



HeadsUp Forum # 44

[www.HeadsUp.org.uk](http://www.HeadsUp.org.uk)

## What makes a good family?

(5 – 23 March 2012)

Families are incredibly important – politicians, children and parents all seem to agree on this, even if the best way to support them is not always clear. Families are the first social grouping that children experience, so having young people's viewpoints on political issues related to the family is vital. With changing family structures and increasing government intervention in family situations currently highly topical in British politics, the students were very keen to express their opinions on this area of policy.

Nine decision-makers drawn from all the UK legislatures, as well as policy-makers from national charities took part in the forum. The decision-makers supporting the forum were:

- **Catherine McKinnell MP** – Shadow Minister for Children and Young People;
- **Graham Stuart MP** – Chairman of the Education Select Committee;
- **Baroness Massey** – Chair of the All Party Group for Children;
- **Aileen Campbell MSP** – Scotland's Minister for Children and Young People;
- **Drew Smith MSP** – Scottish Labour Spokesperson on Social Justice;
- **Mark Drakeford AM** – Chair of the Committee on Health and Social Care;
- **Bethan Jenkins AM** – former Plaid Cymru Spokesperson on Child Poverty;
- **Mark Bennett** – Director of Public Affairs, 4Children;
- **Liz Gardiner** – Head of Policy, Working Families.

[www.headsup.org.uk](http://www.headsup.org.uk) is a safe, online space for under 18s to debate the political issues important to them. **Young people** share viewpoints with their peers and **decision-makers** up and down the country. Through the forums, HeadsUp develops **young people's** political awareness and promotes active citizenship so they can play an effective part in the democratic processes that affect them.

HeadsUp enables **politicians** to consult with **young people**, to find out their ideas, experiences and opinions. There is ample background information to prepare **young people** for the debates, as well as **teachers'** notes and activities.

# What makes a good family?

## Forum Summary

There were 4,997 visits to the website throughout the course of the forum, with 278 posts.<sup>∞</sup> 134 students took part in the debate.

The forum was split into sub-topics, each with a broad heading covering an issue related to families. These subjects were selected both for their timeliness, and also to prompt discussion in areas that young people might hold a particular interest. The four threads were:

- **Family Values** – What values are important to your family? How important is it that most families share the same values? What would you do differently if you had your own family in the future?
- **Adoption** – Who should be allowed to adopt? How can we make sure children have a say in the adoption process? Should religion, age or race play a part in who can adopt?
- **Troubled Families** – Is it the Government's job to help so called 'troubled families'? Does labelling certain families 'troubled' make their problems worse? Should the Government be tougher on problem families?
- **Child Poverty** – How important is money to building a happy family? What are the basic things needed for a stable, happy family? Are our chances in life decided mostly by our family?

The general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted in the following pages, along with specific ideas given by forum users.<sup>1</sup>

### Who should be able to adopt?

The adoption thread was the most popular of the discussions on the site, with much of the debate focusing on gay adoption. There were many posts suggesting that criteria for adoption should be as broad as possible, but there were some provisos that the students discussed. The critical consideration for young people on this issue was the importance of taking into account the wishes of the children who were to be adopted. Giving children a voice in this process was a key theme of this debate.

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<sup>∞</sup> Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and decision-makers.

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are direct and unamended.

*I think a child (aged 5+) should be adopted by anyone they want and they should not be forced into being adopted by someone that they don't wish to be adopted by.*

*The child also should be able to choose, but under 5 years old the social services should have the choice.*

Some students thought that it was important that children are adopted by a family of the same race and/or religion.

