



HeadsUp Forum

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It's a Family Affair! What is the place of family in society?

(February 26th - March 16th 2007)

An online platform providing young people with a secure and structured space to discuss their perspectives on the family.

Families create strong emotions in all of us, and everyone experiences families differently. You may have one, two or more parents, you might be an only child, or have three brothers and sisters. With this information in mind it was perhaps not surprising that this discussion was so well received by all participants involved.

Young people demonstrated an impressive knowledge of a wide range of often highly sensitive family-related issues, as well as exploring all sides of the arguments. The debate gained parliamentary expertise from a range of legislators taking part online - these included:

- **Parmjit Dhanda MP** - Minister for Children and Families
- **Maria Miller MP** - Shadow Minister for Family Welfare
- **Annette Brooke MP** - Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Children and Families
- **Tim Loughton MP** - Shadow Health Minister and Shadow Children's Minister

Senior Ministers, MPs, Peers, AMs and MSPs from all political parties continue to see HeadsUp as a must - this is the main USP of the site from the perspective of HeadsUp users. The HeadsUp team provide short, one-to-one online training sessions to all participating decision-makers.

The debate was divided into four manageable sections for participating students - what constitutes a family?, what keeps a family together?, what role should parents play in the upbringing of their children?, and what causes families to break down?

Young people remain very keen and committed to HeadsUp and getting their opinions heard by decision-makers and they posted comments in the Forum both in and out of school hours. This is a particularly welcome development as it underlines how keen young people are to use this resource, giving up some of their spare time to keep on top of the debate as it develops.

In keeping with the youth participation agenda, a summary report outlining key findings and quotes is disseminated to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, enabling young people's voices to be heard by key decision-makers.

The main objective of the site is not only to enable peer-to-peer deliberation on hot political issues, policies or events but also to provide students with a means of informing themselves about the topic.

This Family Debate, like all previous HeadsUp debates, was supported by structured, student-centred background notes that included an explanation of the key areas surrounding the current family legalisation, an overview of the key issues being debated, a comprehensive glossary and statistics package, plus summaries of arguments for and against specific issues.

Students aged between 11 and 18 from secondary schools right across the UK took part in this Family Debate. HeadsUp continues to attract new schools, teachers, and young people to register to take part in the debates. The participants made multiple visits over the three-week duration of the debate.

This summary report gives an account of the debate that took place and includes key posts from students. Conclusions from the debate are to be found at the end of the report. Special care has been taken to ensure that the report is non-partisan and representative of the views expressed by the participants.

We would all like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the legislators who gave up their time to participate in this debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, and interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings.

Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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Forum Summary

**What makes up a family?
Does every family need a father/mother figure
plus 2.4 children to function?**

Families are a pivotal and fundamental part of our society but moderators wanted to know what, according to young people, constituted a family. Was it still the case that families need a mother and father plus 2.4 children to function effectively?

Perhaps unsurprisingly as the questions were intentionally provocative, this particular discussion space proved to be the most popular in the entire Forum. After considering the pros and cons of families, the majority of young people decided that families were individual and unique.

These students attempted to define the purpose of the family with both repeating strong buzzwords such as love and respect. One made a point of stressing the diversity of families, and that they don't just have to be so called "blood relatives" but could include family friends:

'Family' as a group of influential characters whom you love and respect, can come in any shape or form. It could be your mother, father brother or sister. Or it could be your friends, if, for example, your family are elsewhere or dead. Anyone who you care for can be considered family.

family is just a group of who respect and love you but not always is blood.

There was enthusiastic support for the family from these young people who again pointed to the unique shape of their family and also the invaluable support network which it creates:

My family is very unusual in both numbers and structure, step-parents, in-laws, step-siblings and such like, but because it is really strong and understanding, it manages to deal with various problems better than those of other people I know.

a family is the most treasured possession a human being can have! they see you through even the hardest of situations and you can only help but be very very grateful to them for sticking by you when times get hard and rough

Picking up directly on these comments was Parmjit Dhanda MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, who agreed with the positive opinions posted about the family, especially their individuality and the support they offered. He explained to HeadsUp users his reasons why:

I think the young people who have posted their comments have made some really good points. Every family is different. The important thing is not their size or form but how they are there for each other when things get difficult, giving their love and support.

