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## About Families topic reports: Summary of gaps in research

**This report provides a summary of gaps in research across the four About Families evidence-to-action cycle topic reports.**

**This report contains:**

Section 1: common research gaps across topics ..... 2

Section 2: topic-specific research gaps ..... 3

**The topic reports are:**

- Topic 1 - Parenting Teenagers: relationships and behaviour
- Topic 2 – Together and Apart: supporting families through change
- Topic 3 – Parenting on a Low Income
- Topic 4 – Parenting and Support

Full topic reports can be downloaded at <http://aboutfamilies.org.uk/publications/>

**From 2010 – 2013, *About Families* worked with voluntary and public sector agencies to develop evidence-informed services so the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, can be met more effectively.**

*About Families* was a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), Capability Scotland and Parenting across Scotland, and funded by the National Lottery through the Big Lottery Fund.



## Section 1: common research gaps across topics

**Different types of families:** the circumstances and experiences of different family types, such as step-families, adoptive families, or kinship care arrangements are rarely distinguished or referred to in research with or about families.

**Gender:** most research relating to parenting and families focuses on mothers. However, research is often reported using the gender-neutral, and plural, term 'parents'. As this does not differentiate between genders, it can be difficult to gauge any differences between the needs and experiences of mothers, fathers or female / male carers.

### **Disability:**

- research with and about families generally does not include (or identify) families affected by disability
- research that does include families affected by disability tends to be about disability rather than other family circumstances, or how such circumstances combine with existing pressures associated with disability
- there is little research which views disabled parents as parents, rather than service users
- research tends to focus on children, rather than parents, with disabilities
- research tends to emphasise the difficulties associated with living with disabilities or long term conditions. While it is important to acknowledge and address these challenges, the prevalence of this view can give the impression that having a disabled child will inevitably lead to difficulties and family strain
- families affected by disability can be portrayed as an homogenous group
- there is very little research about the role or needs of extended family members who are supporting disabled parents.
- across the UK, there is incomplete statistical information about the numbers of disabled parents, and some that is available is unclear. However, Capability Scotland requests further analysis of national data, such as the Scottish Health Survey.

**Sexuality:** most research is based on traditional heterosexual two-parent families

**Ethnicity:** generally, research with and about families does not involve participants from ethnically diverse backgrounds, unless the research is specifically about a particular ethnic group. Furthermore, the diversity in ethnic families is generally not considered.

**Outcomes focus:** a focus on improving outcomes for children rather than parents tends to frame much research relating to families. Parenting support literature tends to relate to families considered to be 'at risk' (e.g. affected by substance abuse), and evaluations of social control interventions (e.g. reducing anti-social behaviour).

**Areas outwith the scope of reports:** it should be noted that a number of areas are outwith the scope of the About Families reports, including domestic violence or abuse, bereavement, kinship care arrangements, imprisonment and homelessness.

## Section 2: topic-specific research gaps

### Topic report 1 - Parenting Teenagers: relationships and behaviour

**Everyday issues:** a view of the teenage years as problematic is over-represented and there is less research and guidance aimed at ordinary parents and teenagers with everyday problems. Research tends to focus on reducing social problems, particularly around sexual behaviour, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol misuse and anti-social behaviour. However, the issues of most concern to parents who call helplines are about managing behaviour and getting on.

**Family experiences:** research around parenting mostly looks at the effects of parents' behaviour on teenagers' lives, with an emphasis on controlling and influencing rather than relationship building. There is much less research about what it is like to be the parent of a teenager, or what effect having teenage children has for parents. Similarly, there is little on teenagers' views and experiences of being parented.

**Communication:** studies looking at communication between parents and teenagers generally define 'communication' as directly talking about something. There is little research addressing the role of indirect verbal interactions (e.g. jokes), or non-verbal communication (e.g. laughter, silence), activities together or digital communication. (It should be noted that any recent research that may exist on technological communication such as social networking would not have been accessible at the time of compiling this report).

**Methodology:** most research is based on quantitative data collected via questionnaires. This method may not capture the richness and complexity of the issues, or the detailed perspectives of those involved in the research.

**Geography:** the majority of research relating to teenagers is carried out in the USA.

### Topic report 2 – Together and Apart: supporting families through change

**Disability:** research tends to focus on children, rather than parents, with disabilities and the difficulties associated with living with disabilities or long term conditions. This emphasises the strains and pressure having a disabled child puts on relationships and family life. Help for parents often aims to support them by providing help for the child. Recognising pressures and challenges for these families needs to be balanced with addressing social barriers and the capacity of families to manage well given the appropriate support.

**Parents with disabilities:** there is a lack of information on the relationships needs and experiences of parents with disabilities. Literature about families including children with disabilities tends to focus around preventing, rather than supporting, relationship breakdown. Family support is often seen as being delivered through short term breaks.

