



"from strength to strength"

The experiences of young people growing up in one-parent families in Northern Ireland
Research Report, 2003

Northern Ireland
Gingerbread

supporting lone parents and their children

from strength to strength

A study of the needs and experiences of teenagers growing up in
one parent families in Northern Ireland

Commissioned by: Gingerbread Northern Ireland

Funded by: Youth Council for Northern Ireland

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2003



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ISBN: 0 9540 4064 3 Charity No: XN/46248 Company No: NI24947

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Foreword

The teenage years can be difficult for both young people and parents. Within one parent families there can be additional stresses mainly, as this report explains, to do with competing demands for limited amounts of time and money. What may surprise some parents is the extent to which teenagers are aware of these difficulties and recognise the efforts being made on their behalf. What should concern professionals, perhaps, is the extent to which the stresses upon lone parents are being absorbed by their children as they become young adults.

Although most would agree that things are improving for one parent families, there is still a long way to go. One in four families is now a one parent family and they are twice as likely to be poor as two parent families. A picture emerges from this report of loving families who are finding the strength to overcome the difficulties and prejudices that they encounter. In the words of one research participant 'we struggle but we succeed'.

Gingerbread NI wishes to thank the University of Ulster for the highly professional, yet sensitive, way in which the research was carried out. Our gratitude is also extended to the Youth Council for their funding support, the young people and parents who gave their time to take part in the research and to staff and volunteers within Gingerbread who helped at every stage.

Anne Sweeney, Assistant Director, Gingerbread NI

Acknowledgements

The researchers wish to thank all those young people and lone parents who participated in the research. Without their willingness to give their time and to speak so openly to the researchers, this study would not have been possible. We would also like to express our gratitude to the youth organizations who assisted with the recruitment of participants and offered venues for the research interviews. Finally, the researchers would like to thank staff in Gingerbread Northern Ireland for advice and assistance throughout the project.

Executive Summary

I. Profile of Respondents

In total, the views of 29 teenagers (18 female and 11 male) and 24 lone parents (8 male and 16 female) were obtained for this study. This was achieved by a combination of completed questionnaires and focus groups. Twelve were between the ages of 13 and 15, and seventeen were between the ages of 16 and 18. The majority had lived in a two-parent family at some point in their lives, in keeping with the fact that the vast majority of families come to lone parenthood as a result of separation or divorce.

II. Relationships between Teenagers and Parents

Many of the teenagers in this study stated that on the whole they liked living in a one parent family and that their parent tried to be fair and to make time for them. In turn, the teenagers expressed a desire to spend more time with their parent. Almost half of the teenagers thought that if they lived in a two parent family, their parents would have more time to spend with them, indicating that they were aware of the extra responsibilities upon the parent they lived with.

III. Financial Circumstances

Financial problems were the main source of worry and stress for both parents and teenagers. Some parents directly attributed difficulties in their relationship with their teenager to financial problems which impacted upon their teenager's everyday life and made them feel disadvantaged. A number expressed particular worries in relation to their teenager's third level education opportunities. Most of the teenagers expressed that they felt guilty asking for things as they were aware of the financial strain their parents were under.

Recommendations

- Income Support levels should be increased and the relationship between earnings and benefits, especially the loss of benefits linked to Income Support such as free school meals and Housing Benefit for those on Working Tax Credit, should be addressed.
- The training and childcare available to lone parents entering the labour market should be enhanced to ensure maximum employment prospects and life chances.

- The Minimum Wage should be increased to make employment a more viable choice for lone parents.

IV. School and Education

Some teenagers felt that it would be better if schools didn't know their family circumstances and the majority indicated that they felt that teachers assumed that everyone lived with two parents. The main problem experienced by parents was that in their view, schools appeared to be indifferent to the financial circumstances of one parent families and a minority of parents thought that their teenagers had or might experience difficulties in school directly relating to being from a lone parent family.

Recommendations

- Educational mentoring and parent support programmes should be more widely available.
- Schools should further develop their role in disseminating information about family diversity and change, ensure awareness of the financial hardship faced by many one parent families and be as sensitive as possible to their circumstances. Teachers should be supported by in-service training which addresses these issues.

V. Support Services

There are gaps in the services available both to lone parents of teenagers and to the teenagers themselves. The service gaps identified for teenagers can be placed within the following three categories: practical advice, emotional support and sharing common experiences of one parent families. The service gaps for lone parents can be placed within three categories: financial advice, emotional support and practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone.

Recommendations

- Support services should be available to lone parents to provide financial advice, emotional support and practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone.
- Support services should be available to teenagers from one parent families to provide practical advice, emotional support and the sharing of common experiences. These services can best be offered within peer support projects.

- Lone parents and their teenagers should have access to free counselling services.

VI. Best and worst things

For parents, the most difficult aspects of bringing up teenagers alone can be summarised into three main issues – financial problems, lack of emotional support and worrying if they are doing enough. Teenagers highlighted three main issues – financial problems for their parent, problems due to not having the absent parent around and problems due to normal family arguments. Almost all of the teenagers were able to highlight what was, for them, the best thing about living in a lone parent family. The comments illustrated the love the teenagers felt for their parent and the fact that they felt loved and secure within their family environment.

VII. Making things better

Teenagers identified financial help as the thing that would make things better for their parent. When they were asked what would make things better for them, most of the suggestions made didn't actually relate directly to them. Over a third suggested more financial help for their parent. The happiness of teenagers in one parent families might depend largely upon the happiness of their parent. Therefore if the stresses experienced by lone parents could be addressed, this would impact upon their teenagers who, in turn, would have a much less stressful time during their teenage years.

1.0 Introduction and Background

Lone parents and their children are an important section of our society. The percentage of families with dependent children headed by a lone parent more than trebled in the second half of the 20th century, and by the end of the 20th century, nearly a quarter of all children in the U.K. lived in a one parent family, a total of around 3 million children (National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI), 2001). At the beginning of the 20th century, the vast majority of lone parents were widows (Lewis, 1998), whereas today the likeliest route into lone parenthood is divorce and separation. Near the middle of the 19th century, only about 5% of first marriages ended in divorce (Preston & McDonald, 1979). However, in contrast it is estimated that about half of first marriages initiated in recent years will be voluntarily dissolved (Cherlin, 1992). The point is that for many lone parent families the route to lone parenthood may determine whether they are viewed positively or negatively by society, and with far reaching consequences:

“...today we project on lone parent families an aura of failure and blame. Did we ever expect less from children of widows – so numerous after each war – like we expect less from children of separated or never married parents? (Melanson, 2000”).

There has been much rhetoric about lone parent families and their offspring, and there has also been a significant amount of research carried out with lone parents themselves. However, relatively little attention has been given by researchers to the impact of living in a lone parent family from the perspective of the child or young person. Yet, if policies aimed at lone parent families are to have a significant effect, they must also take into account the views and perspectives of the children and young people growing up within these families.

It is recognised that information about children growing up in different kinds of families is generally scarce (NFPI, 2001). The Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) has been involved in a research programme aimed at looking at what it is like for children aged 5-16 growing up in the 21st century. They state:

“The UK social sciences can make a contribution to developing the potential of the next generation by



expanding knowledge of children’s lives both within families and in other social contexts. Greater understanding of children’s own perspectives, actions and influence are essential to this endeavour.”

(ESRC www.hull.ac.uk/children5to16programme)

The importance of listening to the voice of children and young people is also enshrined in legislation, both nationally and internationally. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child, and the Children Act, 1989 both stipulate this requirement. Moreover, it is increasingly being acknowledged by many organisations working directly with children and young people that consulting them and, more importantly, taking on board their views is, at the very least, good practice.

In recognition of the above, Gingerbread Northern Ireland, commissioned the University of Ulster to carry out research aimed at eliciting the views of young people, between the ages of 13 and 18, living in lone parent families. The views of lone parents of teenagers were also taken into account. The project was funded by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, and the research took place between August, 2002 and March, 2003, during which time a researcher was employed to work on the project part-time. The researcher worked closely with the Gingerbread Teens Project Co-ordinator, who attended each of the focus groups organised with the young people.

The following are details of the research schedule:

- August – October, 2002 Literature Review, Research Design & Fieldwork Preparation
- November – December, 2002 Fieldwork
- January – March, 2003 Analysis and Write-up of Report

1.1 Definition of a Lone Parent and Teenager/Young People

The definition of a lone parent used in the research is based on the one adopted by the Finer Commission Report in 1974: "a mother or father living without a spouse (not cohabitating) with his or her never-married dependent child or children". Teenagers/young people in this research were defined as young people, aged 13-18 years, who had experience of being brought up as a teenager in a lone parent family.

1.2 Report Layout

Following this introductory section, Chapter 2 reviews Canadian, American, British and Northern Irish literature on the topic of teenagers in one parent families. In doing so, key themes emerge which shape the empirical work of this study.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the research, while Chapter 4 outlines and comments upon issues in the fieldwork.

The core findings of the research are presented in Chapter 5 under the following headings:

- profile of respondents
- the relationship between lone parents and their teenagers
- the financial circumstances of lone parent families with teenagers
- school and education from the perspective of lone parent families
- the best and worst things for lone parent families and their teenagers
- specific services available for lone parents and teenagers
- suggestions as to what could make things better for lone parent families and teenagers.

The final Chapter 6 presents a fuller discussion of the implications of the research findings for lone parents and teenagers in Northern Ireland.

2.0 Literature Review

Before the research could be designed, it was necessary to uncover relevant issues for teenagers growing up in lone parent families. Therefore, a literature review was carried out at the commencement of this study. It should be noted that although the context for this study was lone parent families, much of the literature focuses on lone mothers and this is reflected in the literature review.

The aim of the literature review was to enable the researchers to identify themes upon which the empirical work would focus. Research was reviewed from Canada, America, the UK, and Northern Ireland. It should be noted that this does not claim, in any way, to be an exhaustive review of the literature in the field; this would be a substantial piece of work in itself. What this section does is to highlight key issues within this field by providing examples of research that has been carried out in a number of countries.

Only some of the articles reviewed are referred to specifically. However, a list of references for other articles that were uncovered during the literature search will be provided at the end of the Reference section.

- Canadian Research
- American Research
- UK Research
- Northern Ireland

2.1 Canadian Research

A number of articles were reviewed relating to data taken from findings of the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSYC). The NLSYC Survey was conducted by the Human Resources Department Canada and Statistics Canada, and is a long-term study designed to enhance knowledge about human development in Canada. Various analyses have been carried out in relation to the ongoing findings from this project, which involves following twenty-three thousand Canadian children from birth to 11 years into adulthood. Major aspects of well-being are studied including health, family, community, education and work.

Poverty has often been associated with lone parenthood, and the findings in relation to the NLSYC study would suggest that this is no different in Canada. In their analysis of findings from the

NLSYC, Lipman, et al (1998a) found that lone mother families are poorer. In terms of their general analysis of the findings, they noted that low income, parenting problems, low maternal education and maternal depression were consistently and significantly associated with child difficulties and represented important areas for policy intervention in all families. However, they also highlighted that it is important to remember that parents' marital and income status may change over the course of their child's development. Therefore, the length of time a child remains in high-risk situations probably plays an important role in the prevalence and severity of childhood problems.

Whilst Lipman et al found that children from lone mother families had more difficulties in the behavioural, emotional, social and academic domains, they also noted that it was likely that children from lone mother families who developed difficulties did so for the same reasons than children from two-parent families. They suggested that work to understand further the mechanisms through which lone mother status might influence child difficulties remains important. The results of their work suggest that policies aimed at healthy child development should be aimed at all families, and not specifically lone-mother families. However, the authors concluded that specific programmes in the area of parenting should be aimed at lone mothers (Lipman, et al., 1998a).

Attention has from time to time focused upon the parenting skills of lone mothers, in particular. In a study by Landy and Tam (1996) it was found that good parenting can help children from all backgrounds. Moreover, even for children whose backgrounds would put them at risk, the odds of having problems diminished considerably if they were brought up in a positive and supportive environment. The authors also found that positive parenting practices acted as a protective factor for children living in at-risk environments. In particular, for children whose family background included at least four risk factors (e.g. living in a single parent family, or a low income family), it was found that parenting still made a significant difference. The study noted that a child's development prospects were, in most respects, at least as good with positive parenting in an 'at risk'

family as with more negative parenting in a more favourable, non risk environment.

Parenting skills have also been linked to the developmental outcomes of children. Ross et al (1998a) used data from the NLSCY to document where differences exist across a very broad range of developmental outcome variables between children in lone parent families and a comparison group consisting of all children. They found that there were some factors associated with living in a lone parent environment that prejudiced child development. The authors emphasised that these results did not mean that lone parenthood per se was the main factor, rather there was most likely to be a constellation of factors strongly associated with lone parenthood. It is also important to note that the authors found a wide distribution of outcomes among children living in lone parent families. This suggests that not all lone parent families and their children require specific interventions. The main point to highlight is that whilst lone parent families can be used as a guide to where policy assistance might have the highest pay-off, this should not entail a blanketing of lone parents with intervention initiatives. In particular, care should be taken not to stigmatise lone parenthood as a family structure.

