

The ties that bind us

Strengthening the extended family in 21st century Britain



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Report by MICHAEL CLARK, Relationships Foundation

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1. Overview

It is widely recognised that the last sixty years have seen a decline in the importance of the role of the extended family in the UK. As the welfare state has come to be seen as the default provider of financial support not only for those experiencing sickness or poverty, but also in guaranteeing a bedrock income for single parents and elderly people and those who cannot afford to house themselves, some of the former roles of the wider family have been sidelined or become redundant.¹ Indeed 'public welfare has itself helped to create its own administrative definition of families as 'parents living with dependent children'² forming the household. There is a wide variety of definitions of the extended family available; a web search comes up with at least thirteen. The simplest and most comprehensive definition is; 'the family group consisting not only of the nuclear family (the parents and their children), but also embracing the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and sometimes more distant relatives'. This is the definition we shall use for the purposes of this paper.

This paper argues that this is an opportune time to give explicit support to the significant role that the extended family can play in supporting not only the 'household' or 'nuclear family', but also the elderly, especially the single elderly, and other vulnerable groups in society. Extended families can also play an important role in the wider community. Recent research has re-emphasised that peoples' well-being depends to a significant extent on the quality of their relationships. Many would prefer that support be provided by extended family and friends where practicable, rather than by professionals or other external agencies; this at a time when the latter are for the most part heavily over-stretched in seeking to provide an adequate level of service. This paper seeks to outline a number of practical strategies to address this question and suggests further avenues for research and enquiry.

¹ During this period of unprecedented social change, there have of course been other significant factors at work which have helped to undermine the role of the extended family, not least increased social mobility and major increases in real personal income.

² 'The Grandmother project; towards a new partnership between family and state' Dench and Brown ICS Working Paper 2004 p3.

2. Background

2.1 The extended family, as an identifiable unit within the community, is widely held to be an anachronism as greater social and geographical mobility and increased levels of family and marriage breakdown have isolated people from the emotional and practical support which wider kin can provide. In a recent study of the East End of London, often regarded as the archetypal working class community, fifty years on from when the original studies took place ³, the authors found that there had been major changes in the social fabric which had had a significant impact on the extended family. “Massive expansion of higher education was being implemented to lift ambitious working class children out of local communities which might hamper their advance and to encourage wider identities and loyalties. The security formerly provided by families became increasingly vested in the ‘national family’ administered by the State there are losers especially collective losers such as local communities and the people dependent on them – whose interests are not easily protected in the new relationship between citizen and State” ⁴. The State, through the provision of welfare benefits, social workers to support ‘problem’ families and the fabric of social care, provides an impersonal and often fragmented service to those in need. Pockets where the extended family still prospers tend to be found more frequently in ethnic minority groups which are more geographically and socially cohesive (though even this is breaking down) and where a family business or businesses are being run. In general, the nuclear family unit is more fluid, with declining rates of marriage and families breaking up and reconstituting themselves.

2.2 Other research found a small drop in family contact over the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, with evidence that this is linked to changes in the nature of women’s work. This is likely to have accelerated since 1996 with the significant increase in the number of mothers of young children working full-time, partly because of Government incentives. Many, with the pressures of maintaining an acceptable work life balance, no longer see it as practicable to provide time consuming care for parents, other elderly relatives or extended family members with special needs. Indeed, many feel guilty that they cannot spend enough time with their own children. The Social Justice Policy Group found that ‘care for the elderly is compromised due not only to the increased complexity of family relationships (which has confused duties of care) but also to the changing ethos of relationships. In a society characterised by high levels of breakdown, it is no longer seen as a moral duty to look after ageing parents or blood relatives; care and help provided depends on the quality of the relationship.’ ⁵

2.3 However, there is evidence that the extended family may be making a comeback:

2.3.1 There is evidence of grandparents both asserting their right to regular contact with their grandchildren (particularly given high levels of breakdown in couple relationships) and increasingly providing childcare on a regular basis as more and more mothers of young children return to work, often into low paid jobs where paid childcare cannot be afforded. Some policy makers believe that grandparents should be paid for exercising such responsibilities. Grandparents are legally able to look after children, but not to receive childcare tax credits. The Government appears to be nurturing a dependence on state-sector childcare provision which appears to be at odds with women’s preference for informal care... ⁶. However, another researcher points out that “the key consideration here

³ ‘Family and Kinship in East London’, Young and Willmott.

