Single parents equal families

Family policy for the next decade
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# Contents

Introduction 7

Chapter 1
Families in Britain come in all shapes and sizes; we should acknowledge and value their diversity 9

Chapter 2
Family policy should aim to ensure that all children can thrive 14

Chapter 3
The interests of children should come first 18

Chapter 4
Families should be treated equally and fairly 21

Chapter 5
Family work inside and outside the home, paid and unpaid, should be recognised 27

Chapter 6
Conclusion 32
Introduction

Families in the twenty-first century come in a range of shapes and sizes. Gingerbread is the charity working with single parents; a family type that grew between the 1970s and 1990s, and has stabilised at around one in four families since.

We’ve been working with single parents since 1918 when we were founded as the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child. Then as now, our key aim has been to ensure that children who grow up with single parents can thrive.

Making family policy work for children means making it work for the diverse range of families in Britain today. We know that children in single parent families will generally have lived previously in two parent families, and many will go on to live in step-families. Some live with mothers, some live with fathers. Some may live with their grandparents, some may be adopted, some may be disabled or have a disabled parent, and some may have same-sex parents.

This paper suggests a set of principles for making policy that works for families, but we want decisions on family policy to be based not just on these principles but on the best quality evidence available about what helps children do well. We set out here what we think the policies are that follow from these principles, with a particular focus on those for single parents. We will be asking politicians and policy makers to sign up to these principles to ensure that we take the needs of all families into account.

Our principles for family policy are:

- **Families in Britain come in all shapes and sizes. We should acknowledge and value family diversity.**
- **Family policy should aim to ensure that all children can thrive.**
- **The interests of children should come first.**
- **Families should be treated equally and fairly.**
- **Family work inside and outside the home, paid and unpaid should be recognised.**

Each of the following chapters talks about one of these principles, sets out the background and evidence in this area, and makes recommendations for what it would mean to apply this principle to policy.

Throughout the report we have used the voices of single parents to demonstrate the diversity of families in Britain today. The quotes used were answers by our members to the question ‘How do you differ from the single parent stereotype?’ They show that there is no such thing as a ‘typical single parent’ and the range of issues, challenges and successes that single parent families experience.
Chapter 1
Families in Britain come in all shapes and sizes; we should acknowledge and value their diversity

What does this mean?
Different family forms have always existed, as the formation of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child in 1918 recognised. Then, we were campaigning for better health for the children of unmarried mothers, and alternatives to the workhouse. Today in the UK, one in four families are headed by a single parent, and many other families are headed by step parents, co-habiting parents, non-parental carers and other non-traditional families. Gingerbread believes that the diversity of family life should be acknowledged and valued.

What’s the background?
In the UK, one in four families are now headed by a single parent, and single parents are bringing up over 3 million children.

Single parenthood as a family type increased rapidly during the late 1970s and 1980s, but since then has stabilised, with a less than one per cent increase in the proportion of households headed by a single parent in the last ten years.

HOUSEHOLDS HEADED BY COUPLES AND SINGLE PARENTS

"I was married for 17 years and had my children in a stable relationship. It was only when my husband became violent that I became single."
This trend for a larger proportion of families to be brought up by one parent living alone is not unique to Britain, but happened across the OECD, with the highest proportion of families headed by a single parent in the United States.

"Everyone's situation is unique; no two single parents are the same. I am in a low-paid job at the moment but will start a course later this year in order to get a better-paid job next year."

We don’t have a clear accepted version of the reasons for an increase in single parenthood. Factors often cited include changes in divorce law which have made divorce easier, a decline in religion, the increase in cohabitation, which can be a less stable form of partnership,1 the rise of working women,2 and an emphasis on individualism and personal fulfilment.3

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1 Haskey, J. (1999), ‘Cohabitation and marital histories of adults in Great Britain’, Population Trends 96, ONS
2 Layard, R. and Dunn, J. (2009), A Good Childhood, Penguin
3 Ibid
We do know however that most single parents did not expect to be bringing up their child alone. Half of single parents are either separated or divorced from marriage and nearly 5 per cent are widows. The majority of those who were not married were also living together and only around 7 per cent of births are registered only to the mother.4

The reasons why people do end up parenting alone vary widely. Some decide to separate because a relationship is not working, a decision few take lightly. Some single parents have faced additional pressures. The British Crime Survey found that nearly 15 per cent of single parents had experienced domestic violence from a former partner, and that single parents were over three times more likely to have experienced domestic violence than women in other types of household.5 A significant number of single parent families include at least one child with a disability (25 per cent compared to 20 per cent of couple families 6), reflecting the additional strain on relationships that having a disabled child can bring.

Disproportionate attention is paid to teenage parenthood as a route into parenting alone, painting an inaccurate picture of who single parents are. The median age for a single mother is 36, with less than one-quarter (24 per cent) of single mothers aged under 30 and just 13 per cent under 25. Only 2 per cent of single mothers are teenage mums (aged under 20).7 Levels of teenage pregnancy have fallen in the last ten years. Since 1998, there has been a 10.7 per cent reduction in under-18 conceptions and a 23.3 per cent decline in teenage births. In 2007, 41.7 per 1,000 girls aged under 18 conceived, with just over half of these conceptions leading to an abortion.8 The birth rate to women under 20 was at its highest in the early 1970s, when it stood at more than 50 births per 1,000 women.9

Misperceptions also abound about the factors linked to teenage pregnancy. The majority of teenage pregnancies are unplanned and there is no evidence that access to housing and benefits acts as an incentive to become pregnant.10 Teenage parents have no automatic entitlement to housing, and must prove they are homeless before being considered for housing support. Parents aged 16-17 cannot legally hold a tenancy and therefore will normally be placed in supported accommodation. Factors that are linked with teenage pregnancy include living in an area of high unemployment, and having a low family income at age 16,11 disengagement from school, living in care, engaging in ‘risky’ behaviours such as alcohol or substance misuse,12 poor contraceptive use and low self esteem.13 Successful strategies to tackle teenage pregnancy have targeted these factors, not sought to stigmatise young parents.

"I am not a single parent by choice. When my children's father left four years ago I was in a very good job. I gave that job up so I was available for my kids. I replaced that work with self-employment ..."

We do know however that most single parents did not expect to be bringing up their child alone. Half of single parents are either separated or divorced from marriage and nearly 5 per cent are widows. The majority of those who were not married were also living together and only around 7 per cent of births are registered only to the mother.4

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**ROUTES INTO SINGLE PARENTHOOD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married and separated</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.3% Ex-cohabitees and those who never lived with a partner</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following separation, the quality and nature of single parents’ relationships with their child’s other parent varies considerably. Gingerbread’s research into contact following separation found a wide range of models for how often children were seeing their non-resident parent. Approximately 12 per cent of respondents reported shared care, and most children, 71 per cent (according to the resident parent), had direct contact. However, 29 per cent of children have no contact and for two-thirds of these children, no contact has taken place since the separation of their parents.14

The diversity of single parenthood extends into their ethnicity, and to their family size, although single parents tend to have smaller families than couple parents (with an average of 1.6 children compared to 1.8).15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic background</th>
<th>Percentage of all single parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>87.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or Black British</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian British</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child was founded in 1918, one of its prime aims was to campaign against the Bastardy acts, which discriminated against ‘illegitimate’ children. Legislation and public opinion has come a long way since then and evidence suggests that most people now accept the diversity of family life. Recent work by the polling organisation MORI for Policy Exchange found that:

“Public attitudes towards the family have changed to reflect the changes in society. Different forms of family are increasingly accepted as equivalent to the traditional family ...The public have a strong sense that there are many different kinds of families these days, and that the term ‘family’ no longer fits with traditional perceptions of a married couple with children”.16

Yet despite changing public attitudes, single parents tell us that they still feel stereotyped and stigmatised. When we surveyed over 800 of Gingerbread’s members in December 2008, 89 per cent of them told us that they felt that the media presented single parents in a negative light,17 portraying them as ‘scroungers’, ‘bad mothers’, or a combination of the two. Single parents’ perceptions that they are stereotyped are backed up by research. Populus polled a random sample of 1,050 adults in spring 2008 and found that members of the public significantly over-estimated the proportion of single parents who are teenage, never married or out of work.

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14 Joan Hunt and Vicki Peacey (2009) I’m not saying it was easy: contact problems in separated families Gingerbread


16 Jenkins, S., Pereira, I. and Evans, N. (2009), Families in Britain: The impact of changing family structures and what the public think, IPSOS MORI/Policy Exchange

17 Gingerbread (2009), Standing up for single parents against poverty and prejudice available at www.gingerbread.org.uk
On average members of the public estimated the proportion of single parents who are teenagers as 15 times higher than the actual figure. Fifty-five per cent of single parents have been married; when the public were asked to guess the average answer was 39 per cent. Fifty-seven per cent of single parents are in paid employment; when the public were asked to guess the average answer was 41 per cent.18

These damaging and inaccurate stereotypes erode single parents’ confidence and self esteem and that of their children, as well as forming a poor basis for policy making.

What does this mean for policy?

Policy makers and politicians must recognise that families in Britain are diverse, and that diversity exists within as well as between family types. This means:

- **Family policy must consider the needs of single parent families.**
  Single parenthood is now a fact of life in Britain and across the OECD. Policy makers must recognise that around a quarter of children are growing up in single parent families, a proportion that has remained the same for around 20 years. Most single parents did not expect to be bringing up children alone, and no two parents are doing so for exactly the same reasons. Policy needs to avoid ‘one size fits all’ approaches that work for only one type of family.

- **Don’t stigmatise families.**
  Policy makers should commit not to use language that stigmatises or stereotypes particular family types. Many families are already under pressure to find or keep a job, to cope financially and to have quality time with their children. A feeling that policy makers do not understand their concerns, or that society sees them as ‘bad’ parents can knock single parents’ confidence and self esteem, create feelings of exclusion and may prevent them from accessing services. While Gingerbread’s concern is with single parent families, the same principle applies to other ‘non-traditional families’ such as step-families or those headed by a grandparent.
Chapter 2
Family policy should aim to ensure that all children can thrive

What does this mean?

The main reason people care about family policy is because the type of family environment that children grow up in has a significant influence on how they get on later in life, as well as how much they can enjoy their childhood. Policy should therefore focus on the aspects of family life where there is strong evidence of an impact on children’s outcomes, rather than on promoting one type of family.

What’s the background?

Recent debates about family policy have focused on which type of family is best for children to grow up in, with a particular focus on single parent families. Most children brought up by a single parent grow up to do well and we increasingly know that the factors that matter to how children get on are far more complex than family type. Good parenting, good quality relationships and an absence of poverty are more important to families than whether two parents live together or not, and most single parents aspire to provide their children with these.

Discussions about the impact on children of growing up with one parent often look at associations between single parenthood and poorer outcomes for children. Studies have shown that the children of separated parents have a greater risk of experiencing behavioural problems, performing less well in school, leaving school early, becoming a young parent, and having higher levels of depression, alcohol and drug misuse.

However, the research does not show that these outcomes are caused by single parenthood, and recent studies show that no simple link can be made between growing up with a single parent and the risk of a child doing badly. A major review of the evidence for the OECD published in Summer 2009 concluded that “the more sophisticated [research] methodologies typically give a null or lower effect on the child outcomes of being brought up by a single parent” and that “if there is a causal effect on child well-being of being brought up in a single-parent family, it is likely to be small.”

It is also increasingly clear that the proportion of families headed by a single parent can’t be used to explain differences between countries or between different time periods in how children get on. A study looking at the well-being of children across different countries using data from 2006 found that levels of well-being were not linked to levels of single parenthood within a particular country. A review of literature looking at behavioural problems amongst children in the UK over time found that these types of problems had risen amongst all family types and

"I’m a single father who’s trying his best with what little money I do have. I work full time supporting my disabled child."
"I have been trying to get back into full-time work for a year now with no luck ... I want to work but my age and the fact that I have been out of work for a while counts against me."

could not be associated with an increase in the number of single parent families. Therefore, suggestions that a decrease in the number of single parents would lead to an increase in well-being for children are not supported by the evidence.

What does then make a difference to families? The evidence increasingly suggests that what matters for children is what goes on inside a family, not what shape that family takes. As a recent research paper prepared for the Department for Children Schools and Families states: "It is clear from the evidence that how the family functions, rather than family type, is more relevant to understanding the impacts associated with family breakdown."

Many people assume that children in single parent families may suffer from a simple lack of parents; aren’t two parents better than one? It’s worth noting that the research we have suggests that this is not the case, and that ‘parental absence’ is not a major factor in explaining how children get on. Children brought up by a widowed parent generally do not have poorer outcomes than those in other families, whereas those brought up in step-families experience very similar outcomes to those brought up with a single parent.