*Firstly I think the child should be adopted by the same religion, race, etc for six months. Then after this they should be able to be adopted by anyone as the worst thing is for a child to feel unwanted*

*...they should be with the same religion but not sure about race. I think that they should have a say on who adopts them as surely it is an extremely important thing for them.*

*In my opinion, they should definitely be the same race, as there has been numerous cases of children of different backgrounds adopted by parents of a different race, this has led to racism due to the family living in a segregated community.*

*...should have the same religion as the child they wish to adopt. Mainly because I think that nobody should have a religion forced on them and should have the right to choose which religion they follow.*

*I think that it's important for the child to be adopted by the same religion, race, etc because if they don't they may notice that they're different to the parents and other families who are the same colour, religion and so on this could upset the adopted child and make them feel uncomfortable in the family.*

*I think to adopt a child the parents don't need to have the same colour as the child but I think the religion is an important factor*

Others disagreed...

*I believe that race, religion or homosexuality is not a problem for them to adopt children. Unless the child isn't happy, adoption is a chance for everyone to take.*

*I think that the only thing that matters is that the child is going to be in a safe and loving and supportive family. That isn't going to be changed by the fact the 'parents' are of a different ethnic background to the child.*

*At the end of the day, it's everyone's goal to let that child grow up in the best circumstances possible. So not allowing that child a caring home isn't exactly helping the child grow up.*

*... every child deserves a loving family, whether the child's being brought up in a different ethnic background*

*I think that it doesn't matter about the race or religion because we are all the same people and we should all be allowed the same benefits as each other*

There was a general consensus that people with a criminal record shouldn't be allowed to adopt, although some thought it was acceptable as long as they hadn't committed a major crime.

*i think anyone should be allowed to adopt a child as long as they havn't got a criminal record*

*People who want to adopt should be of a resonable age, dont have to be a couple, they are allowed to be of the same sex. They should not have any criminal records*

*Anybody without a criminal record should be able to adopt*

*I think that if someone has been to jail for only a minor thing like graffiti or stealing something from a shop, and they haven't done anything for a few months or something, then they should be allowed to adopt. But if they have been to prison on a long sentence for child abuse, murder etc. shouldn't ever be allowed to adopt.*

*Anybody should be allowed to adopt expect if they have a criminal record as the children need to be safe – they might not be as safe living with a criminal/ex-criminal.*

## **Gay Adoption**

Although, there was a clear majority in favour of gay adoption, users again highlighted the importance of the child's views being taken into account when being placed with gay parents.

*It is unfair if they are not allowed to adopt because they have not done anything wrong. They should not be denied something they want just because they are of the same sex.*

*I think all couples should be allowed to adopt, no matter whether it is a male and female, 2 males or 2 females. The same opportunities for adoption should be given to all these family dynamics because otherwise there would be discrimination and it would be awful to think that such a worthwhile system could be so corrupt...However if the child is unhappy being in a family with same-sex parente, then it is their choice to make.*

*I think everyone should be allowed to adopt as long as the child being adopted agrees.*

*I think anyone should be allowed to adopt as long as they are capable.*

*I think anybody can adopt but lesibans and gays can only adopt when the child is at an old enough age to make a decision like 14 years old. This is because you don't know whether the child is happy with being with homosexual parents*

*Same-sex couples may influence on the child if they adipt and may cause the child might get bullied, but it is the child's decision on whether they live with the couple or not and aslong as the child feels loved and cared for ... then there shouldn't be an issue on the sex of the parents.*

*I think that adoption should be allowed to anyone willing to bring up a family and willing to love, support and care for the child gay or straight.*

*Saying people can't adopt because there gay is harsh, there is the problem that the child might be bullied but that is only because the world the against gay people and don't agree with it which is wrong.*

The main problem that users had with same-sex adoption was fears that the child may be bullied because of their parents.

*We think that gay couples shouldn't be able to adopt because the child could be bullied and the child might not want gay parents but could be forced to because they are desperate to have a family. they also might have trouble at school and need a mum to help them, but because they only have 2 dads, and no mum they may not feel comfortable talking to a man.*

*I don't think that gay people should be able to adopt. Because the child may get bullied because of their parents. Also the parents orientation may rub off on the child and they may grow u thinking that they have to be gay. Also it is important for a child to have a mum and a dad. If a girl has a problem they would usually go to their mom an its important that they have a man and a woman in their life*

## Family Values



Much of the debate focused on the values that a family should have to be happy; the most common being love and trust for one another.