Annette Brooke MP, the Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Children and Families, used her experience to offer participating young people some advice about families, in particular encouraging them to use the word love:

I don't see a fixed formula as to the shape of a family. I agree with other postings, it is the stable loving relationships which are all important, being prepared to put another member of the family's interests before your own. I sometimes think we don't use the word love enough and we don't always show our love.

Tim Loughton MP, the Shadow Health Minister and Shadow Children's Minister, stressed to participants the long-term influence and impact a family has on all our lives:

Often people don't even realise the impact that their families have on their view of the world or the choices they make but if you think about it, from the moment you are born into the world you have a role in family which most people will play out with their parents and siblings, and later on with their own children, for the rest of their lives.

Participants in this Family Debate examined some of the issues behind family composition. All had experienced family breakdown and agreed that the number of parents or children which made up a family was virtually irrelevant as everyone is different. They noted that the breakdown process was very hard to cope with but that in the long run these situations usually improve over time:

My parents split up when I was about 3 years old and as I am an only child people may think that my family is uncomplete, but I think that you don't need two parents and two children for your family to be complete...I feel sorry for people who have their parents splitting up but after a while you do get used to it and if your parents are always arguing it is usually for the best.

when my parents split about 6 years ago; I felt envious of the people who lived close enough to see both their parents all the time... Sometimes the make up of a family has to change and it often changes for the better over time.

This young person agreed with the widely held sentiment that you don't need a certain number of adults or children to make a stereotypical family:

The only thing you need to have a family is a parent and a child... you don't need 2,3 or 4 parents. You don't need 2,3 or 4 children for a family either.

The forum was also used as a consultation tool by Tim Loughton MP, who asked students for their views on how parents could keep educating children about right and wrong:

I agree that parents have a crucial role in educating their children about morals but how do you think parents should do this? Tim Loughton MP

This proactive youngster was quick to offer feedback to the parliamentarian's request. In particular, stressing that the absolute bottom line for parents is to set a good example for their children and hope that they follow suit:

I think all parents can really do is set a good example. There's no better way to teach right and wrong and setting a good example usually works.

Finally in this family composition discussion thread, moderators picked up on a poll which stated that two Scottish districts are considered the best places in the UK to bring up a family. We asked young people to consider whether location matters when bringing up a family. These participants were typical of the feeling during discussions that location did not make much difference in bringing up a family:

I think that location can make a difference when growing up but not the biggest difference and I can say this with a bit of experience because I used to live in the city but now live in the country side.

I don't think location matters too much. Yes it can effect the relationship, e.g. drugs/druggy area, but mostly it should not! If you love each other than it should not matter where you are, you could be out to see and it wouldn't/shouldn't matter



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What elements help keep a family together - children, love, commitment, money?

In this discussion space, we wanted to ask young people for their thoughts on the foundations of families. More specifically what keeps them together, perhaps materialistic factors like money or nice holidays or is it more important to have love and commitment? This particular question was intentionally provocative to test students' resolve about their families.

Several passionate participants were clear that any families which needed just money to keep them together are in a very poor state of health. They argued that families constructed in this way are weak and do not have a long term future:

if money is all that's keeping you're family together then you're not much of a family then are you.

i think that a family held together by money is going to be a weak family and wont last but to expect it to be held together by children is impossible no child or at least none ive ever met weilds that much power over there parents relationship and even if they did i think it would be a pretty miserable family.

These young people held slightly overlapping views about what elements help keep families together. One believed in the power of love as a binding force, but for another the reason to stay together differed from family to family:

i think that it should be love that keeps families together, not money. Marriage for money is terrible.

families are held toger by the thing which made them come toger e.g. love ,money, power

Still on the issue of what keeps a family together, one participant agreed that love plays an important role.

In a family I think all you need is love like in that beatles song.

In most circumstances, participants referred to their own family lives in their postings. At an early stage of this discussion, one student a first-hand experience of what keeps a family together, namely support and love:

things that keep you together vary from family to family but for us it's the knowledge that whatever we go through we can always count on each other. Even when we don't understand or like the situation the love seems to hold us together.

Conversely, other students identified reasons why families can split up but for this participant things do get easier:

I think that no-one or anything can change what happens if parents split up. I know if your parents had split up it is very upsetting but you get used to it. Mine split up but its fine as my parents get on better now and my step-mum is lovely. Everything that happens is fate.