Instead, the research suggests that there may be (at least) three main factors linked to single parenthood that explain the poorer outcomes for some children who grow up with one parent. These are conflict, poverty and mental health. We know quite a lot about how conflict and poverty impact on children, and we discuss this below. We know less about mental health, but this seems to be an increasingly important factor in explaining outcomes for children. Some research suggests that the mental health of mothers can be one of the most important factors in determining how children get on, finding that: "the mental health status of the mother is more predictive of child outcomes than family structure." Gingerbread will be beginning a research project on single parents and mental health in 2010.

Conflict

Experiencing parental conflict is bad for children. Seeing their parents argue, whether this is before, during or after separation is stressful for children, who, research studies have shown, may become anxious, aggressive or withdrawn. This can have long-term consequences, whether parents stay together or separate. Recent research from Cornell University found that outcomes for children in high conflict families where parents stay together are no better overall than those for children in single parent families. The researchers conclude that: “marriage is not a blanket prescription for the well-being of children, any more than it is for the well-being of adults.”

Of course, the best outcome is that families are helped to avoid reaching a stage where conflict is affecting children but for children in high conflict families the best outcome can be that their parents separate, if this reduces the conflict between them.

There is such a thing as a ‘good separation’ and research suggests that children whose parents separate amicably do better. The Kids in the Middle campaign, of which Gingerbread is a founder member, has therefore been calling for more support for parents going through separation to help them avoid conflict and more resources to help children in this situation to cope.

After families have separated, good quality contact with the parent not living with the child is good for children, and can help to protect them against problems. However, it is important to note that it is not the quantity of contact that a child has with their non-resident parent that is...
Important, but the nature and quality of parenting they receive while they are with that parent.\textsuperscript{36} It is also vital that contact is safe for both the child and the resident parent.

Poverty

We know that poverty is bad for children. Extensive research suggests that poverty both damages children’s experience of childhood and impacts on their future prospects. Although poor outcomes are not inevitable for poor children, according to a recent research report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, children who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience health problems, more likely to leave school early and about six times more likely to leave without qualifications and more likely to experience unemployment and low-skilled jobs when they are adults (even when education is taken into account).\textsuperscript{37}

Over half of children living with a single parent in Britain are currently poor.\textsuperscript{38} There is no automatic link between single parenthood and child poverty: Unicef’s 2007 assessment of child well-being found that Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark, occupying the four top places in terms of material well-being of children, are four of the six countries in this dataset with the highest number of children brought up by a single parent.\textsuperscript{39} Specific circumstances and policy failures mean that single parents in this country face a particularly high risk of poverty:

- Single parents continue to receive low rates of child maintenance. In 2007 (the latest available figures) only 40 per cent of single parents were receiving any maintenance at all.

- Combining paid work and care for children remains difficult due to the high costs of childcare, and difficulty of finding part-time work. These factors also contribute to poverty rates amongst couple families, particularly those in which a second earner is not able to find employment.

- Gender and unequal pay play a major role in explaining why single parents are poor: nine out of single parents are women. Women see an income drop of on average 12 per cent following separation, while men see their income increase by 31 per cent.\textsuperscript{40} The median gross weekly pay for male single parents is £346, while for female single parents it is £194.\textsuperscript{41}

Although economic factors cannot explain all of the differences in outcomes for children brought up in single parent families, they clearly play a major role.\textsuperscript{42}

What does this mean for policy?

What happens in families is more important than what family type they are. This means that policy should try to reduce family conflict and tackle family poverty, rather than trying to reduce the number of single parents.

"I am an independent mother, who is intelligent and ambitious. This is not always portrayed as single parents are usually seen as uneducated."
Reducing family conflict, before, during and after separation

- **Provide access to non-judgemental services to help families manage separation.**
  We know that how parents separate can have a major impact on outcomes for children. In addition to advice on how to minimise conflict, parents experiencing separation will also be seeking advice on child support, benefit entitlement, and in some cases legal advice, so services must be holistic.

- **Services for families in conflict need to reach beyond the family courts.**
  Only 15 per cent of (resident) parents separating used either the courts or legal advice to come to a decision about contact arrangements. Services aimed at helping families manage conflict and put their children’s interests first need to be available to all, for example by making use of Children’s Centres and schools.

- **Provide ongoing support to help families manage contact arrangements.**
  Recent research from Gingerbread found that around 29 per cent of children in separated families were not seeing their non-resident parent and most of these had had no contact since their parents separated. Whilst contact was happening for the remaining 70 per cent of children, the majority of their parents – both resident and non-resident parents – admitted they had struggled at times with problems which had the potential to affect or disrupt contact for the child. Parents told us they needed more support and advice to help them manage post-separation parenting. Advice can play a crucial role in helping parents to see each others’ perspective and focus on their child.

Tackling poverty

- **Committing to the targets to halve child poverty by 2010 and end it by 2020 must be a key part of family policy.**
  Measures to tackle child poverty have some of the greatest potential to improve children’s outcomes. Poverty is not just about money, but the stress, stigma and strain that can come from living on a low income, in a poor area, or without sufficient support but money makes a lot of difference: while a one-third drop in family income reduces attainment in childhood by 6 to 7 per cent, evidence suggests that children’s behaviour, happiness and educational attainment all improve as incomes rise. A key priority must be to invest more in benefits and tax credits to reach the poorest families.

- **Child maintenance is a key lever for lifting families out of poverty and a demonstration of the principle that parenting continues post separation. The statutory maintenance system must work.**
  In 2007 (the latest available figures) only 40 per cent of single parents were receiving any maintenance at all, whether through the Child Support Agency or a private arrangement. Only 68 per cent of those who have asked the CSA to assess their case are being paid. A new system to deliver maintenance – the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission – has been put in place with parents able to choose whether to use this body or make a private arrangement. Making sure that the new body promotes a culture of payment and enforces maintenance payments effectively must be a priority.

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"I never wanted to be a single parent! Unfortunately that’s what happened and although we are a single parent family we should not be judged for that."
Chapter 3
The interests of children should come first

What does this mean?

The 1989 Children’s Act, introduced by the last Conservative government, set out the principle that ‘the welfare of the child is paramount’. This means that when a court makes decisions that impact on a family’s lives, the interest of children should be put first. We think this principle is important.

What’s the background?