Ross et al (1998b) went on to look at child developmental outcomes between different types of lone parent families. The authors adapted a framework developed by Robert Haveman and Barbara Wolfe (1994) who argue that child development is determined by three primary factors:

- The choices made by society, primarily governments regarding opportunities available to children and their parents (the social investment in children)
- The choices made by the parents regarding resources to which their children will have access (the parental investment in children)
- The choices that the child makes given the investments in and opportunities available to him or her.

By adopting the investment framework by Haveman and Wolfe (1994) to group different independent factors that may influence developmental outcomes among lone-parent children, the authors identified three groups of resources.

- Family financial resources
The family's economic resources were taken to include level of household income, source of income, low income (poverty status) and home ownership.
- Parental resources
The parental resource factors were grouped into three categories, parent skills, parent health and parent education
- Community resources
With regard to community resources, the NLSCY provided information on the availability and quality of community resources in relation to two areas. First, neighbourhood characteristics, such as safe streets and parks, neighbourly concern and help, and neighbourhood problems. In other words the presence of problems such as drugs, public drinking, burglary and racism. The second area related to the level of social support: Community social support was based on responses to a series of questions, which were incorporated into a scale.



The research found that of the four family economic variables in the survey, household income level (typically low for lone parents) proved to be the only important explanatory factor. Lone parent children from relatively higher income households were less likely to exhibit vulnerable outcomes than children from households with lower incomes.

Three important factors emerged in the parent resources group. Two related to parental skills, namely, consistency and hostile and ineffective parenting. There was a strong inverse association between consistency and vulnerability for all age groups. Similarly hostile parenting was strongly associated with higher vulnerability scores. The third factor related to parental health, and it was

found that depression had the most important association with the vulnerability index.

With regard to the community resources, in the neighbourhood characteristics category, neighbourhood problems were the most important characteristic in this category. For all age groups, there was almost twice the proportion of higher vulnerability children living in neighbourhoods, exhibiting the largest number of problems. In terms of the social support category within community resources, there was a strong association between lower levels of social support for lone parents and higher vulnerability.

The authors concluded that the majority of children in lone parent families did not appear particularly vulnerable to poor developmental prospects. In terms of policy, the authors noted that whilst lone parent families warrant more attention, policy initiatives should be selective. They noted that a shift in focus on policies to support economic resources, community resources and family characteristic areas takes on increased importance as children age.

In 1998, a conference was convened by the Applied Research Branch of Human Resources Development Canada (Human Resources Canada, 1998) to report specifically on the latest data provided by NLSCY. A number of workshops took place, which were structured around specific themes addressed by the Survey. In particular one workshop focused upon family structures relating to lone parent families. A number of general findings were noted regarding children from lone parent families:

- Most lone parents were doing a good job of raising their children and most children of lone parent families show no problems.
- However, children are apt to have more health problems, and poorer social and motor development.

In light of these findings a key question was posed, namely, "is lone parenthood the cause of these problems or do they result from a constellation of problems associated with lone parenthood – poverty, parental stress and instability?" It was concluded that research was needed to determine why so many lone parents are doing so well and to examine the causes of ineffective parenting. Research should involve parents, practitioners and academics.

No one would dispute that there are a wide variety of two parent families. However, many lone parents feel that they are portrayed in a stereotypical way. Ford-Gilboe (2000) challenged stereotypical views of lone parent families that emphasise problems, and vulnerability. Her study highlighted the strengths associated with single-parent families. She concluded that because lone parent families face many challenges, studies should address the resilience of single mothers. This would provide a better understanding of how 'healthy' lone parent families are created and sustained, despite their adverse circumstances.

2.1.1 Summary of issues that emerged from the Canadian Literature

- Poverty was often concomitant with lone parenthood.
- Household income was significant in terms of child outcomes.
- Lone parent children from higher income households were less likely to exhibit vulnerable outcomes than children from households with lower incomes.
- Most single parents were doing a good job of raising their children and most children of lone parents showed no problems.
- The majority of children in lone parent families were not particularly vulnerable to poor developmental prospects.
- Children from lone parent families who developed behavioural, emotional, social and academic difficulties did so for the same reason as children from two parent families.
- Positive parenting helps children from all backgrounds.
- Policies for healthy child development should be aimed at all families.
- Policies in relation to lone parents should be carefully targeted.
- Intervention initiatives in relation to child development should take care not to stigmatise lone parenthood as a family structure.
- Policies to support economic resources, community resources and family characteristic areas take on increased importance as children age.
- Studies should be carried out to examine the resilience of lone mothers. This would provide a better understanding of how healthy lone parent families are created and sustained despite their adverse circumstances.

2.2 American research

A number of articles were reviewed relating to American research. Many of these projects took the form of analysis of longitudinal studies, together with secondary analysis of various other research studies.

The large number of single parent families in the United States has been referred to as “a major social problem” (Lang and Zagorsky 2000, p.254). In what is recognized as the most comprehensive book on the subject, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) argue that children who grow up without two parents are deprived of economic, parental and community resources, which undermine their chance of future success. They attribute a causal relationship between negative outcomes for children and single parenthood. However, Lang and Zagorsky (2000) note that growing up with a single parent is highly correlated with many social and economic disadvantages and children from nontraditional households might, in fact, do worse because they are reared in a disadvantaged environment. Therefore, the causal relationship in terms of negative outcomes is disadvantage as opposed to single parenthood.

There has been much debate about the significance of the relationship between the home and the school in terms of the educational outcomes of children. Research carried out by Dawson (1991) focused on the impact upon school and education of living in a lone parent family. The data was taken from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health. This involved a nationally representative sample of 17,110 children under the age of 18. Unlike other studies which found more negative outcomes in children of divorce, than in children from other lone parent families, this analysis found no statistically significant difference in terms of physical health, school performance, or behavioural problems among children living with formerly married mothers, never married mothers or mothers and stepfathers. In contrast, the study found that whereas the problems of children whose parents had separated, divorced or remarried were reduced on average by the passage of time, this was not the case for children of never married mothers.

Following on from this theme, Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) examined family structure and children’s success. The authors looked at the long-

term differences in children’s attainment and well being across different types of single mother families using a nationally representative sample (the 1972—1996 General Social Surveys). They found that, compared with children raised in single mother families produced by the death of the father, children raised in single mother families produced by divorce had significantly greater odds of not completing high school, lower odds of entering and graduating from college, a lower average occupational status and a lower average level of happiness in adulthood. Divorced and widowed single mothers with dependent children were compared on a variety of attitudes and behaviours. It is important to note that no significant differences in health (physical or psychological), education, religion, family values, or other dimension of lifestyle and social behaviour were observed. However, in contrast there were significant differences in socio-economic position and financial stress in which, relative to widows, divorced mothers were at a substantial disadvantage.

Carlson and Corcoran (2001) also highlighted the significance of family income in terms of children’s educational attainment. In their study, data was used from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the effect of various family structures on behavioural and cognitive outcomes on children aged seven to ten. They found that family income, mother’s psychological functioning, and the quality of the home environment were particularly important for children’s behaviour. Family income and mother’s aptitude had notable effects on children’s cognitive test scores.

There has been much rhetoric about the possible negative implications resulting from the absence of a father during the upbringing of a child. In an article by Biblarz and Raftery (1999) the “pathology of patriarchy hypothesis”, was questioned, namely, that the absence of a father is destructive to children, particularly boys, because it means that children will lack the economic resources, role model, discipline, structure and guidance that a father provides

The researchers used secondary analysis of data from two large-scale surveys. They concluded that analysis of the data showed that the effect of growing up in a single mother family is a complex function of a set of factors that represent both risks and benefits to children’s socio-economic success. On the side of risk, relative to sons from two

biological parent families, they found that sons from single mother families had the disadvantage of having a family head with a greater average likelihood of unemployment, and the disadvantage of having a family head with a lower average occupational position.

They also found that across four large surveys spanning 30 years, across two dependent variables – children’s education and occupation – there was no effect of growing up in a single mother family once family head’s socio-economic location (employment and occupation) had been taken into account.

The authors highlighted that parent’s labour force attachment and occupational positions are keys to understanding the effect of single mother families on children’s socio-economic destinations. They recommended the need to explore job differences between single mothers and other family heads. For example questions should be look at such as:

- Where are single parents located in the occupational structure?
- How do their job conditions affect the family?
- What are the employment opportunities and constraints?
- Why is parental employment good for children?

Biblarz and Raftery (1999) concluded that each of these issues needed to be addressed by further research. They suggested that adequate job opportunities for single mothers could go a long way toward diminishing the unfavourable consequences for children of being brought up in a single-mother family.

2.2.1 Summary of issues that emerged from the American Literature

- The socio-economic position of divorced mothers, relative to widows, was found to be considerably worse.
- Family income had implications in relation to whether some children developed behavioural or educational problems.
- Parent’s labour force attachment and occupational positions were seen as keys to understanding the effect of single mother families on children’s socio-economic destinations.
- Growing up in a single mother family was shown to be a complex function of a set of factors that represent both risks and benefits to children’s socio-economic success.

- Adequate job opportunities for single mothers could go a long way toward diminishing the unfavourable consequences for children of being brought up in a single mother family.

2.3 United Kingdom Research

A number of articles were uncovered that related mainly to UK research. Again, some of these took the form of analysis of longitudinal studies, together with studies that involved secondary analysis of research.

A comprehensive review and summary of over 200 research reports was carried out by Rogers and Pryor (1998). The literature reviewed spanned several decades, and related to research carried out both overseas, and in the UK, concentrating upon the latter. The focus of the literature review was upon divorce and separation, and in particular the outcomes for children. The main findings were that parental separation is most usefully viewed as part of a process beginning before divorce and continuing long after. The report highlighted that support may be needed, and intervention required, at any stage to reduce possible detrimental effects on children.

It was noted that certain factors affect outcomes:

- Financial hardship can limit educational achievement.
- Family conflict before, during, and after separation can contribute to behavioural problems.
- Parental ability to recover from the distress of the separation affects children’s ability to adjust.
- Multiple changes in family structure increase the probability of poor outcomes.
- Quality contact with non-resident parent can sometimes improve outcomes.

In terms of policy interventions, the authors suggested that support for parents to deal with the distress of separation was needed to enable them to better help their children. GPs, teachers and family lawyers need to be equipped to help as they are often approached for this support. Information needs to be provided for parents that says separation does not necessarily lead to adverse affects, but that factors such as conflict can be detrimental for their children.

Policy interventions to help young people deal with the distress of separation are also important. A

report in *Community Care* May, 2000 (Communitycare.co.uk, 2000) stated that children living in families where there was a step parent, or children living with a lone parent were more likely to ring ChildLine about family relationship problems than those living with both parents.

Burghes (1994) reviewed British research on the outcomes for children who had either experienced family disruption, or lived with a lone parent, or both. Her secondary analysis of the literature looked at how these children fared on a range of social, economic and psychological measures compared with children who live with both their natural parents. Measures included their health at birth, physical development, psychological reaction to the separation of their parents, and educational achievements. Most of the British research findings reported by Burghes came from various researchers' analysis of one of two longitudinal surveys - the Medical Research Council, National Survey of Health & Development (1946), and the National Child Development Study (1958) - and also from the 1970 British Cohort Study.

It is important to note that Burghes made a number of methodological criticisms at the outset. First, she noted that some doubts may arise over the applicability to to-day's children of studies of children born in the 1940s and 1950s, when children born outside marriage would have been considered to be something of a rarity. (This may have been due to the stigma associated with this type of family). Second, she highlighted that the sample was not representative of children facing family/marital disruption or lone parenthood. Third, she felt that the sample was unsuitable for drawing conclusions about their development over time. Fourth, the possible influence of factors other than marital disruption and lone parenthood had not been taken fully into account. She also noted that children's disruptive behaviour could both contribute to and result from family disruption.

Burghes found that the nature of the family disruption may be more important than either the disruption itself or the type of family structure that results. Children who lived with lone parents who had been widowed often did as well as their peers in intact families. On the other hand, children who had experienced separation or divorce of their parents, often had poorer average outcomes than those who had not. She also noted that children whose widowed parents had formed new

relationships may have even better average outcomes than children in intact families. However, children whose parents lived with a new partner after separation or divorce often compared unfavourably with their peers living with both their parents.

Importantly, Burghes sought to address what accounted for these differences. She noted that after controlling for social class, the research suggested a range of psychological, social and economic factors to explain remaining differences. For the children born outside marriage the most pertinent factor was thought to be the financial hardship experienced by their families. Burghes highlighted a number of issues that arise for future research.

- The relationship between children and their fathers needs to be explored further.
- The influence of social class might be explored further – taken as the social class of the lone parent, not by her father's social class in the case of a female.
- There is a need for qualitative research from the perspective of families themselves – what do they count as success for their children and what do they perceive to be important in the development of their lives.
- There is a need to explore the reasons why some children from lone parent families do well – under what circumstances do they flourish?

Kiernan (1996) focused on the impact upon children brought up in lone parent families from birth right up until they were in their 30s, in terms of whether or not their lone mother was in paid employment. The data was taken from a British national longitudinal survey (The National Child Development study). This commenced in 1958 and followed children from birth up to their 30s. The researchers investigated educational attainment, economic position, and family formation and dissolution. They compared the situation of children brought up by both parents, children brought up by lone mothers in employment and children in unemployed lone mother families. It should be noted, that the authors highlight that the findings relate to a generation of children brought up in an era when employed mothers were less common, divorce was less prevalent and never married lone parenthood was rare.