Parmjit Dhanda MP came online to wholeheartedly endorse these comments. He identified offering support for carers, parents and families as a key facet of the government's policy:

I think the young person who posted the first comment has really said it all - the reasons for staying together will vary from family to family, but offering support to parents carers and families is important here and remains a key part of this government's work.

One participant attempted to define what factors contribute towards a "good" family, including spending quality time in each other's company:

I think that a good family should spend time together and do things that they all enjoy as a family. i also think that a family should look and care for one another.

Everyone in this discussion concurred that family breakdown where children are used as pawns is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs. Both this student and Maria Miller MP agreed with the principle that young people deserve to be treated as people in their own right:

I agree that children should not be used as toys or a wall to stop pain. They should be loved as their own person as when a divorce happens they are just as important as the married people themselves. I believe that all a child needs is love, support and maybe some money to help hehe....

children and young people need to be treated as people in their own right, they need to be listened to, engaged with, and shown respect - the same as anyone else. All too often children become pawns to be fought over when when parents break up, which can be extremely hurtful for everyone concerned. MARIA MILLER MP

There seemed to be some disagreement amongst HeadsUp users about how much of an influence the family had on individuals and society as a whole. Interestingly, for Tim Loughton MP, families are an important first port of call with news and make up our own mini-community:

Families are important to us because they make up our most immediate community - for a lot of people they are the ones you turn to first if something goes wrong or if you've received good news.

However, perhaps in slight contrast this participant stressed the uniqueness of families as a social network and used their own extended family network as an example, arguing that families stay together due to some kind of social expectations placed upon the adults:

I think most relations are kept together simply because they're socially expected to. If I had completely free choice, I'd never talk to my anties, cousins, etc, but because we're related they expect me to and so would be confused and upset if I didn't, so I talk to them. Same with my grandparents: we don't Really like each other, they only have anything to do with me because I'm related to them, I rely on them for support

that they only give because they're related to me. Family is a strange social phenomona that kind of goes around in circles.

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What role should parents play in the upbringing of their children, and what role should the state play?

This question was highly topical and somewhat controversial. Both before and during this family debate, moderators picked up on several news stories which highlighted some examples of so-called 'bad parenting'.

Participants were asked if in these worst case scenarios the state should intervene to assist parents, or whether parents should be left to look after children without intervention.

For Tim Loughton MP the situation was clear regarding excessive government intervention into family life, as he argued that this was a negative influence on families in the long term:

The state must be careful not to intrude too much into family life though. I think that 99% of times parents know what is in their children's best interests and they don't need the state to tell them. Government interference into the family will, in the long run, make for unhealthy families who lose the crucial positive relationships between different generations.

Perhaps understandably, the vast majority of participants were supportive of their parents. They felt that they had performed extremely well in a very testing role and these comments were typical of the positive views held about the performance of parents when it came to selecting a school for their children:

I know that my parents are caring and want to do what's best for me, and I have been very lucky because we moved to allow me to get into a good school, but I can't say that everyone's parents, including my own, know what's best for me. Maybe someone from a different background has any views?

My mam did her best to choose me a school, she thought she had chosen well but it turned out to be a bad choice. I don't think parents can really help with choosing schools unless they for some reason know everything about all the schools.

Other students noted that their own parents did a very good job whereas some of their friends were forced to go to schools against their wishes or prevented from taking a subject at GCSE:

my parents were really helpful when I chose my school but for some of my mates it was a completely different story from some of their parents forcing them to go to schools they didn't want to, to simply not caring.

I want to make my own decisions, and my parents don't bug me in that area, but many parents do. I have a friend who was only just allowed to take Drama at GCSE's,

and there is no way that her parents would let her take theatre studies at A Level. What up with that?

Attention in this discussion thread turned towards identifying what the role of a parent should be. Overall HeadsUp participants agreed that first and foremost a parent should be a role model for their child, showing them how to respect people and highlight the differences between right and wrong:

Parents should love and guide their children and make them become respected responsible members of society.

The role of a parent is to teach their children the difference between right and wrong. When parents don't do this, this is when young people turn to crime and get ASBO's.