This finding was also borne out by the poll that accompanied the debate, asking; What is the most important thing in a family?

*i think a good family includes trust, honesty and love. without theses three things you cannot call it a family. Families should help and support each other when they need it.*

*I think that their should be some basic ones that every good family should have, such as: Being able to trust each other, love, tolerance and*

*basically being able to live together without eating each other!*

*In a family, **trust, love and friendship** are the **most important values** because there are the bases of a **good family structure***

*I believe the most important value within a family should be love, no matter what family it is.*

*I think that love, trust, respect and care are essential things for a happy family. If you don't love each other then what's the point and is you don't respect each other then they won't give it back*

One student used a Buddhist saying to make the point:

*I have been learning about Buddhism in R.E at school and we discovered the saying that "Happiness is wanting what you have, not having what you want" and I find that that is the perfect motto for a family to have. It has made me realise how much they mean to me.*

Other values, such as discipline, were considered, but while the students thought that this was important they didn't think it was the most important factor in a family.

*Discipline – I think this is important but my family have brought me up to be quite independent and although they might be upset if I do not succeed at something they will tell me I should have worked harder.*

*I agree with most of the recent comments about the Love and Trust because without them you would feel lonely Discipline – I think this is important*

## **Gay Marriage**

During the forum it was announced that the Government were consulting on plans to make same-sex marriage legal. HeadsUp users were almost universally pro same-sex marriage with views ranging from not seeing any reason why homosexual people shouldn't have the same rights, to believing it to be active discrimination not to give everyone equal marriage rights.

*On the matter of same-sex marriages; I have no objection to these sorts of relationships and I see no reason why people who have different relationship preferences should be treated any differently.*

*I think that everyone, whatever their sexuality should be allowed to get married if they want to. Civil partnerships are very similar to marriage and giving them a different name may make same-sex couples feel that their relationship is less valued by society, so can be discriminatory.*

*I think that we should respect all couples, and all family types. Same sex couples should have the same rights as partners of the different sex, it helps them feel more part of society. Giving them different rules because of their sexuality is a form of discrimination in a way.*

*I believe it is important not to cloud your own child thoughts on homosexuality even if you feel it is wrong. you shouldn't push your own opinion on your child before you have given them a chance to make up their own mind about what they think about think about the subject.*

Only one poster wasn't so convinced that same sex marriages were a good thing.

*i want to say that i have nothing against same sex partnerships, but, because marriage started out as a christian thing, and it says in the bible that a man should only get married to a woman and vice versa, shouldn't we respect that?*

## **Benefits**

There was plenty of discussion about benefits and who should be entitled to receive them. The general consensus was that there should be benefits for people who need them but that benefit recipients should still be persuaded and expected to work.

*I think we should help families if they are trying to make an effort in life like searching for jobs but if not why should we as they expect money for doing nothing*

*Families consist of people and our society consists of people! I think the government should absolutely help "troubled families" as they too are a part of society*

*I think that the government should help families that are in the most extreme cases. If the family is poor and both parents are not working this is the sort of case that should be dealt with*

*Children who have nothing, no money no home NO PARENTS, should be aloud to be suported by the government but those who have parents their parents should be financially able to look after a/some child/ren*

*when someone says troubled family it make me think of a mother who has about 10+ kids all with a different dad! i believe this to be irresponsible you should get some benifits but also get a job!!!*

There was a lot of concern that people might abuse the benefits system and that it should not encourage people to give up on work.