It was found that daughters of non-employed, lone mothers were less likely to have attained

qualifications, to be more economically disadvantaged, and were more likely to have become young mothers than their contemporaries in two parent families with a working mother. However, daughters from lone mother families, in which the mother was in employment, had similar experiences to those from dual earner families. Amongst the men, it was found that having a working, lone mother reflected positively in the economic domain. However, overall the beneficial legacy of having a working, lone mother was stronger for daughters than for sons.

The author observed that working lone mothers were likely to be financially better off than their non working counterparts, even though their jobs were likely to be at the low-skill, low-paid end of the league table of occupational earnings. It was noted that having an employed parent provided information on networks into employment.



However, economic well-being was only part of the story, as girls from dual earner families were likely to have been raised in more financially secure circumstances than daughters of women who were sole earning lone mothers, and yet these two groups of women had similar outcomes.

The author concluded that it may well be that girls growing up in an environment where women's economic independence was valued - which was more likely to be the case if they have a working mother - may heighten aspirations with regard to educational and socio-economic attainment, which might, in turn, reduce the chances of forming families at a young age. The authors concluded that the employment status of parents, and types of families experienced by children as they grow up, are important influences on their life chances. They noted that the extent to which this is amplified or diluted with the growth in labour market flexibility and diversity in family life remains an area for future research.

Gregg et al (1999) used data from large-scale surveys to examine the effect of family poverty on children. They looked at the changing numbers of children in different types of poor families, how much was allocated to spending on children themselves and at how children's disadvantages affected them after they grow up.

The authors found that two thirds of children with one parent were poor, compared with one quarter of children with two parents. The relative disadvantage of children with one parent had risen since 1979 largely because the chance of the parent having a job had declined. They also found that parents who were themselves disadvantaged in childhood were more likely to have children who did poorly early on at school. The authors concluded that the economic position of families strongly affects the present and future welfare of children. They also noted that whether a family was able to meet the material needs of its children depended more on whether it had income from work than directly on whether it had two parents. However, because of the much greater amount of time that lone parents spend, on average, out of work, it was noted that a higher proportion of them were unable to meet their children's economic needs as they grew up. The authors stressed that economic disadvantages can lead to both economic and social difficulties in adulthood, and that this can feed through to the next generation.

In terms of policy, the authors suggested that measures that successfully address child poverty, especially by giving more households access to jobs, were likely to have wide-ranging effects in the years ahead - beyond the improvement of the immediate welfare of poor children.

This is borne out by information contained in a fact file, compiled by One Parent Families Scotland (One Parent Families, Scotland, 2001). They cite studies that have shown that children's outcomes - especially measures of academic achievement - are related to the level of household income, following divorce, which is associated with a severe decline in the standard of living for most custodial mothers and their children (Amato, 1994). They suggest that this demonstrates the importance of affordable childcare and effective child support enforcement to reduce economic hardship.

To date, there would appear to have been little qualitative research carried out in the UK that focuses upon the views of teenagers growing up in one-parent families, in terms of their experiences and needs. However, as Dunn and Deater-Deckard (2001) note, it is possible to study the views of children as young as five with rigor and sensitivity. A few qualitative studies were uncovered which looked at children's views of their families. For example, Morrow (1998) conducted a study with children between the ages of 8 and 14 which explored their ideas and use of language about the concept of 'family'. Morrow found that from the children's point of view, love, care and mutual respect and support were the key characteristics of 'family'. Wade and Smart (2002) carried out research with children, aged 5–10 who had experienced their parent's separation or divorce. They found that for all of them, the most important thing was the quality of their relationship with the significant adults in their lives. The importance of talking to children and young people about parental separation or divorce was highlighted by Kirby and Deater-Deckard (2001). They explored the views of 467 children from diverse families, aged between 5 and 16, including children and young people being brought up in single parent families. They found that three quarters of the children whose parents had separated had not been talked to about the separation when it happened.

2.3.1 Summary of issues that emerged from the U.K. Literature

- Family conflict can contribute to behavioural problems, both before during and after a separation occurs.
- Parental ability to recover from the distress of separation can affect children's ability to adjust.
- Multiple changes in family structure can increase the probability of poor outcomes for children.
- Quality contact with the non-resident parent can sometimes improve outcomes for children.
- The relationship between children and their fathers needs to be explored more.
- Support for parents is needed to enable them to deal with the distress of separation.
- Support is needed for young people in lone parent families who were found to be more likely to ring ChildLine about family relationship problems.

- From children's point of view, love, care and mutual support were the key characteristics of family.
- For children, the most important thing was the quality of the relationship with the significant adults in their lives.
- There is a need for qualitative research from the perspective of families.
- There is a need to explore why some children from lone parent families do well, and to identify under what circumstances they flourish.
- The significance of the influence of social class – taken as social class of the lone parent – should be explored.
- Financial hardship can limit educational achievement.
- Parents who were disadvantaged in childhood were more likely to have children who did poorly early on at school.
- Children's outcomes – especially measures of academic achievement – were related to the level of household income, following divorce.
- The economic position of families was found to strongly affect the present and future welfare of children.
- The employment status of parents and types of families experienced by children as they grow up were important influences on the life chances of children.
- Whether a family was able to meet the material needs of its children depended more on whether it had income from work than directly on whether it had two parents.
- Measures to address child poverty, especially by giving more households access to jobs, were likely to have wide ranging effects in the years ahead.

2.4 Northern Ireland

In relation to research within Northern Ireland, one important study should be highlighted, which was commissioned by Relate (Fawcett, 1999). The research was undertaken over a period of four years, and focused upon young people's experiences of the separation/divorce process, together with their experiences of the help and support available to them within the family, the school and the community. The study explored these issues both with young people who had used the RelateTeen counselling intervention, in order to gain their views on this service, and with young people who had not used this service. At least one of the parents of the young people who participated was also involved in this research. Parents and professionals were asked about the

problems they faced in responding to teenagers' needs following marital breakdown. The research sought to identify what hurt young people in these circumstances, together with what had helped them.

In terms of what had helped the young people, a variety of types of support, including social, emotional and practical, were all positively evaluated by teenagers. In relation to what had hurt the young people, the negative impact of marital conflict and/or domestic violence on teenagers' lives was noted. Overall, the findings suggested that formal services played a much less significant role in the lives of the young people than the role of informal support of parents, extended family and friends. A key feature of positive support was the quality of the relationship between the adult and the teenager. Notably, 'being there' was highlighted as being as important as 'doing' in terms of the help adults offered. In terms of the services valued by young people, those that were informal, accessible, flexible and confidential, and which promoted their right to choose, were noted. Attitudinal barriers to services existed, both in relation to parents and teenagers. Alongside this, it was noted that there were significant gaps in the range and effectiveness of the service options available, and it was found that young people were generally disempowered in terms of their knowledge of, and access to, the available services.

The research highlighted a number of recommendations at three levels – primary, secondary and tertiary. Recommendations included more education in schools about family diversity, raising public awareness about relationship breakdown, and a pro-active approach to ensure that professionals gave appropriate help and information to parents early on. Parenting support initiatives were also recommended, together with specialist training for professionals. In particular, it was noted that new forms of service provision, including peer education projects, should be developed.

2.4.1 Summary of issues that emerged from the Northern Ireland Literature

- The quality of the relationship between the adult and the teenager is important.
- 'Being there' is as important as 'doing' in terms of help adults offered.
- Social, emotional and practical support were all positively evaluated by teenagers.

- Teenagers valued services that were informal, flexible, accessible, confidential, and which promoted their right to choose.
- Attitudes of parents and young people towards services created barriers in terms of access.
- Young people were generally disempowered in terms of their knowledge of, and access to, available services.
- Education in schools regarding different family types was recommended.
- Raising public awareness about relationship breakdown was recommended.
- A pro-active approach by professionals was recommended to ensure that appropriate help and information was given to parents experiencing relationship breakdown.
- Parenting support initiatives were recommended.
- New forms of service provision should be developed, including peer education projects.

2.5 Key themes that emerged from the literature

The first point to note is that there would appear to be a dearth of qualitative research relating to young people who are growing up in lone parent families, in terms of their needs and their experiences. Therefore, this study is indeed timely. Bearing this in mind, and taking into account the issues highlighted in the literature, three main areas of concern came to the fore. First, the emotional needs of young people, particularly focusing upon their personal relationships at home. Second, the financial circumstances of lone parent families, and the impact this has upon young people. Third, the implications of growing up in a lone parent family in relation to education and school, and finally specific services for teenagers and lone parents. It was decided that each of these key areas should be addressed in the research, together with more general issues, such as the best and worst things about living in a lone parent family from the perspective of young people, and what would make things better for lone parents and their teenagers.

The following related questions were, therefore, identified within each of these themes, and it was decided to explore these with young people, and lone parents:

- **Personal relationships between teenagers and lone parents**
- How do teenagers feel about living in a lone parent family?

- What is the quality of the relationship like between lone parents and teenagers?
- What causes the most friction between lone parents and teenagers?
- What do teenagers feel about the time they spend with the parent they live with?
- Do teenagers feel that their parent has time for them if they have a problem?
- How do teenagers feel about the time they spend with their family unit?

- **Financial circumstances:**

- What is it like financially for lone parents bringing up teenagers?
- What do teenagers growing up in lone parent families feel about their financial circumstances?
- Do financial circumstances cause problems between lone parents and teenagers?
- Do lone parents see things getting better or worse financially?

- **School & Education:**

- What are the attitudes of schools generally, and teachers, in particular, to lone parent families?
- Do teenagers mind who knows in school/college that they are from a lone parent family?
- Do teenagers experience any problems in school due to living in a lone parent family?
- Does living in a lone parent family have any impact on educational achievement?

- **The best and worst things for lone parent families with teenagers:**

- What do lone parents find most difficult about bringing up teenagers?
- What do teenagers think is the worst thing about living in a lone parent family?
- What do teenagers think is the best thing about living in a lone parent family?

- **Specific services for lone parent families with teenagers:**

- What specific services are available for lone parents with teenagers?
- What specific services would be most helpful to lone parents with teenagers?
- What specific services are lone parents aware of for their teenagers?
- What suggestions would lone parents have for services for their teenagers?
- Do teenagers know of places to contact if they need help or advice?



- What services are teenagers aware of, have used or would use?
- What suggestions would teenagers have for specific services?
- **What would make things better?**
- What do lone parents think would make things better for them and their teenagers?
- What do teenagers think would make things better for their parent?
- What do teenagers think would make things better for them growing up in a lone parent family?

3.0 Methodology

This section describes the methods employed with the young people and their parents, and outlines the rationale behind this.

3.1 Young People

- Focus groups
Bearing in mind what had been uncovered in the literature, it was decided that a qualitative approach should be employed with the young people, in the form of focus groups, in order to gain their views on the range of topics outlined above. It was planned to carry out a number of focus groups in various geographical locations.

- The preliminary focus group
In recognition of the need to engage the young people as much as possible, it was considered essential to involve them in designing how the research should be carried out. Therefore, a preliminary focus group session was planned for the beginning of November, with some of the young participants of the Teens Project. This was arranged to take place in the offices of Gingerbread on a Saturday morning. It was also decided to hold a focus group session to coincide with an Awards Ceremony which Gingerbread were organising at a venue in Belfast, and at which a number of the young people would be present. Five young people who had been part of the Teens Project participated in a focus group – two males and three females, between the ages of 14 and 16.

The aims of this session were:

- To discuss the themes identified from the literature to see how relevant these were to young people growing up in lone parent families in Northern Ireland.
- To find out from the young people what they thought the key issues were in relation to growing up in a lone parent family.
- To get their views and suggestions on the most appropriate methodology.

Involving young people at this stage of the research process can help to shape the way that questions are constructed, influence the language of the research, and find a more youth-friendly way of constructing research methods (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000).

This session proved useful, insofar that it became clear that a number of the teenagers found it difficult to open up and talk about their experiences and feelings. Whilst the young people did agree that the themes were relevant, during the course of the focus group, however, and particularly when we talked about their ideas for the research, a number of them indicated that they would prefer to fill in a multiple choice questionnaire either alone, or in a group setting. When we asked why this was, some of the young people explained that they found it embarrassing to talk about what they clearly saw as 'personal' issues.

- The multiple choice questionnaire
Following this session, and on the advice of the young people we had spoken to, it was decided to compile a multiple choice questionnaire which could be completed in a range of settings: by individual young people in their own homes; in a youth group setting; or as a preliminary exercise within a focus group setting. Using the key themes that had been identified from the literature, and taking on board the suggestions made in the preliminary focus group, a multiple-choice questionnaire was compiled (see Appendix 1). The responses mostly involved the young people ticking the appropriate box. However, within each section, there was also space provided for them either to give a reason for their response, to write down their own views, or to express their feelings about growing up in a lone parent family.

- The vignettes
Given that the young people who participated in the preliminary focus group had found it difficult to open up and talk about their own experiences, it was decided to use vignettes as another method within the focus group setting. According to Finch, (1987), vignettes are basically short stories or scenarios, which provide examples of people and their behaviour on which participants can offer comment and opinion. This is seen as a less intrusive way of obtaining the views of young people, particularly in situations where they may find it difficult to articulate their own feelings about their own circumstances. It is recognized that vignettes are useful when exploring potentially sensitive topics that participants might otherwise find difficult to discuss. For example, they were used by Hazel (1999) in researching post divorce

family life. As Barter and Renold (1999) note, commenting on a story is perhaps easier than talking about a direct experience.