**Marriage and living together:** research does not consistently refer to marriage or cohabitation, separation or divorce, and sometimes uses such terms interchangeably. It is sometimes not clear whether 'couples' are partners, cohabiting or married.

**Forming new families:** research around re-partnering tends to explore likelihoods of forming new relationships given certain circumstances (e.g. gender, children, mental health, length of marriage, cohabitation etc.), rather than the challenges that people experiencing relationship change can face and how healthy relationships can be sustained.

**Gender:** generally, research only differentiates between parents' gender when exploring particular issues, such as financial circumstances following separation, child contact and non-resident parents, domestic abuse and childcare.

**Couples with or without children:** research about relationships is variable in how it refers to couples. It can therefore be difficult to differentiate between couples who do or do not have children unless the literature specifically states this.

**Other relationship factors:** in looking at research, it can be difficult to assess the precise contribution that couple relationship breakdown has on the reported impacts e.g. whether relationship breakdown contributes to alcohol use rather than vice versa. Also, it is not possible to rule out other influences such as behaviour, genetics, or personality.

### **Topic report 3 – Parenting on a Low Income**

**Impact on family life:** there are lots of statistics available on poverty, and much less qualitative research. Statistics can tell us who is most at risk of experiencing poverty and under what circumstances. However, we know much less about what life is like for people living on low incomes, how their experiences change over time, and how parents manage. Therefore, we know far less about the direct impact of poverty on people's everyday lives.

**Impact across the life-course:** we know relatively little about the changing experience of poverty for parents as children grow older, including as adult children, or indeed how low income affects children of different ages or as they grow up. For parents moving in and out of poverty, we know little about the impact of previous experiences of poverty and fear of future poverty.

**Separating the issues:** a range of factors relating to low income operate both independently and together. In addition, these factors interact with family characteristics and life events (such as gender, age, ethnicity, illness). It is difficult, therefore, to isolate the impact of issues relating to low income and parenting. Similarly, how low income affects parenting and the relationship between this and outcomes for children is difficult to understand because it is hard to separate the different factors involved.

**Children and poverty:** while there is a growing recognition of the need for research which specifically focuses on parents, and a call to include how children can impact on parents' behaviour in analyses of the relationship between poverty and parenting, much of the

research on parenting relates to child outcomes, with parents seen as providing a buffer between external factors such as poverty, social exclusion, neighbourhood and their children. There is not enough evidence to tell us how children's experiences of poverty might differ according to their age, gender, or whether they live in rural or urban areas.

**Different kinds of families:** further research is needed with children and families from specific groups to understand their experiences of poverty and how poverty interacts with other characteristics, including low-income working families; low-income fathers; families experiencing disability and poverty; ethnic minority families on low-incomes; and marginalised groups such as travellers and asylum seekers.

**Lone parents:** a lot of research with and about lone parents on low incomes is concerned with getting these parents back into the labour market, and improving child outcomes, rather than on parenting. Research about lone parents tends to be with and about lone mothers rather than lone fathers.

**Ethnic minorities:** although ethnic minority groups are increasingly included in studies as participants, the considerable diversity in ethnic families means this only partially aids our understanding of the ways in which poverty might impact on different minority families and the men, women and children within them, across all areas of their lives.

## **Topic report 4 – Parenting and Support**

**Research about formal support:** much of the existing research on engaging parents in formal services is from the perspective of service providers rather than those using services. Where research data relating to service users does exist, these studies typically assess rates of take up, completion and attrition, and see completing the intervention or support programme, rather than outcomes for parents and families and longer term benefits, as the benchmark of successful engagement. However, quantifiable indicators are not adequate measures of engagement since attending and completing programmes may not necessarily indicate meaningful involvement by parents.

Practitioners and researchers can sometimes assume that services are generally beneficial to all families who use them, although there may be limited evidence to support this assumption. Most studies use services' own definitions of parents' 'need' rather than explore how people seek help, and can make generalisations about the process of help-seeking rather than explore it directly.

Preventive services (for example, services that aim to promote quality of life and well-being, or prevent or delay the need for costly and intensive services) usually rely on parents actively seeking help or voluntarily accepting help offered to them. Evaluations of formal support which focus on people referred to parenting services by practitioners in other services (for example, GPs or maternity staff) are problematic due to under-reporting. There is little research with or about people who don't use services, in terms of their characteristics, their perspective on the barriers they face, or their attitudes towards participation in services and interventions. Nevertheless, the existing studies do provide valuable insight into the complexities of the issue of engagement.

The key reviews included in this report found a gap in research in that there were no studies which compared different methods of engagement or that could offer insights into the advantages or disadvantages of different approaches.

**Research about formal social support:** there have been relatively few sufficiently robust studies of enhancing social support for parents to be able to draw firm conclusions about what works. One difficulty is that outcomes are measured in different ways across studies.