These opinions were echoed by Annette Brooke MP who stated her belief that the role of a parent is one of the most difficult roles in society. She highlighted that parents have to constantly set, adjust and enforce boundaries for their children to keep to:

Parents are carers and first teachers and have an amazingly difficult and responsible role to play. I think it is really important that they set clear boundaries for their children but are always prepared to listen and respond and explain why they have responded in a particular way.

After analysing all the deliberations, one unhappy young person used the forum to remind everyone that children are not glue in a family or marriage. Clearly they felt passionately about this issue and felt that children should not be treated as pawns in an attempt to keep a marriage together:

Children are not glue. They can't keep marriages together. They have feelings and are not objects. It is Therapy that keep marriages together and happiness!!!!!!

As the debate grew to a close Parmjit Dhanda MP posted a comment which highlighted for participants his thinking about the parental role in their child's education. Interestingly, he underlined that when parents are involved in the children's education, children get more out of school. He ended by saying that families bring up children, not government:

There is no doubt that children enrich our lives but raising them is hard. One of the most important areas where parents can support their children is in their schooling. When parents are involved with their children's learning, children tend to enjoy school more, go to their lessons, get into less trouble and get better exam results. Of course, the benefits of parents being involved with schools and working with teachers go beyond getting good exam results. Children whose parents are involved in their education do not get as stressed, are healthier, happier and have better relationships with their friends and family. Families bring up children, not government, but government should try to help all parents and carers to do that to the best of their ability.

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What causes families to break down? Can anything be done to address this breakdown?

The discussion space dedicated to family breakdown was perhaps the most sensitive one in the whole debate. For a whole host of reasons families can break down and unfortunately a number of participants had experienced this process first-hand, either in their own family or one of their friend's. HeadsUp moderators asked participants to consider if there was anything that could be done to address this breakdown.

A group of participants were not afraid to have their say on the potentially delicate topic of family breakdown. They identified a host of contributing factors which could trigger breakdowns including dislike of other family members or diminished trust or respect:

Families break down when people in them dislike each other enough not to be held together by the fact that they're socially expected to.

Though there are many causes for family breakdowns the first one that springs to mind is lack of respect and trust. Without it families can be broken apart because people need both of those.

Continuing on the theme of family breakdown, some participants highlighted several overlapping factors which they believed were crucial in this process. One young person argued that breakdown within families can occur when the bond between the parents is reduced, or perhaps when children cause too much stress. Another highlighted money, love and children and used the forum to talk about their own experience:

I think that the main reason familys split up is because of two reasons:

- 1. That the parents have fallen out and just dont love each other anymore.*
- 2. That the children are causing the parents so much stress because of behavior that the parents have arguements about the children and maybe even become so stressed that they can no longer look after the children and sometimes (in the worst cases) the parents put children into care.....*

Sometimes a number of things cause a break up, money, love, ever children but sometimes its not a bad thing. My parents broke up about 4 or 5 years ago and I'm perfectly happy, i've got 2 of everything! I still see my my dad every tuesday, thursday and every other weekend and I get 2 birthdays, 2 Christmas and pretty much 2 of every thing.

Interestingly for one proactive young person the answer was simple. The importance of families has reduced in recent years due to the rise of consumerism and therefore those families which face breakdown turn to divorce as an immediate solution.

In recent decades the role of the family has switched in society. From being central to our moral view and being the central aspect of our lives, it has now been pushed to the outskirts of what many of us believe to be important. This has led to the massive breakdown in the belief of the familliaral system-many simply don't believe that the idea of family has anything to offer them. In a way this is a quite bigotted view, and just goes to show how the consumer idea can invade every aspect of society. We want everything now, and if that means divorce, so be it.

Parliamentarians involved in this debate offered their perspectives on why families break down and interestingly their opinions overlapped with those of HeadsUp users.