Although we know that most parents want to do the best for their children, there are occasions on which the interests of parents and children may be in conflict. Although it may seem obvious to many, the Children’s Act set out for the first time clearly the principle that ‘the welfare of the child is paramount’. The Act applies across many areas of policy, including child protection, but it has been particularly important in the operation of the family courts, implying that where decisions are taken in which the interests of parents and children may be opposed, those of the child must come first.

We often think that parents and children share the same interests but unfortunately we cannot always assume that parents know what their children want or need. Our research into parental contact with children after separation interviewed parents and children in the same families. We often found that parents and children’s accounts of their situation were quite different, with parents mentioning concerns that were not shared by children, and children talking about problems that their parents were not aware of. Listening to children must be an important aspect of any policies aimed at reducing family conflict and improving family functioning.

In the context of single parents and family policy, the principle that the welfare of the child must come first is most often called upon when making decisions in the courts about where children whose parents have separated should live, or how much time they should spend with each parent.

Families who access the courts are a small part of the total number of families who separate, although how they are treated often dominates the debate about families and the law. Only 15 per cent of parents living apart in the UK have used either the courts or legal advice to make decisions about contact. Those families who do go to court are, naturally, those who are most in conflict, and have been unable to resolve their disputes. One study found that when parents who were in court were asked to identify which out of 14 potential problems they had experienced, the average was seven, with little difference between mothers and fathers. This means that decisions taken in the family courts have a high probability of being contentious and contested.
While the principle that the welfare of the child should come first may seem uncontroversial, other jurisdictions have made decisions to give a high priority to parental rights. In Australia, family courts must now apply a presumption that it is in the best interests of the child for the child’s parents to share responsibility for parenting (except in cases where domestic abuse or family violence is an issue). Some groups have called for a similar presumption to be introduced into British law.  

As we discuss above, we know that a good relationship with their non-resident parent is good for the child’s outcomes. Putting the welfare of the child first is likely to mean in the vast majority of cases, encouraging greater involvement of non-resident parents in their children’s lives, a stance that the family courts have promoted actively. While concerns have been raised by some fathers’ groups that the courts do not treat contact applications fairly, research published by the Ministry of Justice concluded that although there are a few cases where non-resident parents had been treated unfairly, “the courts start from the position that contact is generally in the interests of the child, they make great efforts to achieve this, and in the most part they are successful”.  

Most single parents want their child’s other parent involved in their lives, and want more help and support to make that happen but we do not believe that more co-operative parenting relationships are likely to be achieved by a legal presumption of shared parenting, or by moving away from the principle that the child’s interests must come first.

Evidence from Australia around the operation of the new legislation promoting shared parenting already suggests some concerns about the presumption that this is always in the best interests of children, finding that these arrangements are more conflictual and more likely to break down. Research examining a sample of ‘high conflict’ families found that four years after an arrangement had been made, children in shared-care situations were much more likely to have seen a change in their living arrangements (44 per cent of these children had had a change in contact arrangements) than those living in a ‘primary parent’ arrangement. Moreover, children in shared care arrangements reported high levels of inter-parental conflict compared to those where one parent was the primary carer. Of course, this does not suggest that shared or equal care arrangements cannot be a positive outcome for many children, particularly those in low conflict families but it does lead to caution over assuming that any one type of contact arrangement is in children’s interests, or building into legislation the ‘presumption’ that such arrangements would be in the interests of the child.

It is important that any decisions about what is in the best interests of children take domestic violence and other safety concerns seriously. We know that witnessing (or experiencing) violence has strong negative impacts on children. Ensuring that the interests of the child are paramount means putting in place strong protections against this possibility.

Other safety concerns must also be taken seriously when making decisions or arrangements about contact. Gingerbread’s research found that even in families where contact was taking place with a non-resident parent, 10 per cent of resident parents had serious safety concerns, including drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, and mental illness.
"I am a working single parent and even though I don't earn huge amounts as I currently work four days I pay for childcare and feel that I am adding value and contributing to my local community and my local economy."

What does this mean for policy?

Decisions around family policy, and particularly around the law as it relates to children and parents, should prioritise the interests of the child. This means:

- Children should have their voices heard in decisions that affect them, whether these are taken in or outside of court.

- Normally the involvement of both parents should be encouraged by courts and other family services.

- Family courts should make decisions about the best interests of the child on a case by case basis; there should be no presumption that one form of contact is in the best interests of children.

- Policies aiming to improve relationships between parents and children (or parents and parents) must take the risk of violence seriously. This means that, as a start, impact assessments for new legislation should include an assessment of the possible impact on women and children who have experienced violence. Safety concerns must also be addressed and more support is needed for supervised contact centres to allow continuing relationships between a parent and child in a safe environment.
Chapter 4
Families should be treated equally and fairly

What does this mean?
We want families to be treated with equal respect, and to feel that they are being treated fairly. We also want them to have access to services and support, including financial support, on the basis of need.

What’s the background?
No two families are the same, and no two families have exactly the same needs but fair and equal treatment for families means making sure that it is family need that determines what they are entitled to, not factors such as where the family lives, or what type of family they are.

This applies across all the main services for families, including health and education. Here we focus, however, on three types of family support which engender debate about how best to target this: early years support, financial support and the provision of advice.

Support in the early years
Parents now have access to nine months paid maternity leave, with a portion of this shortly to be made transferable to fathers. Parents also have access to 15 hours a week of free childcare and early education when their children are aged three and four, with pilots currently running to expand this to two year olds.

We know that the early years are particularly important for child development and that access to high quality pre-school education can give children significant advantages when they start school. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education research project found that pre-school provision enhanced overall child development, with particular advantages for disadvantaged children.

Universal access to such services is vital to secure equal and fair treatment for all families, and the OECD’s ‘Starting Strong’ report on international experiences of pre-school education explicitly recommends universal access to such provision. Sufficient financial support for maternity and paternity leave is also vital to ensure that all families have the ability to spend time with a new baby. Current debates about the proportion of leave that should be allocated to mothers and fathers need to also ensure that the small proportion of babies who are born to a single parent receive equal parenting time.

"I have no support from my family, so I am isolated (I'm a widow). Some single parents have support from ex-partners and families so they aren't really alone."
At present, there is a substantial policy gap around support for families when children are aged between nine months and two years – before entitlement to free early education is planned to begin. Access to time off to look after a child during this period is thus clearly dependent on income, rather than family need. One way to begin to address this would be to convert the existing 13 weeks of unpaid parental leave that are available to families with children under five into leave paid at the rate of maternity and paternity pay.