*I think that troubled families need help- benefits- but only if the parents can not find work, and they are trying to do so- if they can, then why are the tax payers paying for their keep, when they are doing nothing to help themselves? This just gives people an incentive to not work- why work if the government are giving free hand outs?*

*i think the government should still give out benefits but they should have a more intense screening process where they can make sure that all the money is going to a good cause and not someone who is too laz to get a job and earn their own income.*

A couple of users, however, spoke out about the difficulties of living within the benefit system or on low incomes and why some families genuinely need more help.

*i know what it is like to live in a family with financial problems. my mum is disabled and has had to cut her work load in half. this results in a major loss of income. but my mum is still able to work a few hours a day. my mum does not like the fact that she is not as able as other people to work full days. we looked to the government for some disabled benefits. we got rejected. because my mum is still 'able to work' when infact she isnt. she just doesnt want to give up her job as it the only source of income she gets.*

*the rents around my area are so high and housing benefit so low people have got no other choice but the have no option but to go into council housing another thing is that pay around here is very low*

## **Changes to the Child Support Agency**

At the beginning of the forum some posters expressed a belief that it should be up to the parents to pay for their own children, so in the case of single mothers the fathers should pay to maintain them and their children. The Child Support Agency was discussed and reactions to changes by the Government to make parents pay to use the service were not well received by students on HeadsUp.

*I think that the government shouldn't charge single parents for help getting money of their child(ren)'s other parent. There may be many reasons as to why they cannot get the money. I cannot believe the government is suggesting charging for such a service, especially when at the times when it is needed – just after a divorce/split – the people are suffering emotionally. The government should be trying to help these people, not trying to make them suffer more than they are*

*I don't think single parents should get benefits from the government, but from the other parent of the child(ren). If they don't know the Father then fair enough, yet if they do he should pay half the cost. Maybe the Government can give them some money, but not enough that they could live off, so they have to work for money.*

*Yes, obviously the father should take responsibilities and financially support the single mother ... the government should not charge the poor mother for sorting things out with the child's father. If they are already struggling to pay for everything else, then how can they squeeze out some money to pay for the help they deserve?*

*Its wrong to charge as if people didn't need the money they wouldn't ask their ex partner for it*

## **Labelling 'Troubled Families'**

On the subject of 'troubled families' there was uncertainty over what the term meant but also concern over the effects of labelling people as 'troubled'.

*I don't think the government should label the so-called families as "troubled families" as it is offensive and inconsiderate. Something a bit more subtle like "households under domestic fatigue" would help, I think.*

*I think it is very offensive that the government can label families as troubled because the family may not do the same as everyone else but if the children are happy then that's all that matters.*

*...if a single mother or father loves her child or children and she is willing to get a job and make their family structure stronger than the family shouldnt be labelled as troubled.*

*I think that labelling a family "troubled" will have a massive effect on the children as if the word gets out by gossip or rumors they are bound to get bullied.*

*I don't think they should be called troubled families, because sometimes the family might have what other people see as a problem, but in their eyes it isn't, and they might be in the situation for a reason and they wanted it to happen*

## **Government help for 'Troubled Families'**

Following in a similar vein from the thoughts on benefits and labelling, the students thought that there should be help but that there should also be conditions. They generally supported the idea that the government should only help if there was a serious problem or if people ask for help, but there was agreement that help should be available if needed.

*...many people think that the governemtn should not inervene with 'troubled' families, with i think in some cases it is unnecessary also but if it is a problem such as living of benifits or drugs then, yes, the governement should help them.*

*Major things should be looked into for example if they are abusing the child but if it is just arguments they should not call it a troubled family*

*I think that the government should help in some cases...but if people got themselves into the mess, I think that the government should give them some pointers, but leave them to sort their own problems out*

*Families consist of people and our society consists of people! I think the government should absolutely help "troubled families" as they too are a part of society. If the government just neglected them, they are essentially neglecting society.*

However there were a few posters who didn't think that it was the Government's responsibility to help.