Vignettes have also been used as a multi-method approach to enhance existing data. For example, Wade (1999) employed vignettes following individual interviews in her study about children's perceptions of family. Whilst little has been written about the use of vignettes in focus groups, they have been used as a warm up exercise to get participants to start talking to each other (Barter and Renold (1999).

Two vignettes were created. They were based largely upon the key themes that had been uncovered in the literature review – financial circumstances, personal relationships and school and education.

The first vignette related to a situation that involved a 15 year old girl called Stacey (see Appendix 3). Stacey lived with her mother and had an older brother, and a younger sister who also lived at home. She was experiencing a lot of emotions – anger, resentment, jealousy, guilt, and sadness. Stacey had written to a problem page explaining how she felt. The source of her problem was the financial circumstances within her family. This had led to some tension between her and her mum, and a lot of resentment on the part of Stacey about her family circumstances.

The second vignette involved a boy called Daniel (see Appendix 4). Daniel was a 15 year old boy who lived with his mum. He had one older sister and one younger sister. Daniel's Dad had no contact with the family. Daniel explained his situation and how he felt to a leader at his Youth Club. His problem stemmed from the fact that there was no contact with his Dad, and he was finding it difficult being the only boy at home. He felt that teachers in school assumed that everyone came from two parent families, particularly when it came to parents' supporting sports events. The main issue was that Daniel found it difficult to talk to his Mum about how he felt, and his problems were too personal to talk about with his friends, yet he needed someone to confide in.

3.2 Lone Parents

- Focus Groups

It was decided to carry out a number of focus groups with lone parents in different geographical locations. Participants would be mostly drawn

from Gingerbread groups. However, it was also planned to organise at least one focus group with individuals who were not members of Gingerbread.

- Open-ended questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire was drawn up for use with lone parents (see Appendix 4). This addressed the three main issues – personal relationships, financial circumstances and school and education - from the perspective of lone parents with teenagers. This was to be used as an additional method, alongside the focus groups.

4.0 The Fieldwork

This section provides details of the planned fieldwork, together with what actually took place between November and December, 2002.

4.1 The Young People

It was recognised that parental consent would be required for any young person who was willing to participate. In addition, it was agreed that two appropriate contact numbers would be given to each of the young people who agreed to participate. These provided sources of help/advice, in recognition of the fact that the issues being raised were of a sensitive nature.

4.1.1 Challenges encountered in finding teenage participants

It became apparent, following the preliminary focus group, that there were going to be challenges both in terms of persuading young people to participate, and in getting them to open up and discuss the issues. As explained, we sought to address these challenges in various ways:

1. A range of methodological tools, in the form of the multiple-choice questionnaire, together with the vignettes would be employed.
2. Individual young people connected with the Gingerbread Teens Project, as well as a large selection of youth groups and organisations that had no formal connection with Gingerbread, would be contacted and invited to participate, in order to maximise participation in the research.
3. The focus groups would be arranged in a location suitable to the participants.
4. Young people would be encouraged to participate in a focus group, but would also be offered the alternative of filling in the questionnaire, individually, and returning it.
5. An incentive to participate would be offered, which would take the form of a Prize Draw for £50 of HMV Vouchers.

The following sources were used to locate teenagers to participate in the research:

- Gingerbread Northern Ireland
Gingerbread facilitated the preliminary focus group of five participants, recruited from the Teens project and also at a Gingerbread Awards

Ceremony in Belfast. As explained in the previous chapter, this preliminary focus group was very useful in shaping the research. It was subsequently decided to use a multiple choice questionnaire as a research tool. Participants were invited to complete the questionnaire and return it in the envelope provided, which was addressed to the research worker at the University of Ulster. It was stressed that these would be treated confidentially, and that there was no requirement to put your name on the questionnaire.

- Teenagers of lone parents within Gingerbread Groups

A flyer was also sent out to each of the Gingerbread Lone Parent Groups, and this was followed up with a telephone call from the research worker. As a result of this, one focus group was arranged with young people whose parents had contacts with Gingerbread in Derry.

- Youth Group participants

The Teens Project Worker had a range of contacts within youth organisations, mostly in the Belfast area. In total 35 flyers were sent out to a range of youth groups/organisations, and this was followed up with a telephone call from the research worker. A number of the youth groups/organisations indicated that they had no way of knowing if their young people were from lone parent backgrounds. In addition, a number of youth groups/organisations felt that it would be inappropriate to separate out the young people from lone parent backgrounds, as this might create an element of stigma. However, five organisations were enthusiastic about taking part in the research and agreed to organise a focus group. Each of these organisations was in the Belfast area. These were arranged to take place between the beginning of November and the middle of December, 2002.

4.1.2 Multiple Choice Questionnaires via post to Youth Group/Organisations

A number of youth groups/organisations indicated that whilst they wouldn't be able to organise a focus group, they would be willing to distribute multiple-choice questionnaires to teenagers who they knew were from lone parent backgrounds. They also agreed to collect these, and return them back to the researcher, and to ensure that there was parental consent. Each of

the questionnaires had a cover sheet, which explained about the research, and each of the young people was given the contact details for additional support or advice, in the event that they required this. In addition, a Gingerbread support worker agreed to distribute approximately 10 questionnaires to teenagers connected with the groups she worked with.

4.1.3 The Focus Groups with the Young People

In addition to the preliminary focus group, three further focus groups took place. Therefore, in total, 20 young people between the ages of 13 and 18 participated in focus groups. Twelve were female and eight were male.

- The format of the focus groups:
Two facilitators attended each of the focus groups, each of which followed a similar format:
 - One of the facilitators explained what the research was about and ensured that each of the participants were happy to proceed.
 - The young people were invited to fill in a multiple choice questionnaire, individually, and were encouraged to ask the facilitators for help with filling this in if they required it.
 - The participants were brought together and asked if they had any objections to the session being tape-recorded.
 - The content of the questionnaires was discussed by the participants.
 - The vignettes were read out to the young people, followed by a discussion of the issues raised.
 - The participants were asked if they had any other issues they wanted to raise.

Filling in the questionnaires prior to the discussion seemed to stimulate the young people to talk more openly than had been the case at the preliminary focus group. In addition, the vignettes worked very well, and it was clear, during one session in particular, that some of the young people could identify with the circumstances of Stacey. This was very interesting to observe and proved to be a very useful tool.

- Focus group data analysis:
Each of the focus groups was tape recorded and transcribed in full. The data was analysed using thematic categorisation.

4.1.4 Analysis of the multiple choice questionnaires

In total, 29 multiple choice questionnaires were completed by teenagers. A database was constructed using SPSS software. Even though there were only 29 questionnaires, there was a substantial amount of data, given the number of questions contained in the questionnaire. Use of a statistical package was, therefore, justified, and enabled generalisations to be made from the findings. The qualitative comments contained in the questionnaires were recorded and analysed separately.

4.1.5 Profile of the teenage participants

Thirteen of the teenagers who participated in the research were between the ages of 13 and 15 and sixteen were between the ages of 16 and 18. Only three lived with their father and the remainder lived with their mother. Two of the participants were only children, but the vast majority had older and/or younger brothers or sisters living at home. Two participants had lived in a lone parent family for all of their life, and the remainder had lived in a lone parent family for six years or more. Therefore, the majority of the participants had lived in a two-parent family at some point in their lives. This is in keeping with the statistics, which show that the vast majority of lone parents come to lone parenthood as a result of separation or divorce.

4.2 Lone Parents

The next stage was to include the views of lone parents, as well as teenagers. However, given that the overall aim of the research was to uncover the needs and experiences of the young people, the researchers had to be cautious that the fieldwork did not become focused upon the issues from the perspective of the parents. Having said that, the views of the lone parents were important, as it was planned to compare these with the views of the teenagers.

4.2.1 The sources used to locate the lone parents

The Gingerbread groups were mostly used to recruit lone parents. However, other women's organisations in the province were also contacted. An incentive to participate was provided in the form of a Prize Draw for £50 of Tesco Vouchers.

4.2.2 The focus groups with the lone parents

Four focus groups took place with lone parents. Three of these were made up of lone parents who had connections with Gingerbread, and one was

made up of lone parents with no Gingerbread connections, as well as a few that had.

The format of the focus groups

- Two facilitators attended each focus group, each of which followed a similar format, as follows:
- One of the facilitators explained what the research was about and ensured that each of the participants were happy to proceed.
- The participants were asked if they had any objections to the session being tape recorded.
- Each of the three themes were introduced by a facilitator and respondents were invited to discuss these from their own personal experiences.
- The participants were asked if they had any other issues they wanted to raise.
- Multiple choice questionnaires were left with the participants and they were invited to fill these in, if they wanted to add any other comments, or to pass them on to a friend. These could then be posted to the researcher in the envelope provided.

Focus group data analysis

- Each of the focus groups was tape recorded and transcribed in full. The data was analysed using thematic categorisation.

4.2.3 The open ended questionnaires used with the Lone Parents

As noted, a number of these questionnaires were distributed at the focus group sessions. However, in an attempt to get a wider range of views, these were also distributed in other ways.

- **Open ended questionnaires distributed at the Awards Ceremony**

As a large number of lone parents would be present at the Awards Ceremony organised by Gingerbread, it was agreed that we should make maximum use of this event, in terms of promoting the research. The three researchers attended the Awards Ceremony in early November. A table was set up at the registration area, and questionnaires were handed out to a total of 35 lone parents. The lone parents were encouraged to fill in the questionnaire, and either hand it back to the researchers on the day, or return it by post in the self addressed envelop provided.

- **Open ended questionnaires posted out to Women's Groups**

Around 20 questionnaires were sent out to a few of the Women's Groups that had been

contacted about the research. These groups indicated that, whilst they couldn't organise a focus group, they would be willing to try and distribute some questionnaires to lone parents and to arrange for them to be sent back to the researcher.

4.2.4 Analysis of the lone parent multiple choice questionnaires

In total, 24 open-ended questionnaires were received back from lone parents. The structure of the questionnaire, which followed the relevant themes, made it relatively simple to categorise the comments contained in the questionnaires. This alternative method provided a further rich source of data, and enabled some lone parents to participate who might not have been comfortable doing so in a focus group setting.

4.2.5 Profile of the lone parent participants

Twenty-one lone parents participated in the focus group sessions. In addition, 24 open-ended questionnaires were returned and most of these were from lone parents who didn't participate in the focus groups. Most of lone parent participants were female, with a third being male. While this reflects the reality that most lone parents in Northern Ireland are, in fact, female, lone fathers are rather over-represented in this research, since in the population as a whole, the percentage of lone fathers is approximately ten per cent. It should be noted that while some of the teenagers and lone parent participants were from the same family, this was only a small minority. The majority of lone parents and teenagers in the study were from different families.

5.0 Findings

The findings are set out under sections 5.2 – 5.7. Each section addresses a particular issue, and the implications of the findings will be more fully discussed in the concluding chapter.

5.1 Profile of Respondent

In total, the views of 24 lone parents and 29 teenagers were obtained. This was achieved by a combination of completed questionnaires and focus groups. Four focus groups were completed with teenagers and four with lone parents.

What is the age and gender of teenage participants?

Eighteen of the teenagers were female and eleven were male

Twelve of the teenagers who participated were between the ages of 13 and 15, and seventeen were between the ages of 16 and 18.

What is the family profile of the teenagers who participated?

Twenty-six teenagers lived with their mother and three lived with their father. Two were only children, but the vast majority had older and/or younger brothers or sisters living at home.

How long have the teenagers lived in a lone parent family?

Two had lived with a lone parent all their life. Twelve teenagers had lived in a lone parent situation between one and five years, and the remainder had lived in a lone parent family for six years or more. Therefore, the majority had lived in a two-parent family at some point in their lives. This is in keeping with the statistics which show that the vast majority of lone parents come to lone parenthood as a result of separation or divorce

What is the gender of the lone parents who participated in the study?

Around one third of the participants in this study were male, which is more than for the general population.

5.2 The Relationships between Lone Parents and their Teenagers

This section asks a number of questions and addresses these from the perspectives of lone parents and teenagers:

1. How do teenagers feel about living in a lone parent family?
2. What is the quality of the relationship like between lone parents and their teenagers?
3. What causes the most friction between lone parents and their teenagers?
4. What do teenagers feel about the discipline they receive from their lone parent?
5. How do teenagers feel about the time they spend with the parent they live with?
6. Do teenagers feel that their parent has time for them if they have a problem?
7. How do teenagers feel about the time they spend with their family unit?

How do teenagers feel about living in a lone parent family?

Many of the teenagers who participated stated that on the whole they liked living in a lone parent family. Here are some of the comments they made:

"I feel fine, my Mum is great, she does everything for me."

"It makes no difference whether you have one or two parents as long as you are loved."

"I like living with my Mum, she gives me everything I need."

"I wouldn't change it even if I could, maybe it's because I am close to my Aunts and Uncles"

"Living in a one parent family isn't that bad - it hasn't given me any behavioural problems!"

However, when asked most of the teenagers indicated that living in a one parent family sometimes caused problems for them, and most indicated that if they had the choice they would prefer to live in a two parent family. This is what these teenagers had to say:

"I feel left out living in a one parent family, as all my friends have two parents"

"It makes me sad"

"Sometimes I feel lonely"

"I feel very unhappy"

"Sometimes it can be frustrating, 'cause you need to talk to your Mum"

"There's times I want my Dad, but I'm glad I live with my Mum"

What is the quality of the relationship like between lone parents and their teenagers?

The views of teenagers:

When the teenagers were asked to describe how they got on with their parent, the vast majority of comments indicated a very good relationship, apart from minor arguments. Comments included:

"We get on great, we have a mother and son bond"

"We are very close, we always talk things through"

"I think we get on better because of the fact she is on her own"

Some comments confirmed that the usual teenage/parent rows were no exception for teenagers of lone parents. For example, they stated:

"We usually get on well, but when we argue it's not nice"

"We get on well, but we argue a lot about silly things"

"I get on with my Mum, but we argue about me staying at friends' houses"

"We get on well, apart from socialising"

The views of lone parents:

So how did lone parents describe the relationship they had with their teenagers? Overall, there was a mixed response. About a third of the lone parents made only positive comments such as:

"Good"

"Very close and very loving overall"

"Very good on the whole"

"Better than when there was two parents"

Some lone parents acknowledged that whilst the relationship was good now, that wasn't always the case. For some, it was difficult when the 'break up first occurred'. Going from a being a two parent family to a lone parent family had caused some problems, as this comment from a lone father illustrates:

"They found it hard at the start, you know, taking sides between me and their mother. But they have come to accept it now... It has got easier as it has gone on, and they have found their niche at home now - one does this and the other does that"

Other lone parents found the relationship, stressful 'at times', as the following comments indicate:

"It is stressful, she thinks she knows best, but sometimes it's good"



"I find it stressful at times - tiring and exasperating - but rewarding"

"At times our relationship is stressful and fraught, at other times less so"

"Overall we have a solid relationship that can stand the occasional row"

However, for around a third of the lone parents in our study, there were major difficulties in the relationship between them and their teenagers. For example, one parent stated: "it's getting worse", and another commented, "we have spells of being very tough".

The next section will highlight what causes the most friction between lone parents and their teenagers.

What causes the most friction between lone parents and their teenagers?

The perspective of lone parents:

Overall there were a variety of reasons given as to what caused the most friction. However, about one third of lone parents indicated that the main source of friction between them and their teenager/s was money. One parent of teenager girls had no doubts about the problems caused by the lack of money in the family: "with my girls, it's definitely a matter of money, that's an issue!"

The financial problems for lone parents may be made worse because of peer pressure, which, as the following quotations illustrate, is a particular issue during teenage years:

"It's peer pressure coming from other kids in school because you can't afford to buy them the latest gear, or stuff like that"

"I have one who wants to go to a disco this weekend, and if I take her over to Heaton's and try to get her a top, there's no way she will go to a disco with that top on...because all her friends will have different tops from Top Shop or Tempest, and she won't go with anything less - £30 for a skirt - I just can't afford that!"

Well, I had a problem when I couldn't give her the money and her father wouldn't give it to her...that caused bother. We had more rows about that. She felt that she was the odd person out, because her friends were getting everything and she was getting nothing."

The expense brought on by special events at certain times in the year, such as Christmas and summer holidays, and going back to school, clearly caused extra pressure between lone parents and their teenagers, as one lone parent explained:

"There is real stresses in households at this particular time of year- Christmas is bad. Also buying school uniforms and summer holidays...Most of my children's friends go all over the world. I'm lucky if I can get somebody's caravan up in Donegal that's falling to bits and where there's no water!"

Other causes of friction between lone parents and their teenagers related to normal teenage behaviour, such as staying out late, not doing chores, not doing homework, and fights with siblings.

However, it should be noted that half of the lone parents who participated felt that problems between them and their teenagers related directly to not having the other parent around. Lone parents gave some examples of the difficulties they are experiencing with their teenagers.

For some lone mothers, there were problems directly related to bringing up boys alone. Comments included:

"It's difficult not having a male around"

"For me, it is discipline - having all boys and all the male related issues"

"Their father was very strict, now there's no boundaries"

One lone mother expressed concern that her son was trying to take on the role of his father:

"I would dare say that if he thought he could fill his father's shoes he would, if he would get away with it. He would dictate to me what time I have to go to bed, never mind me telling him!"

Other lone parents highlighted specific difficulties caused by the break up itself, and spoke of problems surrounding their teenager's relationship with the absent parent. One mother said:

Well...he was a bit more difficult whenever we split up...Sometimes he'll go out with his father and other times he has a great big argument with him and comes home in a worse state than when he went out!"

One mother spoke of the problems she felt were caused by the absent parent moving in and out of the child's life, and leaving her to pick up the pieces:

"...if somebody's there in the relationship full time they probably have to work that little bit harder...whereas if you only see somebody you can screw up their lives and then walk away until next week and see what happens. ...I find that lack of commitment to being a parent full time is a problem because it shows in the quality of the relationship"

For some teenagers, once the absent parent leaves, they can begin to see them in a 'different' and sometimes 'better' light. A mother spoke about how difficult she found it when her children didn't want to listen to her, and how hurtful it was for her when they appeared to 'idolise' the absent parent who they rarely saw, and who they didn't get along with when he was living in the home!

"It's very difficult because no matter what I say they won't take it on board because they won't believe anything I say... and their attitude toward their father - amazingly they just think he's wonderful but yet when he was there they didn't have a good relationship with him - they didn't have one!...I feel that you're better being the absent parent actually because you become a hero."

This was made more complicated for some lone parents who were conscious of trying not to influence the child against the other parent, as one mother explained:

"...I'm from a separated family myself, so I understand both points of view...but that doesn't mean that I agree with them, but I can see both their sides...I just say I have my opinion on what you are doing"

One lone father spoke of how he had to come to terms with his feelings about his ex-wife, for the sake of his teenagers:

"At the start there was a wee bit of animosity, with the break up, because you were maybe saying 'you don't want to go to your mother'. But that's not fair, because they are all individuals, it's up to them to make their own decision...but things have got better as time has went on...it's got to the stage that they go to their mother when they feel that they want to go to their mother"

In all families, some children will get along better with one parent than the other, and parents may, rightly or wrongly, have 'favourites'. However, for lone parent families this can cause particular problems, particularly if the favouritism comes from the absent parent. Some parents spoke of the difficulties caused by one child in the family having a better relationship with the absent parent, than

the others. This clearly caused friction in the home, as one mother explained:

"Contact with their father is very difficult. The youngest would go to her Daddy, and it was causing a wedge between her (and her) older sister, and with me... It was just causing so much friction...the relationship was just falling apart. That would be the biggest issue in our house...he would give to one and not to the other"

Another parent expressed the difficulties she was experiencing having to cope with her older children feeling 'left out' by the absent parent:

"...my husband would be favouring the youngest one to the exclusion of everybody else and they're all feeling very left out...and I find it very hard to cope with because I don't have any answers."

However, conversely, other lone parents attributed most of the problems they were having with their teenagers to having little or no support, as the following quotes illustrate:

"All the responsibility lies with you and you have no partner for support."

"It's due to being with them 24/7"

"It's because I can't do everything they want and there's no other adult"

Another parent described how trying to cope with teenagers alone was wearing her down:

"Well I think they (teenagers) can use the situation very much to their own advantage, you know...instead of having two parents to discipline, there's only the one, and you do get tired...they wear you down and it's very hard to keep that standard up...Also I find it very hard to cope with the hurt they're going through as well. From being a family, they're now sort of here, there and everywhere... and they all experience different feelings at different times, and when they come to me I'm sometimes all over the place too and I can't help them"

In some lone parent families, the absent parent can have a positive influence in terms of support. However, this is not always the case. One parent spoke of the problems she had in persuading the absent parent to share some of the responsibility for disciplining their teenage son:

"He (ex partner) works away, so there wouldn't be much contact with him, only over the telephone - there isn't much you can say over the telephone, and he doesn't want to hear it anyway. He wants me to look after it...he will just say well I'm down here, you sort it out up there"

Not surprisingly, the relationship between the lone parent and the absent parent may sometimes be strained, and if this spills over into the wider family, it can have particular consequences for

teenagers, who are coping with all sorts of other emotions as well. One parent spoke about the traumatic break up of his marriage, and it was clear that this was still impacting upon his teenage son:

"The children had a good home. So, this was a massive trauma to us all. Unbelievable! I find he's (son) suffering greatly from stress - huge amounts of stress. He's very angry with her, the way she's behaved."

One lone mother explained that she was conscious that the poor relationship between her and her ex partner was causing 'conflict' for her teenagers. She expressed her worries about this:

"...I usually find it difficult to have to talk to my ex-partner about the kids. I prefer to be basically on my own than to have to deal with him. But that actually means that for my children there's a conflict...because they still do visit their father and they have quite a good relationship, but there's a love/hate thing there."

However, it is also true that when parents break up, this can be positive for all concerned. A minority of lone parents in our study indicated that the relationship with their teenagers was better since the break up, as these comments indicate:

"If anything our relationship is better"

"We are closer now because of our situation"
"Better since husband left, found strength to cope more"

What do teenagers think about the discipline they receive from their parent?

Disciplining teenagers can be fraught with all sorts of difficulties for any family, and teenagers may feel that they are being given a raw deal by their parents. So what was it like for the teenagers in our study?

The vast majority of teenagers were of the opinion that the parent they lived with tried to be fair with them and wasn't too strict. Again, the majority stated that if they disagreed with their parent about something they usually managed to sort it out, and there was evidence to suggest that the young people had learned the value of communicating with their parents.

For example, during the focus group sessions, vignettes were used to stimulate discussion. One of the vignettes (see Appendix 3) focused upon a young girl, Stacey, who was having problems getting along with her Mum. This was mainly due to the lack of finance in the family, and the

consequences for Stacey. It became apparent during the focus groups that the young people could not only identify with Stacey, but that they were also able to offer some advice to Stacey and to her Mum on how their problems could be resolved. One girl had this advice for Stacey:

"I think I would tell her to sit down and talk with her Mummy and tell her to take in her Mummy's point of view...I would tell her to say that it is not that she is being selfish, she just feels jealous of her friends, and she doesn't expect to get all the time."

The teenagers were also able to suggest some practical solutions to the problems being faced by Stacey and her Mum. For example, one of the teenagers suggested:

"...Stacey could even get a wee Saturday job or something"

Another teenager had some practical advice for Stacey's Mum, which she thought might help to solve the problems between them:

"I can see it from Stacey's point of view. I know she (Stacey's Mum) doesn't have much money, but she could even treat them on Saturday to something like a McDonald's for example. Just to spend time with them and to give them a bit of money at the same time."

Arguably, most parents will worry at some time about the amount of time they seem to spend arguing with their teenagers about one thing and another. Indeed many parents of teenagers will be familiar with teenagers' complaints that "their parents don't understand them", or that "they never see things from their point of view".

A minority of the teenagers who participated in this study felt that they spent a lot of time arguing with their parent and thought that their parent hardly ever saw things from their point of view. However, when discussing the vignette about Stacey and her Mum, it became clear that some of the young people were critical of Stacey's Mum's attitude, because they thought she didn't appreciate or understand where Stacey was coming from. In empathising with Stacey, one girl commented:

"...It's not nice for her Mummy to keep saying 'you're just being selfish'. Her Mummy has to realise that she mightn't need it, but people get stick about what they wear, like 'look what she's wearing...'"

Another teenager said:

"I feel the same as her (Stacey) 'cause my Ma is always going on about money"

Overall, however, most of the teenagers recognised that if the problems between Stacey and her Mum were going to be sorted, it would

mean a solution being reached on the basis of compromise. The following quotation from one of the teenagers sums this up well:

"I think she (Stacey's Mum) should try and talk it out with Stacey, and let her know her point of view, and let Stacey have her point of view, and come to some sort of agreement."

Over half of the teenagers in our study recognised that it was probably hard for their parent having to discipline them on their own, and around a third agreed that they probably got away with more than their friends in two parent families. Yet, the vast majority of teenagers stated that they tried not to give the parent they lived with any trouble because they knew they "had enough to deal with already". Without exception every teen who participated indicated that even though they didn't always get along with their parent, they knew that "the parent they lived with wanted the best for them".

In terms of how they behaved at home, the majority of teenagers stated that they tried to behave well towards the parent they lived with. Some teenagers indicated that they would like to behave better. From the perspective of the teenagers, the gender of the parent didn't appear to have any impact on how they behaved, as only a few teenagers expressed that they would behave better if their parent was of a different gender. However, most of the teenagers agreed that it would be easier for the parent they lived with to discipline them if the absent parent was living at home. One teenager commented, "it's hard for her to handle us". The results indicate that most teenagers are aware of the extra responsibility placed upon their parent in trying to discipline them, perhaps without any support.

How do teenagers feel about the time they spend with the parent they live with?

With the pressures of modern day living, many parents will admit that they find it difficult to set time aside to spend with their family. Also, in order for parents to spend quality time with teenagers, there also has to be willingness on their part too. When asked the vast majority of teenagers in our study indicated that the parent they lived with did try to make to time for them, and most felt that their parent would like to be able to spend more time with them, and that they, in turn, would like to be able to spend more time with their parent.

Interestingly, about half of the teenagers in the study indicated that if they lived in a two-parent

family, their parents would have more time to spend with them. This would suggest that the teenagers recognised the additional responsibilities that come with lone parenthood and how this impacts upon the time families can spend together.

But, living in a lone parent family can also mean additional responsibilities for some teenagers too. During one of the focus groups teenagers were asked if they felt they took on more responsibility for things at home than, say, their friends in two parent families. One teenage boy replied:

"Yes...you have to look after yourself more, 'cause your parent has to look after so much on their own, and work as well, and money-wise and stuff. So you have to try and help her"

Overall, only a minority of comments about the time teenagers spent with their parent were negative:

"She's not always up for doing things, we don't do much together"

"We don't spend much quality time together"

"I was more close to Dad"

The majority of teenagers had only positive comments to make about the time they spent with the parent they lived with. Comments included:

"I feel good, because it makes me feel wanted"

"I enjoy it; it brings us closer together"

"I like the time I spend with my Mum, because she is usually busy"

"We always find time to spend together to talk or go shopping"

"I feel happy I can spend time, it's good she has time for me"

This should be encouraging for lone parents, some of whom indicated that they worried that their teenagers only associated doing 'nice' things with the absent parent. This is summed up well by one lone mother:

"...I feel...when my children are with their father they tend to get to do the nice things and it really makes me so angry because I end up cooking their food and cleaning the house up...I end up doing the drudgery work, and that affects my relationship with my children...I'm the main one in the house who keeps everything going...the one who says yes to this or no to that...the one to tackle relationship problems."

So, did teenagers feel that the parent they lived with had time for them if they had a problem? This next section addresses this issue.

Do teenagers feel that their parent has time for them if they have a problem?

The vast majority of teenagers felt that their parent would have time for them if they had any problems, and only a very small minority of teenagers indicated to the contrary. But, perhaps it should be noted, as one teenager highlighted, that it's not only parents who feel that they are not being listened to, sometimes teenagers can also feel that parents don't listen to them:

"...if she is on the computer or something, and I'm sitting watching TV and there's something I want to talk to her about, and she says 'houl on' and you're waiting about half an hour..."

Whilst the majority stated that they could talk to the parent they lived with about problems, other teenagers expressed that they didn't like to bother their parent. Perhaps this is an indication that teenagers recognise the stress lone parents can be under trying to cope alone.

When asked, a lot of the teenagers in the study indicated that they would like to have someone to talk to outside the family if there were ever any problems between them and the parent they lived with. But, for most, it would need to be someone who was in a similar situation, as one teenager highlighted:

"...there's no point going and speaking to someone who hasn't, they're not going to know what to say to you...it would be better speaking to someone who has been there and they could give advice and they could talk about their experiences together..."

It was encouraging to see that the vast majority of teenagers had someone they could turn to if they really needed to. This included siblings. Some of the teenagers also had a good relationship with the absent parent and turned to them for advice and support. This might be more likely to happen in cases where there was no animosity between the parents. One teenager who lived with her Mum spoke happily about being able to talk to both her parents:

"...I can tell both of them. If I was to have a problem and I was to tell my Mummy, she would phone him and tell him... I think sometimes I can talk to my Daddy better than I can talk to my Mummy. Maybe it's because I live with her, I don't know."

Around half of the teenagers in the study turned to a grandparent if they needed advice, or to aunts, uncles and cousins. This indicates the importance of the extended family for some lone parent families. Only a small minority of teenagers

turned to someone in their church if they had problems. However, a number of teenagers said they could talk to a teacher at school, or to someone in a youth club. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the majority of teenagers in the study indicated that if they had the choice, they would rather talk to friends about their problems.

How do teenagers feel about the time they spend with their family unit?

The teenagers were asked about the time their family was able to spend together. It was positive to note that over half of the teenagers in the study indicated that their family often did things together.

Almost half of the teenagers indicated that they had a family holiday together at least once a year. However, the other half stated that the reason they didn't have a holiday together was because they couldn't afford to. When asked, the majority of teenagers felt that people who lived in two parent families were more likely to be able to afford a family holiday. As the next section will highlight, the nature and extent of the time lone parent families spend together may often be determined by the financial resources available to them.

Summary

Many of the teenagers in this study stated that on the whole they liked living in a lone parent family. However, when asked specifically, most of the teenagers stated that it sometimes caused problems for them, and that if they had the choice, they would prefer to live in a two parent family. Overall, the vast majority of teenagers stated that, apart from minor arguments, the quality of the relationship between them and their parent was very good.

When lone parents were asked to describe the relationship between them and their teenagers, there was a mixed response. For some, it was generally good, and for others it was sometimes good and sometimes not so good. However, for around a third of lone parents in our study, there were major difficulties in the relationship between them and their teenagers.

When we asked lone parents what caused the most friction between them and their teenagers, around a third said that this was due to financial problems, added to by peer pressure upon their teenagers in terms of having the latest clothes, or going to places with their friends. Lone parents also highlighted that the financial friction between them and their teenagers was worse at certain

times of year, particularly Christmas and school holidays. However, about half of the lone parents in this study, attributed the problems between them and their teenagers directly to not having the absent parent around.

The vast majority of teenagers in this study were of the opinion that the parent they lived with tried to be fair with them and wasn't too strict. They also stated that if they disagreed with their parent about something, they usually managed to sort it out. Only a minority of teenagers in our study spent a lot of time arguing with their parent.



Again, the vast majority of the teenagers indicated that the parent they lived with tried to make time for them and most of them felt that their parent would like to spend more time with them if they could. In turn, the teenagers expressed a desire to spend more time with their parent. It was interesting to note that almost half of the teenagers thought that if they lived in a two parent family, their parents would have more time to spend with them, which would indicate that the teenagers were aware of the extra responsibilities upon the parent they lived with. Over half of the teenagers stated that they often spent time together as a family.

When we asked teenagers if their parent had time for them if they had problems, the vast majority stated that they had. However, some teenagers felt that they wouldn't like to bother their parent, and a lot of teenagers in our study stated that they would prefer to talk to someone outside the family if they had problems with their parent. The main point to note is that the majority of teenagers indicated that they had someone they could turn to if they really needed to, including the absent parent, or a grandparent. Not surprisingly, most of teenagers indicated that they would rather talk to a friend about their problems.

5.3 The Financial Circumstances of Lone Parent Families with Teenagers

This section addresses a number of questions:

1. What is it like financially for lone parents bringing up teenagers?
2. What do teenagers growing up in lone parent families feel about their financial circumstances?
3. Do financial circumstances cause problems between lone parents and teenagers?
4. Do lone parents see things getting better or worse financially?

What is it like financially for lone parents bringing up teenagers?

Lone parents were asked what it was like for them financially trying to provide for their family. Only three lone parents in the study stated that things were 'OK' financially. However, the vast majority of lone parents appeared to be under great financial strain, as these comments indicate:

"Extremely difficult; very hard"; "uphill struggle"; "a nightmare"; "a strain most times"; "I can't plan for the future"; "it's absolutely exhausting".

There are a number of reasons why lone parents are so badly off financially. Many studies have shown that there are problems for lone parents trying to balance work with their responsibilities at home, and trying to find work through which they can earn enough to significantly improve their financial circumstances can prove difficult. As illustrated in the following quotations, for many doing a full time job either doesn't pay, in terms of lost benefits, or it is just too stressful! One lone parent had tried it all:

"I've done the working thing - full time work, part time work and no work...The full time work was a disaster. I mean it's just too difficult to ask anybody to be a good parent and do full time work. It's really asking too much of a human being; something's gotta give somewhere."

Another lone mother explained how she was worse off financially when she was working, as well as being exhausted.

"...I went from two parents...to one parent working and having to cover £80 a week in child care and a mortgage. I was worse off than everybody I knew who was on benefits. I was doing 60 or 70 hours a week working, paying childcare at £80, paying £60 a week in a mortgage, and then going home from work and collapsing into a heap because nobody was doing the housework and nobody was doing anything else - so I had a breakdown!"

The problem of balancing work and family responsibilities is not restricted to lone mothers; lone fathers had similar problems. This is what one lone father in our study had to say:

"There's no incentive to go out to work. My crowd tried to sack me because I couldn't do overtime for them. They wanted me to just pack up and leave, because I was an inconvenience for them... My employer was very understanding when I could work 7 days a week, 365 days a year, but once she (wife) left and I was on my own, and I couldn't do it anymore, they stopped being understanding and they just want me to move."

Another lone father spoke about the stress involved in trying to work full time, and look after the home as well as his teenagers:

"I found it very, very hard at the start...washing clothes and no time to iron them, there was just so much to do. It has got easier, but it's not easy. It'll never be plain sailing...there doesn't seem to be any middle ground on it...I'm working and I get family credit. I've seen me working from a Monday to a Friday, living on my wages, and from a Friday to a Monday living on the Family Allowance. At times, I wish they would change that bloody family credit...at times it comes through your wages, and then it's paid into your Bank Account...And you're not entitled to school meals, you're not entitled to school grant. But if you were on income support you would be...it's costing me £40 a week on school meals or lunches...They seem to make help, but not enough help...you don't seem to be able to save"

Part time work is sometimes seen as the preferred option for lone parents. However, for many lone parents on income support, it is not financially viable, as one explained:

"...if you want to do a part time job and you are on income support, you are penalised. I mean I'm on Jobseekers, and do you know what I am working for? £1 a day - literally £1 a day, because Jobseekers take the rest off you."

Another mother explained how she couldn't afford to go out to work!

"Well, I could have got a job about 6 months ago, and it was good pay, but, for me to go out and do a full time job, it meant that I lost the uniforms that I get. I lost the (school) meals that I get free. I lost the medical which I get free. Plus I was £8.00 down on what I'm on at the minute, plus I would have to pay the rent on top of that. So, there was no way I could take that job on...you go out to work to make money not to lose it!"

It would appear that it is not always financially viable for lone parents to be in paid employment. However, many do want to work. Indeed, some lone parents in our study expressed how they need to work!

"You need to get out of the house for your sanity. You have to go out of the house to meet other people, otherwise you would go mad."

The main point is that vast majority of lone parent families in this study, irrespective of whether the parent was in full time employment, part time employment, or not in paid employment, and whether or not they were male or female, were struggling financially to make ends meet, as these short comments illustrate:

"It's robbing Peter to pay Paul"

"There's always bills, I do without myself, but sometimes there's not even enough for food"

"It's very hard with four kids, ends barely meet, and this creates a lot of stress"

"You get fed up trying to spread your money around"

"The money I work on is not enough to keep us in a reasonable lifestyle"

There will be a further discussion of these points in the concluding chapter.

How did parents think their financial circumstances impacted upon their teenagers?

One mother spoke about her worries for the future:

"I only work part time, and I have to say it works well. I am getting going out to work and earning some extra money. My kids are 14 and 16, so they are capable of coming in to see me at work when they come from school. What worries me more is the future, because at the moment I can get the working family's tax credit, which brings us up above the poverty line, but when my youngest turns 18 that stops. What happens then, when she wants to go to university?"

The extra expenses incurred when a teenager goes on to third level education seemed to be a particular worry for lone parents in our study. One parent who had gone through the experience, and was coming out the other end, spoke about how difficult it was for her putting her son through university:

"...He's just finished his degree in June, and from the day and hour he went to university, I was paying money from my account into his...it is a horrendous stress...I'm disgusted that young people no longer have grants. I think if it hadn't been for the fact that I have a third level education, I might not be as committed to it...certainly a lot of young people will not go into third level education because of the anxieties around debts and owing money, and not having money now."

One mother told of how her daughter's choice of university was limited because of their financial circumstances:

"My daughter was talking about going to Edinburgh, and I'm gonna have to tell her that she just can't go to Edinburgh, because the rents are double/treble and that would eat up an entire loan. So that choice is being taken away from young people."

Another lone parent was concerned that the 'whole university experience' might be spoilt for teenagers due to lack of finances, and she expressed her anger:

"If they can come home at the weekend, you can give them food and stuff, but part of being at university is leaving home, and not still be tied to you. I think it is a national disgrace that this is happening to young people. And it's not just people on benefits, it's people on low incomes too. I know a woman who works in a factory, she is on the minimum wage - she is 50 years of age - she leaves the factory after working 40 hours there and goes to McDonalds and washes floors."

This is how one mother plans to resolve the issue:

"I told R--- that I would sell the house and move to wherever she's going to university so that she has somewhere to live. I haven't got money to give her, but I can try and give her a home wherever she is."

Aside from issues surrounding third level education, the majority of lone parents stated that, overall, their teenagers were disadvantaged financially because they lived in a lone parent family. They made the following comments:

"When they need something we have to save for it"

"They can't have money for things they need at school, or youth club - it hurts!"

"My teenager has had to work sooner - we can't do extra things like two parent families"

"I know it is as long as they feel loved, but that doesn't put food on the table"

Lone parents were asked if they thought their teenagers 'felt' disadvantaged financially because they lived in a lone parent family. Around half of the lone parents in the study thought that their teenagers did feel financially disadvantaged. This mother had no doubts about her teenagers *feeling* financially disadvantaged:

"...my two youngest daughters...are not big into labels or anything - never were - thank goodness! They do need shoes at the minute, and I've just bought them a coat each - they didn't have a coat - and they were £70 each, the coats. I couldn't wait, they needed coats. They need shoes. I was ashamed because one of my daughters borrowed a pair of shoes off somebody the other day and the oldest daughter said to her why are you not wearing your own?" and she said, "there's a hole in mine and my feet are soaked"...I thought, Oh dear...those things are very

expensive, you know, a pair of shoes, you're talking £40 each again."

This was reiterated by another mother, who said:

"...nine times out of ten in a one parent family a child doesn't get something that it doesn't need. When my weans get anything they need it and that's it!"

Another lone parent explained how hard it has been for her teenage daughters to come to terms with the change in their financial circumstances:

"It's been very hard for me. It was toiletries and all these things, and especially with friends...they're experimenting...and they come to you and say 'Mum can I have £5, I have to buy a present', and you have to think £5, it's an awful lot - of course £4 or £5 wouldn't be anything, you know...I have to say well no, I can't give you £5 this week, maybe next week'. Whereas before when they came to me I said 'there you are'...and it's getting to them

Some parents spoke of how they tried to 'hide' their financial circumstances from their teenagers:

"You don't really want them to understand, because there's no point in putting them under pressure."

Another mother worried that if her children knew about her financial circumstances it might spoil their enjoyment of special times like Christmas:

"As a child you always looked forward to Christmas, and you wouldn't want your own children to see the stress and strain you are under."

Other parents spoke about how they 'cut down' on things in an attempt to cope with the financial pressures, and to avoid their teenagers becoming aware of their circumstances:

"...I had a job and everything was great and money wasn't a problem and it's a drastic change for them now... When they're at school, it's £10 here and £35 there. School trips, it's never ending and that's just school trips and the outings - that alone. ...I tend not to tell them about the problems with money. I wouldn't really say. I'd cut down on food and things and they're not fully aware of it."

However, in spite of all of this, many of the lone parents in our study did feel that their teenagers felt disadvantaged, because of their financial circumstances, as the following comments illustrate:

"They hesitate in asking and seem to feel guilty about money

"They don't get the same pocket money as before, the standard of living is bad"

"It's when then hear about their friends in two parent families being able to do things"

"I've heard him telling his friends I'm not in, rather than say I've no money"

"She wants the new styles in clothes and I can't give her the money"

"They feel they are missing out because they can't go to the cinema, or out for meals like their friends in two parent families"

"It's having to have free school meals, and different clothes than their friends"

What do teenagers growing up in lone parent families feel about their financial circumstances?

We've heard lone parents' views about their financial circumstances, and about how they think this impacts upon their teenagers, but it's important to hear what the teenagers themselves had to say.

Whilst two thirds of the teenagers questioned recognised that the parent they lived with struggled to make ends meet, the majority indicated that they didn't get less than their friends because they lived in a lone parent family. However, perhaps this is because almost all of them '*realised that they may not always need the things they want*'.

It was sad to note that over two thirds of the teenagers in this study indicated that they felt 'guilty' asking for things because they knew their parent hadn't got much money, and most of the teenagers were aware of financial problems in their family. This was despite the fact that half of the teenagers indicated that the parent they lived with was in paid employment. Teenagers made the following comments about their financial circumstances:

"I no longer ask for what I don't need"

"We struggle, but we succeed"

"I try to save through the paper round"

"I know Mum can't afford much, she gets us as much as she can"

"It's hard, we don't have much money. There are so many of us. Mum has no job"

"It's very hard as my father is on a low income"

"We get by, but I'm always aware of how much is being spent. We rarely get extras"

"We don't have a lot of money. My friends get a lot more, like more expensive clothes"

A minority of teenagers described their financial circumstances as 'good'. This may have been

because their parent was in a well paid job, or because they had learned to accept their circumstances, as these quotations illustrate:

"Financially my family is good. I almost always get the things I need"

"Good financially, Mum has a well paid job"

"Things are good financially, but would be better if we lived in a two parent family"

Overall, it is clear that, despite the efforts of some parents to hide their financial circumstances from their children, teenagers in this study were largely aware of the financial strain that their parents were under. The point to note is that for the majority of teenagers there was an element of guilt associated with asking for material things. For some, there was clearly a dilemma between asking for what they needed or wanted, and settling for what they felt they could reasonably expect, which in some cases may not have been very much. So were the financial circumstances of these families causing problems between lone parents and their teenagers? This is what lone parents had to say in answer to this question.

Do financial circumstances cause problems between lone parents and teenagers?

Around half of the lone parents in the study felt that their poor financial situation directly caused problems between them and their teenagers. For example, they stated:

"I feel guilty. We argue about money, and it gets harder the older they get."

"When they don't get what they want, they give me a hard time."

"My daughter says I don't manage the money well, but my son is the opposite- he would do without and not say."

"I wish I could surprise them without the stress."

One mother explained why she felt her teenagers were oblivious of her financial circumstances:

"... I will give you an example. My TV Licence is due up on Saturday...I only needed a few more stamps to pay for it, and I said that they could pay the rest, and...she said to me 'we don't watch TV!'. When I come home from work they are sitting watching it. I told them they watch the video, but they don't see it."

A lone father speaking tongue in cheek about the problems he had with his teenagers using the telephone made the following comment:



"...my daughter turned round and told me any phone calls that doesn't show up on the bill is free! There was something like 67 hours of phone calls that weren't listed...they were under 4Op, and they were all free! ...it turned out they were all free, they didn't give you a penny!...yes that's it, everything is free in the house!"

However, in the vignette about Stacey, which was used in the focus groups with the teenagers (Appendix 3), a number of interesting observations were made from the perspective of the teenagers. For example, when they were asked what they thought about Stacey's attitude towards the lack of money in the family, many of them thought her attitude was wrong, as one teenager girl commented:

"She's being selfish. Because it's hard for one parent families with money and she just can't get things!"

Another teenager admitted to being able to 'understand' how Stacey felt, but, nevertheless, she thought Stacey was being unreasonable. She offered Stacey some advice, which many parents would be delighted to hear!

"She has to realise that there is other people in the family. I can understand how she feels and maybe it will be hard for her, but she can maybe think about getting her own job and helping her Mum out."

Another teenager tried to see it from both points of view:

"In a way, I would feel sorry for her, but in another way I think that she maybe doesn't realise that it's hard for her mummy as well...there are three living in the house and she probably doesn't realise that her mummy has hardly got any money...You have to pay for your electric and your food and all your bills...and then going on at her mummy after all that... But I suppose in a way her mummy is going on at her about not being able to afford things... She should try and save money or something, or even give her money every now and then. But I don't think she (Stacey) realises what her mummy has got."

One teenager thought that perhaps Stacey just wanted to be like everybody else:

"I think she just wants to be like the rest of the wee

girls she runs about with. If they get new shoes, she wants them, and she wants to go and say 'my mummy bought me this or that'.

Interestingly, however, most of the sympathy from the teenagers was reserved for Stacey's Mum. One teenage girl observed:

"I think she (Stacey's Mum) is trying her best to make things equal with everybody, so that it's not just Stacey that's getting everything."

Another teenager explained why she could understand Stacey's Mum's point of view:

"I would understand...I know how much a month my mummy is getting. My mummy tries her best and even if somebody was to get the latest trainers tomorrow, they will still be out for ages."

It is clear that some lone parents felt that their teenagers were unaware of, or perhaps indifferent to their financial circumstances. However, the comments made by many of the teenagers in this study showed that they were very perceptive about their family's financial situation and many understood why their parent couldn't give them everything they wanted, or perhaps needed. However, perhaps what parents might find most touching is that the majority of teenagers expressed their awareness and appreciation of the fact that their parents were "doing their best" for them.

In light of all of this, did lone parents see things getting any better for them financially in the future?

Do lone parents see things getting financially better or worse?

A minority of lone parents in the study were hopeful that their financial situation would soon change for the better. This was either because their children would soon become financially independent, or because they were hopeful of getting paid employment.

"My eldest is due to start work and my business has grown"

"I hope to get employment and that should help the situation"

A few stated things couldn't get any worse, or stated that they were trying to remain optimistic despite their circumstances.

"I have had four years working hard - things should get better"

"Having an optimistic outlook helps - positive thinking"

"Don't see things getting better, but try to ensure no worse"

However, for over half of lone parents in this study, there was no such optimism. As discussed in the earlier section, a number of lone parents expressed particular concerns about the financial consequences if their teenagers wanted to go on to third level education. There were other worries about, for example, the increased cost of living, and general worries about teenagers not being able to get employment, as the following comments illustrate:

"Things will get worse due to cost of living going up and my income will stay the same"

"They're becoming adults and things are getting more expensive"

"They'll leave school/college and there'll be no jobs"

Finally, one lone mother summed up the enormous burden of responsibility that many lone parents feel they cope with alone, and how this caused her to worry about the future:

"I think that there is also the anxiety if you are a lone parent that if anything happens to you. I haven't made a Will, and even though I don't have an awful lot - my house is not worth a great deal...I am not sure what will happen to my children...So I have a joke with the person I work with that whenever he drives the car, I say to him 'would you please drive this car carefully, I'm the mother of three children'. I just need to keep myself alive because I have to see my children through the times that they need me, and I worry about it."

Summary

For the vast majority of lone parents things were financially difficult, irrespective of whether or not they were male or female, or whether or not they were in full time employment, part time employment or not working. Lone parents felt that their financial problems did impact upon their teenager's everyday life, and many of the lone parents thought that their teenagers 'felt' disadvantaged. A number of lone parents also expressed particular worries in relation to the impact upon their teenager's third level education opportunities.

Interestingly, whilst the majority of the teenagers who participated recognised that the parent they lived with struggled to make ends meet, the teenagers indicated that they didn't get less than their friends who lived in two parent families. Perhaps this was because almost all of them 'realised that they may not always need the things they want.'

Most of the teenagers expressed that they felt guilty asking for things because they knew their parent hadn't got much money. Clearly teenagers in this study were aware of the financial strain their parents were under.

Some of the lone parents felt that their financial situation directly caused problems between them and their teenagers. However, this was not articulated by the teenagers in the study, who offered some good advice both to parents and teenagers experiencing tensions because of financial problems.

Whilst some lone parents tried to be optimistic, the vast majority were worried that their financial situation could only get worse. They put this down to the cost of living, the extra costs involved in third level education, and the fact that their teenagers might not be able to get a job.

5.4 School and Education from the Perspective of Lone Parent Families

This section explores the experiences of lone parents and teenagers in terms of school and education. The overall aim of this section is to highlight whether or not living in a lone parent family has any adverse implications for teenagers in terms of their educational achievements and experiences.

The section asks four main questions:

1. What are the attitudes of schools, generally, and teachers, in particular, to lone parent families?
2. Do teenagers mind who knows in school/college that they are from a lone parent family?
3. Do teenagers experience any problems in school due to living in a lone parent family?
4. Does living in a lone parent family have any impact on educational achievement?

What are the attitudes of schools, generally, and teachers, in particular, to lone parent families?

Lone parents were asked what they thought about the attitudes of schools generally, and teachers in particular, to lone parent families.

Some lone parents expressed the view that school no longer asked about family situations or background, and that this was a good thing.

Well, they don't ask you your situation. Years ago, maybe, but I think now there is that much going on, they couldn't very well ask you. You're just a parent, it doesn't matter if you have a husband with you or not."

Some parents said that they had deliberately not told the school. One lone mother explained her reasons:

"I didn't tell the teachers - I don't think they are aware of it...I'm not sure I can trust them...to handle things. I mean if they're not trained and you get them saying something in class when she's angry or something that could completely devastate - I mean that has happened before where if you get a nasty type teacher who would just launch out and say something in front of the whole class and I wasn't prepared for that to happen. So I haven't mentioned it to them and that's very difficult because I have to go to the meeting...my husband and I could meet up at the door and go in and sit together so nobody would really notice that. The last one I had to go to on my own, but you have to be careful how you speak, you know. You don't want to talk like a lone parent family. It's all very difficult and I find it embarrassing because I don't know who else is lone parent families. I'm sure I'm not the only one, but I'm not aware of anybody else there so I find it embarrassing..."

Other lone parents had taken the decision to inform the school about the change in their family circumstances, as one lone father explained:

"...my son's school knows... The school are aware of it from my point of view - I've told them. They have been very supportive...and very helpful. I've been very lucky in that aspect."

The majority of lone parents indicated that they had not experienced any problems with teachers, which they could attribute to being a lone parent. Some parents stated:

"Perhaps teachers have a better understanding these days."

"Teachers are quite helpful to me."

However, when lone parents were asked if they thought they were viewed by schools as being better, worse or the same as two parent families, there was a mixed response, with almost half indicating that they were viewed the same, and the other half indicating that they were viewed worse. In relation to those who felt they were viewed worse, the following comments were made:

"I am viewed worse due to the stigma of being a lone parent."

"I feel schools think we are not as efficient on our own."

"They think you can't give the same quality time as a two parent family."

"Teachers seem to think that stable children only come from two parent families."

A small number of lone parents in our study - around a third - indicated that they had experienced direct problems with teachers because they were lone parents. Comments were made such as:

"They suggest that you have a lot on your plate."

"Teachers are not supportive; they class us as a problem family"

Some parents felt that it depended largely on the individual teacher, as one lone mother explained:

"...some teachers are excellent and other ones are just...they have lone parent, council estate, written all over you before you go in the door."