Annette Brooke MP talked about conflict and communication in families. However, Parmjit Dhanda MP stressed that in the majority of families splits occur due to factors going on outside the home:

Relationships between parents and between parents and children are likely to falter and result in conflict from time to time. It is important to think about strengthening relationships by trying to work out where 'communication' is not working properly. Sometimes, people can work through this themselves, sometimes somebody from the wider family can help, sometimes somebody from outside the family can help - it is important to realise that constant friction can be resolved. If only my husband would be tidier! Annette Brooke MP

Although the reasons behind a family breaking up are intensely personal, the break-up is often because of things that are going on outside the home. When a relationship goes wrong, the important thing is that families can get the support they need either to stay together or to separate on friendly terms so that both parents can continue to have a relationship with their children. Parmjit Dhanda MP

Picking up on these comments, one student used the forum as a plea for help from their HeadsUp peers and parliamentarians after detailing how their own family life has deteriorated in recent times:

my family is slowly breacking apart my parents are divorced, this was because my mum fell out of love with my father and they kept on having arguments. now i have a step dad and he is a pain, since my mum re-married there has bin a lot of arguments in the house i am loosing the relationship with my mum and she is getting annoyed by it. she wants to move out. i hate my family life atm and i wish i could stop it or control my family from splittin up. what do i do?

A teacher who had experienced family breakdown first-hand used this discussion to highlight that children can still be loved by parents who have separated:

I am a parent, and when we split up we tried to be as fair to the children as possible... We are a lot happier tho we are not a "normal" family anymore. My ex husband and I don't have much contact but the kids know we are there for them.

One bold student went so far as to say that some parents stay together just for the sake of their children and concluded by saying that when relations are this bad then perhaps divorce is the only solution:

Sometimes parents are intent on staying together "for the children" or to keep up appearances. In doing that they often really cause problems for the children.... When people are fighting so much, they reeally should just get a divorce. Especially when there's children invovled.

Finally Tim Loughton MP used the debate to ask young people for their views on the sensitive topic of the issues courts should consider when deciding which family member a child should live with:

I'd be interested to hear your views on what the courts should take into account if they have to decide which parent a child should live with?

According to one young person, practical considerations should be thought through, and, above all, the children involved should be consulted at every stage of this process to ask them what they want to do:

Obviously, practical things should be taken into account such as whether the parents have permanent homes and spare room. Also, if they already know that one of the parents is keeping the old house then it would probably be best for children to stay there. Another factor is which parent has most time to spend with the child. I think that whenever the child is old enough the choice should come down to them. Social workers or someone should talk with them and see what they would really want.

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Conclusions

- * Family diversity should be championed
- * Love, respect and support help keep families together
- * Widespread support for the quality of parenting
- * Several contributing factors behind family breakdown

The quality of argument and deliberations in this Family Debate was particularly pleasing and interesting to follow, encompassing the ideas of 11-18 year olds plus a range of relevant legislators from across the UK.

Young people made four key conclusions in this Family Debate...

Students were asked what constituted a family, where the majority decided that the diversity and uniqueness of each family were attributes which should be championed and not something to be ashamed of because they don't meet outdated stereotypes. Importantly, families were also acknowledged as providing a support network where members can share both good and bad news.

When analysing the factors which keep families together, young people offered a whole host of contributing factors. There was widespread agreement that strong buzzwords such as love, respect and support can all help provide the glue which keeps families together. Some astute participants noted that families built solely on money are very weak and don't have a long-term future.

Considering what role parents and the state could play in the upbringing of children, the majority believed that their parent(s) were doing a fantastic job under some very testing circumstances. Many concurred that their parents made sound decisions when selecting a school for their child and often kept them updated/involved throughout this process.

Responding to the sensitive question asking what makes families break down, participants felt that many of the reasons which helped keep families together could just as easily be flipped to contribute to a split. For example, a lack of love, commitment or respect were identified as important factors, plus stress and children. Importantly everyone was extremely considerate of all opinions as a proportion of participants had experienced family breakdown at first-hand.

The range of enthusiastic and relevant legislators taking part online during all three weeks gave the debate added momentum and a stamp of parliamentary approval from the young people's collective viewpoint. We are grateful to all the decision-makers who responded to young people's opinions in this Family Debate.

It's a Family Affair! What is the place of family in society? was a particularly topical issue for a HeadsUp Forum and therefore one that was welcomed by young people who participated, other NGOs and MPs from across the political spectrum. It provided

a secure, structured but non-sanitised platform for young people to voice their perspectives on the family.

HeadsUp tackles complex political problems but is not designed to make set recommendations. Like adults, young people have a range of perspectives on political events, issues and policies, and often favour different solutions. This resource was established not to give the 'definitive line'; rather it is about providing a space for people to share their views, challenge those of others and, in turn, be challenged.