*I think it isn't the government's job to help 'troubled families' because it is not the government's family that needs help. Everyone is in charge of their own family and should help themselves. If they need more help, they should go to counselling.*

## **How important is money in making a happy family?**

While there seemed to be an implicit understanding that a certain amount of money (enough to be able to provide the basics such as food and clothes) was necessary, the debate focused on what was really important to make a family happy. The majority of students thought that lots of money wasn't that important.

*Money cannot buy love, respect or care and a happy family is not necessarily the riches...However, with more money, families can afford to go on holiday which makes everybody in the family happy*

*I think that you don't need money to have a stable and secure family, as long as you have enough money for the necessities, then all you need is love, care, commitment and patience*

*Also, it isn't true that the more money you have, the happier you are, because every family has issues.*

*Material objects can mean a lot to people but in the end all that you really need is each other. When your sad your parents can lend you a shoulder to cry on, but your ipad will just break if you drench it in tears*

A few of the students thought that being rich makes people spoilt and might make families less close than those that shared non-material benefits.

*MONEY IS JUST AN ITEM!!!!!! In the modern world money is brain washing people and they are forgetting the most important things like LOVE and a SENSE OF COMMUNITY...You need money to get food and other important things for survival but ipads and phones are a wanted item not a needed items!!!!*

*...money can go to peoples heads and they become 'obsessed' with money. This is not healthy.*

*...a child in a rich family will be given what they want, when they want. Richer children are spoilt rotten, so if their parents don't buy them the latest trends the child will be moody, proving the child only loves their parents because they buy them everything*

*Usually, too much money for a family makes the child spoilt, but children with enough money to live won't get spoilt.*

However a sizeable minority of students thought that money was important to people's chances in life and therefore affected the happiness and wellbeing of the families and children.

*I don't think that a family can be happy without money. A child's parents would need money for school uniform and school trips. They would also need money for car insurance, facilities in the home .etc.*

*I think that a bit of money can help families be happier, because it enables them not to be so stressed about having to stretch everything to make it last and go further. It also means that the family can have some luxuries, which is always nice.*

*...extra disposable money can come in handy. When children want to learn another instrument, another language or any other skill, arguments can be created, between the parents or between the whole family; it can cause problems.*

*In my opinion, families need some money to be happy. In the modern world there are lots of issues that can cause families stress and one of those is money. Having financial problems can lead to arguments about how the money is spent and means that basic things that people need sometimes cannot be supplied.*

*In my opinion money is something that is essential to you and the family...having money brings more happiness as you can afford anything you wish for and you won't need to worry about the future ahead of you and then you can enjoy more your family than just work all day to get a low wage.*

## **The Meaning of Poverty**

While discussing poverty a few of the students talked about what it really means to be poor. Within this subsection there was a general feeling that there is more to poverty than just being poor, things such as emotional poverty and time poverty also had an impact on children and families.

*I feel that the biggest problem is emotional poverty, when children get little or no care and attention from their parents. This, I think, is often where a child's chances go downhill.*

*I think poverty is a state of mind, and doesn't necessarily have very much to do with money...You can be rich and in a kind of poverty...or poor and perfectly content with your life*

*...as long as your family love, care and trust each other you shouldn't need to feel like your family is in poverty.*

*if you have money for your basic needs, eg, water or food you can live great and be happy, as long as you have a family*

## Political Context

Family issues were discussed by politicians and the media frequently during the period the forum was running. Policy announcements during this time included; David Cameron announcing measures to speed up the adoption process by penalising councils that did not place children quickly enough and Lynne Featherstone launching a consultation on gay marriage. Changes to universal child benefit were also announced in the Budget that took place in the last week of the forum. Other high-profile policy decisions in this area were related to the Welfare Reform Bill which became law on 8 March 2012. Changes this introduced, such as charging parents to use the Child Support Agency, were debated on HeadsUp.

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The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the decision-makers, young people and teachers who got involved in this debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings. Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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