⁴ ‘The New East End’, G. Dench, B. Gavron and M. Young (2006) p 106.

⁵ ‘Breakdown Britain’, Social Justice Policy Group (2006) p 33.

⁶ ‘Breakthrough Britain’ Social Justice Policy Group ‘Family Breakdown’ p26.

is that older generations do seem to be programmed, both by natural inclinations hard-wired into us all, and certainly by family culture, to give priority to the interests of younger generations – both their own offspring and young people in the community generally. Older people are solicitous and provide care; children and younger people generally soak it up”⁷. However, the growing number of grandmothers who are still in employment and increased mobility means that grandparental participation may be likely to decline in future years.⁸

- 2.3.2 Despite trends mentioned above, and its many detractors, family life in Britain continues to thrive. Researchers found that “most people are in regular contact with their immediate family who remain of primary importance in their lives. The family is still the dominant source of support and care for most people.”⁹. In a survey of adults’ views on what contributed to quality of life, relationships with family and relatives were named frequently as most important.¹⁰
- 2.3.3 Evidence from the United States is that ‘multigenerational households’ (three or more generations) are growing faster than any other type of housing arrangement. Whilst the number of such households is still relatively small, 4.2m - 4%), they grew by 35% between 1990 and 2000, and professionals say the trend has accelerated since then. Whilst more common among low-income families, such arrangements are becoming increasingly common in all social groups¹¹. This also became common practice in Italy during the 1980s and 90s owing to the exorbitant price of property. There is now evidence in the UK that those builders are building multi-generational homes on new developments. In a recent report, according to David Birkbeck of Design for Homes, “Many people love living near their closest relatives, but they also need their own independence and privacy”¹². He estimates that there are now around 50,000 modern multi-generational houses in the UK and both the demand and number of new starts is growing.
- 2.3.4 New forms of extended family have been increasingly evident over the last generation as a result of increased levels of divorce, couple breakdown and remarriage or formation of new nuclear family units. The new family unit may have links with at least two and possibly more other family units through the previous marriages or relationships of one or both partners and children spending time in two separate family units. As the Grandparents Association have highlighted, this also brings complex and often difficult sets of relationships for grandparents. Whilst it may be assumed that personal relationships between these family units may be strained at best and hostile at worst, there is evidence of goodwill and co-operation and will increasingly need to be, to address the needs of elderly family members.

⁷ ‘The Grandmother Project: towards a new partnership between family and state’, ICS working paper 2004) – Dench and Brown.

⁸ ‘Being a grandparent: research evidence, key themes and policy recommendations’ Prof Bob Broad Grandparents Assn 2007.

⁹ ‘Relative Values: Kinship and Friendship’, McClone, Park and Roberts, British Social Attitudes – 13th report 1996.

¹⁰ Broad op cit p7 quoting Bowling A. ‘The most important things in life. Comparisons between older and younger population age groups by gender’ International Journal of Health Sciences 6, 169-175.

¹¹ Article in New York Times, May 2006.

¹² Quoted in ‘The Times’ 19 October 2007 “Bricks and Mortar” p6.

2.4 The Relationships Foundation has always emphasised the relational benefits which the extended family brings, not only to those who are part of its circle, but more widely to local communities and to society at large:

- 2.4.1 Relationships of mutual help and support are vital to well-being. A number of studies attest this and many still look to the extended family as the enduring set of relationships in their lives¹³. Conversely, the decline in the significance and social role of the extended family has been associated with a fall in social cohesion and a rise in indices of social fragmentation e.g. breakdown in marriage, increase in crime and disorder.
- 2.4.2 The practical benefits of support provided, such as childcare, financial support, care for the elderly in their own homes, and at times of crisis.
- 2.4.3 The key role of grandparents and other members of the older generation in providing a source of continuity and solidarity both for the extended family and the community, and giving young people a place to go for help and unconditional love outside their own home (which may well be 'broken'). Dench and Brown highlight the important role of the grandmother in working class communities in this regard.¹⁴
- 2.4.4 As part of the long-term 'glue' which helps to hold communities together and takes an active interest in the well-being of the physical and social fabric of the community.

