

Embargoed until 0001 BST Thursday 24 April 2014

Children living with a step-parent or a lone parent are as happy as those living with two biological parents

Children living with a step-parent or a lone parent are as happy as those living with two biological parents, the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Leeds heard today [Thursday 24 April].

In a major UK study on wellbeing, researchers from NatCen Social Research analysed data from the Millennium Cohort Study on 12,877 children aged seven in 2008 and found no significant difference in their reported happiness.

Whether the children lived with two biological parents, with a step-parent and biological parent, or in a single parent family, made no difference: 64% said they were happy 'sometimes or never', and 36% said they were 'happy all the time'.

Even when the researchers statistically removed the effects of other factors such as parental social class so that the effects of family type were isolated, the results showed no significant differences.

Jenny Chanfreau, Senior Researcher at NatCen, told the conference that, in contrast, relationships with parents and other children were strongly linked with how likely the seven-year-olds were to be happy. For instance, factors such as getting on well with siblings and not being bullied at school were associated with being happy all the time.

Ms Chanfreau said they found a similar result when analysing another set of survey data on 2,679 children aged 11 to 15 in the UK – this also showed no significant statistical difference in the level of wellbeing among children in the three types of family when the effects of family type were studied in isolation.

Ms Chanfreau told the conference: "We found that the family type had no significant effect on the happiness of the seven-year-olds or the 11-15 year olds.

"It's the quality of the relationships in the home that matters – not the family composition. Getting on well with siblings, having fun with the family at weekends, and having a parent who reported rarely or never shouting when the child was naughty, were all linked with a higher likelihood of being happy all the time among seven-year olds.

"Pupil relations at school are also important – being bullied at school or being 'horrible' to others was strongly associated with lower happiness in the seven-year-olds, for instance."

Ms Chanfreau worked with Cheryl Lloyd, Christos Byron, Caireen Roberts, Rachel Craig and Sally McManus of NatCen Research on the analysis and report, and Danielle De Feo of the Department of Health also contributed.

Results summary:

In the **Millennium Cohort Study** survey, data were gathered in 2008 on 12,877 children aged seven, and their parents.

Of those children living with two biological (or adoptive) parents: 64% said they were ‘sometimes or never’ happy and 36% said they were happy ‘all the time’. The exact same percentages were found for those living with one step-parent and one biological parent, and for those living with a lone parent.

The researchers then statistically controlled for other factors, such as their parents’ class and the level of the deprivation in the area where the home was, so that the influence of the family type on the seven-year-olds could be studied in isolation.

After doing this they found that those in living with a step-parent and a biological parent, and those living with a lone parent, were marginally less likely to be in the ‘happy all the time’ category, but this result was negligible and not statistically significant, and so was discounted.

Instead, factors such as relationships with others were found to be both important and statistically valid, including getting on with their siblings, having friends, having fun with the family or not being bullied at school.

A fourth family type – those not living with either a natural or adoptive parent – was linked with reduced happiness, but there were so few children in this category (forming only 0.3% of the total) that no further statistical analysis could be carried out.

The researchers also used data from the **Understanding Society Study** survey, gathered from 2009-2011 on 2,679 people aged 11 to 15. After removing other factors to isolate the effect of family type, the researchers found that those living with one step-parent and one biological parent were slightly more likely to be happier than those living with two biological (or adoptive) parents, and that those living with a lone parent were slightly less likely to be as happy as those living with two biological parents; however neither result was statistically significant and both were discounted. In effect, the family type had no effect on the 11-15 year-olds’ happiness.

For more information, please contact:

Tony Trueman
British Sociological Association
Tel: 07964 023392
tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk

Notes

1. The researchers’ study was funded by Department of Health. The full report is available here: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/205352/predictors-of-wellbeing.pdf>
2. NatCen Social Research is an independent, not for profit organisation. It believes that social research has the power to make life better. By really understanding the complexity of people’s lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, it gives the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone.
3. The 2014 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the University of Leeds from 23 - 25 April. Over 600 social scientists will present their latest research, and 750 people will attend. The British Sociological Association’s mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729, and a Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk