should focus on the stability and quality of family relationships – including couple and parent-child relationship – to prevent breakdown or minimise the impact of instability, where it occurs, on children’s welfare.” Former children’s charity 4Children developed a “Children and Family Hubs” service model which “would provide a wide range of family support, across both targeted and universal services [which] could include increased direction and
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provision of relationship support for couples and family therapy”.75 Most recently, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children’s Centres recommended renaming and rebranding these centres as family hubs and broadening the range of services available to include an emphasis on mental health support, and for them to be placed at the heart of local health and wellbeing strategies; employment support; and relationship support – beyond parenting support, to include couples counselling, pre-marriage courses, post separation support, and help with parenting teenagers.76

3. **Embed support for family relationships within mainstream services around the transition to parenthood**

In light of our findings in this survey which show the extra strain parenthood (especially of younger children) can place on relationships (evidenced in particular in the way that parents of younger children identified to a greater extent money worries, household chores, lack of work-life balance, childcare/bringing up children as strains on their relationships – as well as by wider research), we also recommend that policy makers and local commissioners look at coordinating family relationship support with perinatal health services within these Family Relationship Centres/Hubs. New parents’ everyday interactions with mainstream public services present considerable opportunities for a more holistic support offer for families and present ‘touch points’ at a crucial life transition which can involve significant stress on relationships. We know that the demands of adjusting to caring for a new baby 24/7 and a changed relationship can often mean reduced relationship quality. Antenatal, maternity, postnatal and health visiting services, for example, could play a vital role in promoting good quality relationships as the basis of family wellbeing and child development.

4. **Training and guidance on family relationships and relationship support for frontline professionals in public services**

Frontline practitioners in public services (such as GPs, midwives, health visitors) could be given training about family relationships and relationship support to help them to identify distressed relationships, talk appropriately and with confidence to service users about their relationships, sign-post or refer to relevant support services, as well as screen for domestic abuse. With training, frontline professionals can support wider efforts to shift culture, both in the specific support they offer and in the subtler signals they send through the language they use and the way they approach issues. Training for frontline professionals has been shown to lead to improvements in signposting and referrals to appropriate relationship support services/resources.77

5. **Expand access to support for carers**

Taking on caring responsibilities can have a significant impact on relationships. In a survey of over 5,000 carers, for example, Carers UK found that 49% said that they had experienced difficulties in their relationship with their partner because of their caring role and 57% had lost touch with friends or family.78 In a separate survey, 42% of carers said that they have experienced the breakdown of a relationship with a family member.79

Becoming a carer can change the dynamic of a couple relationship and put it under strain,80 and with 1.4 million people providing over 50 hours of care per week,81 it’s therefore no surprise that nearly three-quarters (73%) of carers surveyed by Carers UK have found it hard to maintain relationships with friends, family or other social networks.82 Family relationship support for carers, people who are disabled or have long-
term health conditions and their families would provide important support for relationships under particular strain. Our finding that nearly four-in-ten people who provided formal or informal care were themselves disabled or limited by a long term condition speaks to the profound support needs of many. Policy makers and commissioners should expand access to relationship support for carers, people with long term conditions and their families.
Methodology

The survey was carried out by YouGov and was conducted using an online interview survey administered members of the YouGov UK panel of over 800,000 individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An email was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. YouGov normally achieves a response rate of around between 35% and 50% to surveys although this does vary according to the subject matter, complexity and length of the questionnaire.

In total we polled 5,071 UK adults (over 16) across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18th June and 7th July 2016. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 16+). YouGov is a member of the British Polling Council. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.

The results of our poll were weighted to make the data more representative of the population in terms of age, gender, region and country, and an indicator of social class (based on census information). However, the results do come with some caveats around representativeness. While the results of our survey are weighted according to these criteria, our sample may still differ according to other unobserved factors, including those that are the subject of our survey, such as relationships and sexual behaviour.

These data were further analysed independently of YouGov on behalf of Relate using STATA 13 with individual weights attached to all sample members; direct replication of the statistics featured in this report using the tables published by YouGov may therefore be subject to rounding errors. Additional variables, such as relationship status, which were not available in the standard output provided by YouGov, were subsequently created and feature throughout the report. All of the bivariate analyses that we present represent statistically significant patterns and differences – these are patterns that we would not expect to see by chance. Throughout the report, unless specified otherwise, all data are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Definitions of terms

Throughout this report, the following terms are used in the description of findings. For clarification:

‘**Good**’ – including those who responded ‘very good’ and ‘good’

‘**Bad**’ – including those who responded ‘very bad’ and ‘bad’

‘**People who are disabled or living with a long term health condition**’ – including people who reported that their day-to-day activities are limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted or is expected to last at least 12 months
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This report forms the second of a series of reports which together comprise our major study into the state of the UK’s relationships, *The Way We Are Now*.

**About Relate**

Relate is the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year. Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- Delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- Helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- Helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

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**About Relationships Scotland**

Relationships Scotland’s network of 22 affiliated local services provide relationship counselling, family mediation, child contact centres and other family support services across all of mainland and island Scotland. Our work supports individuals, couples and families experiencing relationship difficulties. Around 30,000 people have contact with our services each year.

We are a national voice for relationship support services and we influence policy and legislative policy development in the area of family life and wellbeing. We support people to live with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy and respectful relationships.

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