Financial support

Financial support for different family types has been one of the most contentious areas of recent debate about family policy. Several reports have suggested that there is a ‘couple penalty’ which they say penalises parents who live together compared to single parents.59

Gingerbread is clear that we do not want to see single parents given ‘special treatment’ or additional financial support on the basis of single parenthood. We do want to see financial support based primarily on family need.

At present, the system of financial support for families is complex, and single parents and couples are treated differently by different parts of the benefits system. It is important to note that single parents do not receive ‘more’ than couples, as can be seen in the table on page 23. Different parts of the benefit system make different assumptions about whether couples need more financial support than single parents. Out of work benefits, that is Income Support or Jobseeker’s Allowance, pay a higher amount overall (though lower amount per person) to parents living together as a couple than to single parents: £100.95 compared to £64.30. Parents living together also get a higher rate of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit than single parents. Working Tax Credit on the other hand, paid to those who are working for more than 16 hours a week, makes no differentiation between single parents and couples with children.

Assessing whether financial support to families is fair depends on whether a family with two adults living together have greater expenditure and therefore a greater need for financial support to escape poverty. We might imagine that some costs, for example food, will increase when two people live together, but many, such as heating, or a TV license, are shared.

Government currently makes different assumptions about these costs in different contexts. When it measures poverty, it assumes that two-parent households need more money than single parent households. It uses an ‘equivalence scale’ to work out how much different family types need to be above the poverty line. The current equivalence scale used by the Government for the official poverty figures (known as the modified OECD scale) suggests that single parents have a need for an income that is worth 74 per cent of what a couple family requires. The poverty line for a working age couple with two children aged five and 14 is £322 – that for a single parent with children the same age is £239.60. Using this scale suggests that single parents currently receive a rate of out of work benefits that is too low in relation to couples; Jobseeker’s Allowance and Income Support currently pay a single parent 64 per cent of what a couple family receives. It also suggests that the rates of Working Tax Credit, where single parents receive 100 per cent of the couple rate, are too high.

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"I have managed to get a law degree but have been discriminated against since becoming a single parent, and find the perceived image of single parent families to be wholly wrong."
"My partner left after we had been together for 12 years. I worked very hard to reconcile but he was not open to this. My son has the same opportunities as other children whose parents live together."

MAXIMUM LEVELS OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT AVAILABLE
APRIL 2009 – APRIL 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of financial support</th>
<th>Single adult, no children</th>
<th>Single parent aged over 18 with one child – maximum weekly entitlement</th>
<th>Couple both aged over 18 with one child – maximum weekly entitlement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Benefit</td>
<td>£ 0</td>
<td>£ 20</td>
<td>£ 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Support</td>
<td>£ 64.30</td>
<td>£ 64.30</td>
<td>£ 100.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobseeker’s Allowance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the amounts are the same for child benefit)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Benefit</td>
<td>£ 64.30</td>
<td>£ 64.30</td>
<td>£ 100.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council Tax Benefit</td>
<td>£ 64.30</td>
<td>£ 64.30</td>
<td>£ 100.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Tax Credit –</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basic element</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(families with children must be working 16 or more hours a week, single adults need to work for 30 hours)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Tax Credit –</td>
<td>£ 36.35 *</td>
<td>£ 36.35</td>
<td>£ 36.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single parent or couple</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>element</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Tax Credit –</td>
<td>£ 0</td>
<td>£ 35.77</td>
<td>£ 35.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 hour element</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(must be working 30 or more hours per week)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Tax Credit –</td>
<td>£ 14.90</td>
<td>£ 14.90</td>
<td>£ 14.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help with childcare costs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(for one child)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Tax Credit –</td>
<td>£ 0</td>
<td>£ 140</td>
<td>£ 140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Element</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Tax Credit –</td>
<td>£ 0</td>
<td>£ 10.48</td>
<td>£ 10.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Element</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Tax Credit –</td>
<td>£ 0</td>
<td>£ 42.98</td>
<td>£ 42.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The equivalence scale is an OECD measure, and the British government uses it to be able to more easily compare poverty rates internationally. However, that does not mean that it is necessarily a good reflection of the different needs of single parents and couples in the UK. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation therefore set out to produce a new equivalence scale based on the real needs of families, as part of a project on minimum incomes. The research used discussion groups with the public, informed by expert opinion, to arrive at an acceptable level of minimum income for different family types. This concluded that a single parent family with two children required 80 per cent of the financial support given to a couple family with two children to achieve a decent minimum income. Again, this would suggest that rates of out-of-work benefits for single parents are too low, and in-work benefits are too high if measured on this basis.61

Other research has suggested that there may be savings from living together which offset the additional costs. Research by Richard Berthoud found that “couples report slightly lower deprivation scores (on a given income) than single people or lone parents – it might have been expected that the extra person might add to a family’s costs, but there appears to be some benefit associated with being a couple that more than compensates for this in terms of deprivation.”62 That is, when assessing how well single parent and two parent families were coping on the same (unequivalised) income, couple parent families were doing better.

Financial support may reflect policy aims other than tackling hardship. The support for working single parents through Working Tax Credit (and its predecessor Working Families Tax Credit) has been an extremely effective means of enabling many more single parents to move into paid employment.63

Gingerbread believes that levels of financial support should be primarily based on need. At present there is competing evidence on what levels of need between different family types are, and this evidence needs to be assessed carefully. However, rather than debating this evidence, much recent discussion has focused on whether the system of financial support should be used to encourage people to live together. We think, in line with our first principle, that the financial system should not be used to favour one type of family over another.

Even if policy aimed to do this, it is difficult to achieve a situation where the total amount of state support received is not reduced when two people cohabit. Although there is no additional financial support for single parents than couples, if two people who live on benefits decide to move in together the total amount of income received from the state will decline. Looking at the table above, it is clear that in place of receiving two individual entitlements of £64.30 (and the same amount in Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit), they will receive a couple entitlement of £100.95. While couple penalties of this type may be reduced, the alternative to having any type of ‘couple penalty’ is to individualise benefit entitlements so that each adult is assessed separately.

This would mean that a couple living together would be entitled to double the amount of support as a single person. This may be desirable and would provide greater financial independence within families, but it is likely to be expensive. It would mean, for example, that the husband of a millionaire with no income of his own would be entitled to the same level of state support as an unemployed single man, and would widen eligibility for benefits to a far greater group than is entitled at present.