¹³ See 'Thriving lives, which way for well-being?' www.relationshipsfoundation.org/thriving-lives-for-a-range-of-examples.

¹⁴ Op cit p7.

3. Why this is the right time to support the extended family

There are a number of reasons why this is a good time to be taking active steps to support the role of the extended family:

- 3.1 Politicians and community leaders are increasingly looking to implement preventative measures which can be put in place to ameliorate the enormous social cost in support and remedial measures which come from the breakdown in nuclear families, the increase in crime and disorder, rise in abuse of alcohol and drug-taking and gambling, major debt issues and teenage pregnancy. Grandparents and other extended family members can often play a key role in supporting children through the consequences of family breakdown or other external factors.¹⁵
- 3.2 There is an increasing recognition that travel within the UK, particularly by car, has now passed its optimum point because of traffic congestion, the impact of carbon emissions and increasing restrictions. A vision of sustainable living would encourage us to spend more time in our own localities. But, given that around half the population have families at a distance, as noted below (para 6(a)), most will want to travel on a regular basis to visit and to spend time together. The wider networks and relationships in peoples' lives, particularly where three or four generations are widely scattered, often internationally, will make it impractical or impossible for many to move physically. However, there are steps which could help to ameliorate these trends in the long-term:
 - 3.2.1 Firstly, there is some anecdotal evidence that a significant proportion of young people who go to university or college settle in or near their student location, which may be a considerable distance from immediate and extended family. It may be desirable therefore in appropriate cases (and many will not be) to provide incentives for students to live near home or at home during term time. The increasing costs of getting a degree are placing a burden of debt on many young people, which is making their own participation in the housing market very difficult. Living at home may increasingly be a better solution for many, even though there may be some increase in travelling (which technology will continue to give the opportunity to reduce). This pattern of residence is common in the rest of Europe, particularly in France. This will also help promote a greater sense of rootedness in belonging in a certain locality or community. Even if there is a physical move after university to take up work or broaden life experience, public policy should encourage a return at some stage to local community to play a full adult role.
 - 3.2.2 Secondly, there is a case for exploring incentives for families to collocate if they choose to do so. Whilst a few employers may help (see below), there may be scope for the State to provide direct financial benefits, given the potential impact on welfare and social care provision. This could be done for instance by allowing a reduced rate of stamp duty on property transactions where a move can be shown to be in order to move nearer to close family or by giving some priority in social housing provision. The Singapore Government has introduced an imaginative scheme to provide incentives for married children or parents to live reasonably close. A higher grant (\$40,000 rather than \$30,000) is available either to children who are married or shortly to be married, or to elderly parents, to purchase a property within 2 km or in the same town as their parents/children. Priority is also given to

¹⁵ Broad op cit p12 quoting Lussier et al 'Support across two generations' Journal of Family Psychology 16, 363-376.

married children or parents to reside within the same estate or neighbouring estate to care for elderly parents ¹⁶ .

- 3.4 The enormous pressure which care for an older generation, who are living longer, will continue to bring on public services. Measures which can incentivise and support carers to look after their parents and grandparents and other elderly relatives within the community are to be strongly encouraged. ¹⁷ It is therefore pleasing to note new UK legislation from April 2007 giving carers of dependent relatives the right to ask for flexible working. Its take-up will be carefully monitored. There is a case for making increased levels of attendance or tax allowance available to relatives who can demonstrate a regular caring responsibility which would otherwise need to be provided by the State or a voluntary agency funded by the State.
- 3.5 Increased welfare dependency and increased indebtedness, particularly in communities subject to social deprivation. Mechanisms for mutual financial support operating at community and extended family level have a key role to play in addressing these needs.
- 3.6 Pressure on housing and living space, particularly in the South East of England, fuelled by the growth in one/two bedroom houses and apartments. There is considerable evidence to show that family breakdown and fragmentation has been a key driver of increased demand for small housing units in recent years. The NHBC reports that flats and maisonettes made up 44% of new homes started in the UK in the first quarter of 2007 - double the percentage seen in 2000. Imtiaz Farookhi, Chief Executive of NHBC, said, "The drive for more affordable homes is being intensified by the number of first time buyers and a rise in the number of people living alone"¹⁸. The rise in the number of people living alone is closely related to relationship breakdown and the decline of the extended family. More multi-generational housing on the pattern now being established in parts of the USA and in the UK (see para 3(c) above) would bring significant environmental and social benefits.