62 Berthoud, R., Bryan, M. and Bardasi, E. (2004), The dynamics of deprivation; the relationship between income and material deprivation over time, DWP Research Report, No. 219


"I work hard within my house as my daughter is disabled – she cannot go to school as she isn’t well enough and so I cannot go out to work but that doesn’t mean I am lazy or grasping."
Whatever the intentions of the system of financial support, there is little evidence that people in fact make decisions on whether to live together on this basis. A recent review of international evidence found that: “on balance, the reviewed literature shows that there is no consistent and robust evidence to support claims that the welfare system has a significant impact upon family structure.” Policies to promote one type of family over another using financial incentives are therefore likely to be ineffective and costly. Given the need for Government to allocate its resources carefully, particularly with current pressure on public finances we believe that the best basis for doing so is family need and to alleviate poverty, a goal to which there is commitment across the political spectrum.

Advice provision

Access to advice on financial support, employment law, housing, consumer rights, financial advice and other legal issues is not always something that is seen as part of the spectrum of ‘public services’. Yet this advice is often vital to enabling families to overcome problems and function effectively, and Government currently supports this through a range of channels, including the legal help budget, through supporting Citizens Advice Bureaux, and through more recent initiatives such as the Parent Know How scheme, providing tailored and independent advice to parents.

Such services, including the Single Parent Helpline run by Gingerbread, can provide advice on a range of issues, from family law to debt, child maintenance to housing, and make a significant difference to families’ ability to deal with problems and crises. Independent evaluation of the helplines funded by the Parent Know How strand of the DCSF for example, found that over 60 per cent of parents who called the service felt better informed, and there were also gains in terms of confidence and reducing stress.

It is vital that access to advice is based on need rather than the ability to pay for it or location. Such advice is particularly important to single parent families, who face greater advice needs than other family types. The Legal Services Commission researched the incidence of ‘civil justice’ problems in England and Wales in 2007 across 18 categories, including problems with debt, consumer issues, housing, discrimination, welfare benefits, and neighbours. They found that they were the family type by far most likely to report problems, with 67 per cent of single parents reporting a civil justice problem in 2007, compared to an average of 36 per cent of the population.

Research by Gingerbread found that 63 per cent of single parents had had to deal with a benefits problem in the last year, 53 per cent with a problem related to contact and 48 per cent with a problem related to debt. Around half of these problems had lasted for over a year. The research also found that many single parents were struggling to access the advice they needed: 41 per cent had wanted face-to-face advice and been unable to find it, 32 per cent had not been able to find telephone advice, and 12 per cent had not been able to find any advice at all. These problems can be cumulative; if one problem such as debt goes unresolved it can lead on to other problems, for example with paying rent or council tax.

The Legal Services Commission research found that the impact of experiencing civil justice problems included physical ill health, loss of confidence and loss of income. Around half of respondents to the survey had managed to obtain advice, but those who were least likely to resolve an issue, were those who had tried and failed to get advice. Given their high incidence
of problems, lack of advice is likely to have a disproportionate impact on single parent families. When considering funding such services, Government must take account of their impact on the most vulnerable.

**What does this mean for policy?**

We want families to be treated equally and fairly across services and financial support. This means ensuring that all families have access to services that meet their needs. In the three areas of early years support, financial support, and advice provision that we have focused on this means:

- **Provide early years support on a universal basis.**
  Research suggests that the best way to ensure that all children benefit from early years support is to provide it on a universal basis. Early years support now needs to extend to families with children aged between one and two. One step towards this would be to pay the existing 13 weeks of unpaid parental leave at the rate of maternity pay.

- **Provide financial support based on need.**
  Financial support to families should be based on their individual needs. At present, there is dispute about whether two parents living together need more financial support than a single parent to lift them out of poverty. Any decisions about benefit levels for different family types need to be based on clear evidence about differential need.

- **Access to independent advice for parents can help resolve problems and crises, and prevent them from escalating.**
  All types of families may at times need access to advice, but it is particularly important to single parents.

"I believe my family is whole, healthy and positive and my children value themselves and do well in school because I broke free of a destructive relationship."
Chapter 5

Family work inside and outside the home, paid and unpaid, should be recognised

What does this mean?

Most families are working outside the home on a paid basis, as well as caring for their own children, and sometimes for other relatives too. At present, the care work that families do inside the home receives insufficient recognition. Single parents tell us that they feel criticised as bad parents if they go out to work and criticised as bad citizens if they do not. We need to recognise both paid and unpaid work, and make it easier for families to combine the two.

What’s the background?

Much policy directed towards single parents in the last ten years has aimed at increasing their employment rate, with the Government setting a target to have 70 per cent of single parents in work by 2010. Moving from a voluntary, (and highly successful) approach with the introduction of the New Deal for Lone Parents in 1998, Government has recently attached increasingly strict work search conditions to the receipt of out-of-work benefits. From 2010, all single parents with a youngest child aged seven or over will have to claim Jobseeker’s Allowance and ‘actively seek work’ if they wish to receive financial support. The Welfare Reform Bill, which gained royal assent in November 2009, also allows Government to pilot asking single parents with children aged between three and seven to take part in ‘work related activity’. These provisions can also be applied to ‘partners’ in couple families where both parents are out of work, meaning that both parents will need to be either looking or preparing for work.

Many more families do now combine paid work with caring for children and this is particularly true for single parents. Between 1994 and 2004 the proportion of families where two (cohabiting) parents worked rose by eight percentage points to 68 per cent, and since 1997 the proportion of single parents in employment rose, faster than any other comparable group, by 12 percentage points to 54 per cent in 2004. It now stands at 57 per cent.

Paid work represents one of the most secure routes out of poverty for parents, although it is not a certain one (see table below). Nine out of ten single parents say that they would prefer to be in paid work than not, although not necessarily immediately, and parents who have chosen to take part in paid work cite improved confidence and self esteem as benefits of employment. Gingerbread’s recent qualitative research with non-working parents of children aged twelve and over, found that these parents could see many positive benefits in having a paid job, but also faced complex issues which meant achieving this could be difficult. These included children experiencing problems at school, children with conditions such as Aspeger’s or ADHD, and children with additional support needs due to previous experience of domestic violence.
"I was made a single parent due to divorce. I work part time. Working Tax Credits are a great help. My children are both doing well at school."

### CHILDREN’S POVERTY RATES BY WORKING STATUS OF PARENT(S)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental working status</th>
<th>Children’s poverty rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single parent working full time</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent working part time</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent not in paid work</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple parents self employed</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple parents both working full time</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple parents, one in full-time work, one in part time work</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple parents, one in full-time work, one not working</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple parents, one or more in part-time work</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple parents, neither working</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All families face dilemmas in balancing paid work with caring for children. Single parents tell us that these issues are particularly acute for them, partly because they are parenting alone, but also because popular stereotypes often paint single parents either as ‘scroungers’ who are unwilling to work, or ‘bad parents’ whose paid work means that they are unable to properly supervise their children. Parents tell us that they want jobs that allow them to spend quality time with their children, and fulfill their parenting role. Significant barriers remain to achieving this, and we discuss these below.

**Work doesn’t always pay**

Having a paid job clearly reduces the risk of poverty for both couple and single parent families. But it does not guarantee an escape from low income. As the table above shows, a third of single parents working part time still face poverty, as do nearly the same proportion of couple families where one parent works full time and one part time.

Substantial steps have been taken to reduce the risk of poverty for working single parents, including Working Tax Credit and the temporary In Work Credit. However, the cost of childcare, travel costs, the additional costs of meals at work, and the loss of benefits received when out of employment, including free school meals and Housing Benefit, means that the gains from paid work can be minimal for some single parents. As research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has pointed out, the number of children facing ‘in work poverty’ has remained unchanged since 1997.
Jobs at flexible hours remain hard to come by

When asked what the main barrier to getting a paid job is, single parents consistently cite a lack of jobs at flexible hours. Research by Jane Millar and Tess Ridge also found that children wanted their mothers to be working part time. Although they appreciated the additional money coming into the household when their mothers worked, they also expressed concerns about the loss of family time and preferred their mothers to be working in a part-time role during school hours.

Although parents with children aged up to 16 can now ask their employers for a change in their working pattern, this is only possible after six months of employment, and employers can refuse for business reasons. There is also some evidence that parents in low paying jobs have less access to ‘work-life balance’ policies.

Despite progress, available affordable childcare is too often not available

Childcare provision has improved but 69 per cent of Family Information Services (FIS) in England and Wales said that parents had reported a lack of childcare in their area in the last 12 months. The cost of childcare can also absorb much of the financial gains from working. The childcare element of Working Tax Credit up to 80 per cent of childcare costs up to a maximum of £175 a week for one child or £300 for two or more children. For families with young children or with more than two children, these may not cover the full costs of childcare: the average weekly cost of a nursery place for a child under two in England is £167, for a child over two or for a childminder it is £156 and for an out of school club it is £40 a week.

If childcare is particularly expensive for young families, it is particularly scarce for older children. Fifty-six per cent of Family Information Services report that there is insufficient childcare for children aged over 12, compared to 27 per cent for under fives, and 36 per cent for five to eleven year olds. Our research with parents with older children also identified this as a problem and suggested a significant need for services for children before and after school and in the school holidays. Such services may work better if they are not labelled as ‘childcare’, a term that parents and teenagers may reject. Services need to be responsive both to teenagers and parents needs; safe and interesting, but also flexible and affordable.

Single parents don’t have real choices about whether and how many hours to work

Increased work search conditions on the receipt of income-related benefits have limited the extent to which single parents can make choices about how best to combine work and family life. Recent reforms, such as the right for parents with children aged under 12 to restrict their work search to jobs in school hours have shown some recognition of parents’ childcare needs but the state has effectively stated that paid work must take priority for single, and increasingly couple parents.
Not only does the benefit system increasingly restrict choice about whether to work, it also limits the extent to which parents can choose hours to fit in with their childcare responsibilities. No financial support is available via the tax credit system for parents working less than 16 hours, and parents on benefits can only earn up to £20 before a pound for pound reduction in benefits becomes applicable.

What does this mean for policy?

Families need a secure income from work that also enables them to spend quality time with their children. This means that single parents working part time should not face poverty. Parents need more choice over the hours they work, and should not be compelled to work by tighter benefit conditions. To make balancing work and care a reality for parents, Government needs to:

- **Improve parents’ access to ‘good jobs’**.
  Tackling in-work poverty requires a two pronged strategy; improving parents’ access to better jobs, and reducing the costs of paid work itself. Improving access to better jobs requires a greater focus on job sustainability from government – both in the targets it sets Jobcentre Plus advisers and private contractors, and in the training provision it makes available: Government should allow all lone parents without a level three qualification to participate in full time training whilst claiming benefits.

- **Reduce the costs of working**.
  Childcare remains the major outgoing for most working parents. The childcare element of the Working Tax Credit should be increased to meet 100 per cent of childcare costs, rather than the current 80 per cent. Many parents tell us that the cost of school meals represents a particular burden when they move from benefits into paid work. The costs of meals are met when parents are out of work but there is no support for working parents. Free school meals for all children would significantly reduce the costs of working for parents, as well as reducing the stigma that is attached to claiming school meals for the children of non-working families.

- **Improve access to flexible working**.
  Government has significantly extended parental rights at work with the introduction of the right to request flexible working for parents of children aged 16 and under. However, Government should now go further. One bold, but relatively cost limited option, would be to commit to offering public sector jobs on a part-time or job-share basis and to use the Government contracting framework to ensure that those supplying or working with Government do the same.

- **Allow single parents to work in jobs of less than 16 hours**.
  Single parents working between 4 and 16 hours a week gain no financial benefit from doing so, unlike mothers in couples. The greater proportion of mothers in couples who work in jobs of less than 16 hours accounts for all of the difference between employment rates for single mothers and those with partners. Government should extend its pilots introducing an increased income disregard within means-tested benefits to allow single parents to work in jobs of less than 16 hours.
"I have never met a woman who had a child to get a council house. I have never met a woman who wanted to be single parent. We are just people who have made the best out of our circumstances."

- **Leave decisions about combining work and family life in the hands of families.**
  Paid work is often good for families, but it is not without its costs. It is clear that those best placed to make the choice about how to combine paid work with their family life are parents. Government should not impose benefit sanctions on single parents with children aged below seven who do not take steps towards employment and should review the imposition of work search conditions on parents with children aged seven and upwards.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

‘Family policy’ can potentially cover a huge number of areas. We have not attempted to look at how every aspect of Government policy affects families, and this paper says nothing about health policy, housing policy, taxation, or education policy beyond the early years, all of which have a huge impact on family life.

However, we have tried to set out broad principles which can be used when looking at how policy can serve modern day families, and how these might be applied in certain policy areas. Gingerbread supports single parents, and we have focused on policies which particularly impact on their lives. We do not want to see ‘special treatment’ for these families that goes beyond their needs. Rather, we want single parent families to be recognised and treated fairly alongside other family types and for their children to enjoy the same life chances.