¹⁶ See Singapore Housing Development Board website www.hdb.gov.sg .

¹⁷ For people aged 75 and over, intergenerational care is the single most important source of unpaid care for those in need of help. 'The decline of intensive intergenerational care of older people in Great Britain 1985-1995', Population Trends 110 (pp 31-41), I. Pickard 2002.

¹⁸ NHBC website.

4. A Range of Possible Solutions

The following areas are worthy of further investigation and research to enhance and strengthen the role of the extended family. They will also have wider positive implications and consequences for the relational health of society more widely.

4.1 *Colocation of Relatives*

Many of us already live quite close to our extended family. There is a general paucity of hard evidence, but one key study¹⁹ found that close to half of those in all age groups live within half an hour's journey of their mother, father and eldest child. Those living within half an hour of the place where they had spent most of their childhood had a much higher chance of having close relatives living nearby. In the UK, 44% of the population live within the local authority area in which they were born.²⁰ Therefore, if roughly half the population have ready access to their extended families, the other half do not. As a society, we arguably need to do more to support dispersed extended families, by encouraging them to live closer together, or even in the same household. Indeed, a precondition of providing both emotional and practical support is that people live near each other. Face-to-face communication is worth so much more than telephone calls and emails to provide emotional support, which is difficult to achieve over distance for a prolonged period. Relatives living nearby can offer help prevent marriage break-up by providing emotional support at key times. In addition, many forms of practical support – such as taking an elderly relative shopping or giving regular home care – cannot be done without being physically close by. The kinds of areas which public or employment policy might address are:

- 4.1.1 Large employers, particularly in the public sector, might build on the new rights to ask for flexible working for carers by facilitating colocation through transfers or job swaps. A recent survey undertaken by BT shows that 60% of staff have moved or live more than 100 miles from where they originated.²¹ Several large multi-site employers including BT, John Lewis and Asda are already including such options in their portfolio of flexible working policies.²²
- 4.1.2 Housing policy to encourage multi-generational living in the same household or within a short distance. Although the large majority of parents have their own parents alive, very few live in the same household (4% of mothers with their own mother and 3% with their father)²³. More may choose to do so if affordable properties with more bedrooms were available. On the other hand, there is evidence that a growing number of younger people continue to live with their parents because they are unable to afford a place of their own. 'For the people who find themselves on the wrong side of the housing divide, .. the experience is one of extended student type house sharing, living with parents, together with postponed independence, relationship formation and parenting'.²⁴ One way forward may be to consider the provision of a proportion of affordable properties, both in the private and social housing sectors, to allow inter-generational living. A recent survey on the role of grandparents argues that for a number of reasons, including regular

¹⁹ 'Grundy E., Murphy M., and Shelton N. 'Looking beyond the household: intergenerational perspectives on living kin and contacts with kin in Great Britain' Population Trends 97 pp19-27.

²⁰ Rainer and Saidler 'O Brother where art thou? The effect of having a sibling on geographic mobility and labour market outcomes' ISER 2005-18 quoting Gregg et al 'Mobility and Joblessness' in 'Seeking a premier league economy' NFER 2004.

²¹ Presentation by BT at Working Families Conference 28 Nov 2006.

²² See for instance 'Enter the Timelords; transforming work to meet the future' EOC Report 2007 p49.

²³ Quoted in Broad op cit Broad Owen et al 'Wider Family' in Dex and Joshi MCS 2004.