We think that applying these principles would lead to the new directions for policy set out below. We hope that the principles we have set out can form the basis for discussion about which of these policies will best serve the needs of families and children in the twenty-first century.

Summary of policy recommendations

Families in Britain come in all shapes and sizes. We should acknowledge and value family diversity

- Family policy must consider the needs of single parent families.
  Single parenthood is now a fact of life in Britain and across the OECD. Policy makers must recognise that around a quarter of children are growing up in single parent families, a proportion that has remained the same for around 20 years. Most single parents did not expect to be bringing up children alone, and no two parents are doing so for exactly the same reasons. Policy needs to avoid ‘one size fits all’ approaches that work for only one type of family.

- Don’t stigmatise families.
  Policy makers should commit not to use language that stigmatises or stereotypes particular family types. Many families are already under pressure to find or keep a job, to cope financially and to have quality time with their children. A feeling that policy makers do not understand their concerns, or that society sees them as ‘bad’ parents can knock single parents’ confidence and self esteem, create feelings of exclusion and may prevent them from accessing services.

"I am a man for a start. I am in my 50s with three children under 11. Working full time. Widower."
Family policy should aim to ensure that all children can thrive

- **Provide access to non-judgemental services to help families manage separation.**
  We know that the way in which parents separate can have a major impact on outcomes for children. In addition to advice on how to minimise conflict, parents experiencing separation will also be seeking advice on child support, benefit entitlement and in some cases legal advice, so services must be holistic.

- **Services for families in conflict need to reach beyond the family courts.**
  Only 15 per cent of (resident) parents separating used either the courts or legal advice to come to a decision about contact arrangements. Services aimed at helping families manage conflict and put their children’s interests first need to be available to all, for example by making use of Children’s Centres and schools.

- **Provide ongoing support to help families manage contact arrangements.**
  Recent research from Gingerbread found that around 30 per cent of children in separated families were not seeing their non-resident parent and most of these had had no contact since their parents separated. Parents told us they needed more support and advice to help them manage post-separation parenting. Advice can play a crucial role in helping parents to see each others’ perspective and focus on their child.

- **Committing to the targets to halve child poverty by 2010 and end it by 2020 must be a key part of family policy.**
  Measures to tackle child poverty have some of the greatest potential to improve children’s outcomes. Poverty is not just about money, but the stress, stigma and strain that can come from living on a low income, in a poor area, or without sufficient support. Money makes a lot of difference: while a one-third drop in family income reduces attainment in childhood by 6 to 7%, evidence suggests that children’s behaviour, happiness and educational attainment all improve as incomes rise. A key priority must be to invest more in benefits and tax credits to reach the poorest families.

- **Child maintenance is a key lever for lifting families out of poverty and a demonstration of the principle that parenting continues post separation. The statutory system must work.**
  In 2007 (the latest available figures) only 40 per cent of single parents were receiving any maintenance at all. A new system to deliver maintenance, the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission has been put in place, with parents able to choose whether to use this body or make a private arrangement. Making sure that the new body promotes a culture of payment and enforces maintenance payments effectively must be a priority.
"After getting married and having children you don't expect to become a single parent. You are after all being responsible, but a relationship can break down or you can become widowed."

The interests of children should come first

- Children should have their voices heard in decisions that affect them, whether these are taken in or outside of court.
- Normally the involvement of both parents should be encouraged by courts and other family services.
- Family courts should make decisions about the best interests of the child on a case by case basis; there should be no presumption that one form of contact is in the best interests of children.
- Policies aiming to improve relationships between parents and children (or parents and parents) must take the risk of violence seriously.
  This means that, as a start, impact assessments for new legislation should include an assessment of the possible impact on women and children who have experienced violence. Other safety concerns must also be addressed, and more support is needed for supervised contact centres to allow continuing relationships between a parent and child in a safe environment.

Families should be treated equally and fairly

- Provide early years support on a universal basis.
  Research suggests that the best way to ensure that all children benefit from early years support is to provide it on a universal basis. Early years support now needs to extend to families with children aged between one and two. One step towards this would be to pay the existing 13 weeks of unpaid parental leave at the rate of maternity pay.

- Provide financial support based on need.
  Financial support to families should be based on their individual needs. At present, there is dispute about whether two parents living together need more financial support than a single parent to lift them out of poverty. Any decisions about benefit levels for different family types need to be based on clear evidence about differential need.

- Access to independent advice for parents can help resolve problems and crises and prevent them from escalating.
  All types of families may at times need access to advice, but it is particularly important to single parents.
Family work inside and outside the home, paid and unpaid should be recognised

- **Improve parents’ access to ‘good jobs.’**
  Tackling in-work poverty requires a two pronged strategy; improving parents’ access to better jobs and reducing the costs of paid work itself. Improving access to better jobs requires a greater focus on job sustainability from Government – both in the targets it sets Jobcentre Plus advisers and private contractors, and in the training provision it makes available. Government should allow all single parents without a level three qualification to participate in full-time training whilst claiming benefits.

- **Reduce the costs of working.**
  Childcare remains the major outgoing for most working parents. The childcare element of the Working Tax Credit should be increased to meet 100 per cent of childcare costs, rather than the current 80 per cent. Free school meals for all children would significantly reduce the costs of working for parents, as well as reducing the stigma that is attached to claiming school meals for the children of non-working families.

- **Improve access to flexible working.**
  Although significant steps have been made in this area, Government should now go further. One bold, but relatively cost limited option, would be to commit to offering public sector jobs on a part-time or job-share basis and to use the Government contracting framework to ensure that those supplying or working with Government do the same.

- **Allow single parents to work in jobs of less than 16 hours.**
  Single parents working between 4 and 16 hours a week gain no financial benefit from doing so, unlike mothers in couples. Government should extend its pilots introducing an increased income disregard within means-tested benefits to allow all single parents to work in jobs of less than 16 hours.

- **Leave decisions about combining work and family life in the hands of families.**
  Paid work is often good for families but it is not without its costs. It is clear that those best placed to make the choice about how to combine paid work with their family life are parents. Government should not impose benefit sanctions on single parents with children aged below seven who do not take steps towards employment and should review the imposition of work search conditions on parents with children aged seven and upwards.
Gingerbread Single Parent Helpline
Freephone 0808 802 0925
Open 9am to 5pm Mondays to Fridays
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Expert telephone information and advice for single parents

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