²⁴ Press release for 'On the treadmill an exploration of the life chances and well-being of young adults in contemporary Britain'. Bone and O'Reilly School of Social Sciences, University of Aberdeen. June 2007

childcare, assuming the role of full parenting when their children are unable to do so, or because of the dispersal of the extended family, there will be an increasing need for adequate space for grandchildren (and their parents on occasions) to be accommodated full time in the home, visit or stay overnight.²⁵

- 4.1.3 For centuries, economic migration has taken place from areas of relatively high unemployment and economic decline to areas of growth and full employment, contributing to strain on the extended family and sibling tension in arranging or providing the care of elderly parents.²⁶ There are signs that this trend may be slowing in the UK, not least because of continuing high house prices in favoured locations such as London and the South-East. However, regional policies promoting economic and social regeneration, including the provision of regional savings banks and other inward investment mechanisms will continue to be essential to discourage economic migration.

4.2 *Working and Travel Time*

Time is the currency of relationships. A key factor in strengthening families, especially relationships within households, is to increase the amount of time family members can spend together. Survey evidence from the UK and elsewhere consistently suggests that couples say that they do not have enough time with their partner and with their children – and extended family members clearly miss out also. Recent research sponsored by Relationships Foundation’s Keep Time for Children initiative shows that around 40% of couples are now working regularly at weekends.²⁷ Extended family members are involved principally in providing childcare for couples who are both working, particularly at weekends. Whilst it is argued that this provision should be more formally recognised in the tax and benefit system – see above – the key objective should be to allow both household families and extended family members to spend more time together.

This can be achieved in part by reducing time out of the house at work or travelling to work. Policies might include:

- 4.2.1 Adopting the EU maximum length of the working week (48 hours averaged over 13 weeks). The opt-out provision favoured by the UK has been widely criticised for promoting the long hours culture, a key feature of workplaces, particularly for men and failing to discourage ‘presenteeism’.²⁸
- 4.2.2 Extension of the right to ask for flexible working to all employees, but particularly to parents of school-age children. In a recent survey, 60% of people think the right to request should be extended to all employees, and 68% of that group say that they would be likely to use it if available.²⁹
- 4.2.3 A weekend day off work for all parent-employees with school-age children, with the right for them to ask their employers that it should be the same day as their partners. This was debated in Parliament as an amendment to the Local Government Bill in 2003 and received support in principle from representatives of all parties.
- 4.2.4 Further promotion of flexible working options including working from home. Although choice for many is clearly limited, 73% of staff would work from home at least some of the time if offered. A YouGov survey found that 37% of men and 34% of women would give up part of their next pay

²⁵ Broad op cit p16.

²⁶ See Rainer and Siedler op cit.

²⁷ ‘Keep time for children; the incidence of weekend working’ Bryson C and Barnes M. NatCen 2004.

²⁸ Leighton P, ‘Flexible working and the long hours culture, a research review’, Equal Opportunities Review 2005 No 138 (pp 10-15).

²⁹ ‘Enter the timelords: transforming work to meet the future’ EOC Report June 2007 p19.

rise if they could work at least part of the time at home.³⁰ Exploiting the full potential of home-working would reduce pressure on road and rail infrastructure and so help to reduce travel time for other commuters.

4.2.5 Transport infrastructure investment targeted to reduce travel to work times by both rail and car.

4.3 *Family Financial Independence*

Rather than promoting financial independence of each individual through a range of welfare benefits and savings incentives such as ISAs, Government could promote the opportunity for extended families to co-operate in the areas of welfare provision, insurance, education and housing for their members. As early as 1947, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons argued that organizations, including families, which lacked a common purpose would tend to disintegrate. Financial shared interests and welfare interdependence are arguably the key bond which holds extended families together in low-income countries.

Relationships Foundation has developed the concept of insurance/welfare/savings syndicates as a means of fostering mutually supportive relationships, drawing partly on the experience of credit unions. The syndicates would operate by spreading risk and providing advantaged access to savings products and other financial services. In outline, an extended family syndicate could look like this:

- 4.3.1 Individual or couple members contributing monthly to a central fund (which could be subdivided for specific purposes).
- 4.3.2 The fund would then be used to meet a number of specific functions likely to be relevant to the family group. These could include:
 - a) group purchase/ discount of insurance products
 - b) care for the elderly, including particularly home-based care or small community based units for disabled young adults,
 - c) help for young adults to get on the property ladder etc. The extent of support would clearly depend on the degree of financial commitment that could be made.
- 4.3.3 Associational and financial constitutional models for family groups to use could readily be made available on the web by a central body, together with information about provision of help or specialist services.
- 4.3.4 Apart from the benefits in drawing extended families together in a greater measure of interdependence, there would be direct economic benefits to families in being able to source services and to spread risks more competitively. There would be benefit to the community and the State in reducing demand for scarce local caring resources.³¹

4.4 *Education in Relational Skills*

The quality of family relationships is often low because relational skills, traditionally acquired in families, are no longer transmitted in ways that they used to be. Government policy could include:

- 4.4.1 Support for marriage and parenting courses. Whilst provision for parenting education is improving through new programmes based on Children's Centres, the Government currently spends only around £4m pa on relationships education, a tiny fraction of the cost to the State annually of

³⁰ Op cit p25.

³¹ A paper setting out proposals for Savings Syndicates in more detail is available from Relationships Foundation.

dealing with the consequences of family breakdown.³² A relatively small investment could help to strengthen family life by funding voluntary agencies to provide a range of community-based services, both at a couple/household level.

- 4.4.2 A 'relational skills assessment' at the end of both primary and secondary school, to incentivise parents and schools to focus on teaching 'emotional intelligence', and to identify children with special needs in this area, rather than assess children only on SATs and exam league tables. This could be supplemented by including within the PHSE curriculum a specific opportunity to learn about, explore and discuss the nature of family relationships.

4.5 *Relational Support through Public Services*

Apart from social services, public services do not see it as part of their job to provide relational support to their 'clients'. There is a danger of confusing their goals and causing them to be even more overstretched. However, there are situations where relational support can be provided effectively at little extra cost, particularly in providing a 'joined-up' provision of advice and support to needy families. Two examples Relationships Foundation has come across are:

- A trial with 20,000 health visitors where they dealt with relational issues when visiting mothers after the birth of a baby, with documented positive outcomes for both partners.³³
- An inner city school where a headmaster used some special funding to appoint a local social worker as a family worker with positive outcomes in terms of child welfare, and low income mothers able to claim benefits etc.³⁴

More research needs to be done in this area in setting up pilot projects and evaluating the benefits for wider application. Relationships Foundation is currently putting forward research proposals for funding aimed at mapping the existing coverage and opportunities for provision of relational support in three areas:

- For public service professionals on the ground in helping them address common areas of interest in the provision of care and support services;
- Relationships education for couples and parents as a preventative measure;
- Acting as a catalyst for extended family and community support groups.

³² 'Despite family breakdown costing every family between £680-£820 annually, Government spends just 58p per taxpayer on preventative and remedial relationships support'. 'Fractured Families' Social Justice Policy Group Dec 2006 pp 67-68.

³³ 'Randomised controlled trial of training health visitors to identify and help couples with relationship problems following a birth', Simons, Reynolds and Morrison, British Journal of General Practice, October 2001, pp793-799.

³⁴ Public Services Consultation 2004 (details available on request).

5. Further Work

Relationships Foundation has recently published a report setting out the benefits for public policy and individual behaviour in following a well-being agenda³⁵. The report looks at the way Government policy at both national and local level shapes the social environment, either fosters or undermines relationships that make for well-being. It identifies three different ways in which policy can enable relationships and how these might translate into specific policy options:

- Motivation – encouraging a culture which values relationships
- Opportunity – providing the foundations for relationships
- Support – strengthening existing relationships and building relationships for the excluded.

In the area of extended families, there is a positive role for Government to play in encouraging, enabling and supporting extended families to improve their own well-being and that of others within their communities in the specific policy areas outlined above. We will be pursuing our own research in the areas indicated in order to provide further evidence for changes in policy and practice (see one specific example on p26 of the report). We offer this paper as a contribution to the debate.

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³⁵ [www.relationshipsfoundation.org/thriving lives](http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org/thriving_lives).