Labelling of children can, undoubtedly, have negative consequences, both for them and their parents. One lone mother recalled how comments made years ago by her, now grown up, son's teacher had lived with her:

"I'm going back now...but I remember when he was at primary school that a teacher said to me that children from lone parent families never done well at school. And then I asked another girl who is a teacher who I was friendly with, and she was amazed that anybody would say such a thing. But I always worried about that..."

Another lone parent spoke of the stigma that she felt still surrounds lone parent families:

"With education and health there is enormous stigma around lone parent families. Certainly when I split up from my partner I did feel a certain amount of shame when I had to go and explain that I had split up from their Dad, and they are now with me, and I wanted to let them know in case it affected their school work. And I felt that there would be judgements made. I feel our family's far better the way it is now, but I don't think the school will see it that way..."

Some lone parents worried that the negative images of lone parent families, often portrayed in the media, might influence teachers, and that this might impact upon what teachers expect from their children, as one lone mother observed:

"I think they have really been sucked in by the discourse that there has been about the inadequacy of a lone parent family, and so they are making all these allowances and not expecting too much..."

Other lone parents felt that it really boiled down to money, as opposed to lone parenthood in itself,

although, as we have seen, lack of money and lone parenthood are often synonymous. A lone mother highlighted her experience:

"When they were at another school I found that money, (and) where you lived, was very important, rather than if you were from a lone parent family."

Many lone parents expressed that schools were, largely indifferent when it came to their financial difficulties, and that this was an added pressure, and one that didn't help their relationship with the school. One lone mother explains:

"It's worse if you are a lone parent. They don't think of the problems you have. It's money every week for charity, cookery, woodwork - even £5 for a ticket for the Christmas play. I think this is unfair that a single parent has to pay to see a Christmas play"

Other parents talked about the assumptions made by schools that everyone had a computer at home:

"...the kids are sent home to work on stuff on the internet and I don't have the internet. Some people don't have computers."

"...the school assumes that every family has a computer and the internet and everything else."

"...if you bring your coursework in done on a computer, you get extra points for that."

So, how did all of this impact upon the teenagers in our study?

Do teenagers mind who knows in school/college that they are from a lone parent family?

We asked teenagers if they were bothered about whether friends in school or college knew that they were from a lone parent family. Almost all of the teenagers in our study stated that they didn't mind who knew their family background. Perhaps this was because the majority of them also indicated that they had friends in school who also came from a lone parent family. A few of the teenagers felt embarrassed in school because they were from a lone parent family, and a few didn't like to tell friends in school about their family circumstances. One teenage boy commented:

"I think it is more important to have good quality equipment in schools, rather than what they think of your family."

Do teenagers experience any problems in school due to living in a lone parent family?

We also asked parents and teenagers if teenagers experienced any difficulties in school, which they could directly attribute to living in a lone parent family.



About one third of parents in our study thought their teenagers had or might experience difficulties in school directly relating to coming from a lone parent family. They gave the following examples:

"I feel that teachers' expectations are affected by your family situation"

"Sometimes they can't go on school trips because of finance"

"They are probably uncomfortable in groups talking about families"

"My son has been bullied. He has no male figure, and he has missed a lot of school"

When we asked teenagers, only a few indicated that they felt that they were more likely to be bullied because they were from a lone parent family, and only a few thought that teachers would think less of them, or their parent.

However, whilst the vast majority of teenagers didn't mind their peers knowing about their family background, some teenagers did feel that it would be better if 'schools' didn't know their family circumstances. One teenage boy explained why:

"...it's better that they don't...cause then they won't give you hassle about it."

One parent spoke about teenagers she knew who avoided telling the school about their circumstances:

"Some of the children I know who are from lone parent families, they don't tell the school, cause they're cute and they don't ever let the school know that they are from a single parent family. And one of my friends gets invites to the house to 'Mr & Mrs' and they have been separated for years, but the pretence is kept up. And they get treated a whole lot differently by teachers in terms of the social activities of the school than I would, because I am openly a single parent..."

It was interesting to note that almost two thirds of the teenagers in our study indicated that they felt

that teachers assumed everyone lived with two parents.

The second vignette we used during the focus group sessions with the teenagers related to a boy called Daniel (see Appendix 4). Daniel lived with his Mum and two sisters, and was having trouble relating to his Mum. Daniel also felt that teachers assumed that everyone had two parents at home, and he was embarrassed that, unlike some of his friends, he couldn't bring his Dad to school football matches. We asked the teenagers to comment on Daniel's circumstances and to give some advice, if they could.

One teenage girl had this to say:

"...he's embarrassed about the fact that he doesn't have his Dad to come to the match, but he should be proud of whatever parent he has."

Another teenage girl offered this advice:

"Just tell him to bring his Mummy, or they'll think he's got nobody!"

A teenage boy offered a solution to one of Daniel's problems:

"...maybe he could bring an uncle."

A few teenagers also had some advice for Daniel's Mum. One teenage boy had this to say:

"...he should talk to his mum...she should try and spend more time with him and stuff, and ask him if he wants her to go to football."

Does living in a lone parent family have any impact on educational achievement?

When we asked teenagers if they thought it was more difficult to get good qualifications when you are from a lone parent family, less than a third thought that this was the case. Similarly, only around one third of teenagers stated that they found it difficult to get help with homework because they were from a lone parent family. Slightly more teenagers wished that they had another parent living at home to help with their homework. However, overall, about two thirds of the teenagers in this study felt that it made no difference in relation to school/education whether you came from a one or a two parent family. Here are some of the comments teenagers made in relation to their experiences in school/college:

"It hasn't bothered me, I have done quite well in school"

"Education is not made better or worse by living in a lone parent family"

"Teachers give you that extra bit of help if you are struggling"

"My family always helps me when needed"

For the minority of teenagers who thought it did make difference, the following reasons were given:

"It can sometimes be worse because teachers assume everyone has a computer"

"I don't get as much help with homework"

"It was hard at school when my Dad first left. It's OK now"

But what did parents have to say? Without exception, the parents we spoke to were concerned that their teenager did well educationally, and they were committed to supporting and helping them to achieve their potential. This is evidenced by some of the earlier comments made in relation to third level education. However, lone parents also admitted that sometimes they found it difficult, for example, to help with homework:

"...homework is a nightmare. The way I used to do things at school has changed now. Everything is done differently."

Many parents, irrespective of their family type, could relate to the previous comment, and to the next comment from a lone mother who found helping her teenage daughter with GCSE coursework particularly exhausting:

What is more difficult now is that an awful lot of the courses are modular and you do course work to hand in and that is awful. Every other weekend my daughter is looking for support with this dissertation or that assignment, or whatever, and it's totally endless. There's times I say to her that I feel as if I am back at school."

Another lone mother spoke, light-heartedly, about getting children from two parent families coming to her for help, as well as her own teenagers:

"...I get all this coursework from everybody's kids coming to me, because I'm a single parent and their mummies and daddies work...and it all comes to me! I provide a support service for two parent families...and then you get the case where they say, 'Mummy's gone to work and I need an egg and some cheese.... (for Home Economics)'

Summary

The majority of lone parents indicated that they hadn't experienced any problems with teachers due to being a lone parent. However, when directly asked if they thought lone parents were viewed by schools as being better, worse or the same as two parent families, there was a mixed response. The main problem experienced by parents in relation to schools was that they appeared to be indifferent to the financial circumstances of lone parent families.

While most of the teenagers said they didn't care if their friends in school knew about their family circumstances, a minority of parents thought that their teenagers had or might experience difficulties in school directly relating to being from a lone parent family.

It was interesting, however, to note that some of the teenagers felt that it would be better if schools didn't know their family circumstances, and the majority of the teenagers indicated that they felt that teachers assumed that everyone lived with two parents.

Overall, it was encouraging to see that the perceptions of lone parents and teenagers in this study were that their educational achievements were not being affected by living in a lone parent family. Arguably, this may largely be due to the determination of the lone parents we talked to who were clearly committed to giving their teenagers as much support and encouragement as they could, at great cost to themselves.

5.5 The Best and Worst things for Lone Parent Families and their Teenagers

This section asks three main questions:

- What do lone parents find most difficult about bringing teenagers up alone?
- What do teenagers think is the worst thing about living in a lone parent family?
- What do teenagers think is the best thing about living in a lone parent family?

What do lone parents find most difficult about bringing up teenagers alone?

The vast majority of lone parents were able to describe what were the most difficult things for them bringing up teenagers alone. Their comments can be summarised into three issues:

- Financial problems
- Lack of emotional support
- Worrying if they are doing enough.

Financial Problems

Around one third of the lone parents in this study stated that one of the worst things about bringing up teenagers alone was the sheer lack of money. The financial difficulties faced by lone parents have already been highlighted in a previous section. However, as this comment illustrates, it is not merely having to struggle to make ends meet which causes stress, lone parents also worry about the impact of their financial circumstances upon the life chances of their children, as one lone mother explained:

"It's worrying about the missed opportunities they have had due to lack of money"

Lack of emotional support

As illustrated in the previous quotation, financial problems often have emotional consequences for lone parents.

For over a third of the lone parents in our study, one of the worst things about bringing up their teenagers alone was the lack of support they experienced, coupled with the feeling of isolation. They made the following comments:

"It's not having someone there to understand what I am going through."

"Not having another adult to discuss things with."

"The lack of support for me, especially when they challenge me."

"The lack of family support and social isolation."

Lone parents in our study also spoke about the sheer exhaustion they felt due to trying to cope alone, as this lone mother explained:

"I get really stressed out...there's times I get so tired and worn out that if one of them comes to me and says...I would be saying 'what is it now?' You just are so tired and you just want peace."

A lone father summed up what it is like for him trying to cope alone:

"... 'cause you're the only one there and they're going

"Daddy, Daddy...there's no other person they can go to and ask... It's always Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, and with three of them going at this, it gets a bit much at times...The...bigger ones can be more of a headache...you're not worried about the wee ones going out drinking or about what time they are going to come in at."

Loneliness can also be a problem, which can become worse as teenagers become more independent. One lone mother explained how she feels that her teenagers, who are busy with their own social life, forget that sometimes she might like to have them around more:

"Well, in my girls case, they have four homes. They have my home, and they have three friends' homes, which they never leave. You know, even at weekends I am lucky if I see my children for half an hour...I feel I don't count anymore."

One lone mother explained the sacrifice involved in being a long parent:

"For me, it's about finding a way to enable your child to do the very best it can with itself and that involves a whole lot of different things. The big stress for me is that you are trying all the time to give your children as many options and life chances and skills that you possibly can and...that can be really limiting for your own life."

Lone parents may also worry about being left on their own when their teenagers leave home, yet as one lone mother explained, some feel that they have neither the time nor the energy to invest in other relationships:

"The other thing that is there is that because so much of your time and energy is put into looking after the kids and working, or whatever, you have no time to invest in other relationships... And the thing that sits with me, my first child is sort of gone, the second child is going to go next year...coming home with washing - and that will leave me with the youngest child... And I just know that four or five years down the line, he will also go and I will be left with a four bedroom house on my own and a certain amount of resentment. But I know that I will have paid a really heavy price for everything. Because I don't have time to invest in relationships. You virtually give up everything - your whole self. You are no longer a priority at all. The priority is that you work to get money that you look after your kids. Your own personal happiness is not on the agenda."

Worrying if I am doing enough

Many lone parents put the interests of their children before their own and are clearly making sacrifices. However, despite this, over a third of the lone parents in our study indicated that they worried about whether they were doing enough for their children. Comments included:

"It's worrying about them. Feeling you are totally responsible if they stray."

"Knowing if I am doing the best, or what is right."

"It's trying to get the balance in terms of discipline."

One lone mother spoke about her fears:

"It's the fear of making the wrong decision, because you have nobody to share the decision with. It's the responsibility - it's a big responsibility - and it is also the loneliness. It's hard, you know. There's nobody there for you."

Finally, this comment from one lone mother sums up the problems many lone parents face and, as she explained, these problems are compounded by the stigma, and general lack of awareness, surrounding lone parenthood:

"Just lack of support, lack of finance, and lack of concessions, or whatever you want to call it, for lone parents. And people look at you and say 'why should they get this?' But I never chose to be a single parent, things happen! You know, I never married to be a single parent, but it's a fact of life that it does happen, and it's better that I'm living alone, rather than living in an unhappy situation...if there was maybe more awareness."

Another lone mother explained that the stigma attached to lone parenthood couldn't be over-estimated:

"I think there are still people who remain in relationships because of the stigma attached to lone parenthood. Certainly from the start you are a failure, and you would even accept this for yourself. You know that somehow or other this relationship has failed, and I don't know any women who are lone parents who didn't struggle and struggle to maintain the relationship for the sake of the children. So I think from the very early days when somebody becomes a lone parent, the stigma attached to having failed is pretty bad, and I do think it does sit with you for as long as you are a lone parent."

For many lone parents in our study, just knowing that somebody cared did help, as did talking. But, as one lone mother explained, whilst talking about problems certainly helped, it was not the whole answer:

"Talking is all very well, but if there was something that could be done about it. It's action we need, not words."

What do teenagers think is the worst thing about living in a lone parent family?

When teenagers were asked to state what, for them, was the worst thing about living in a lone parent family, they highlighted a variety of things.

However, their comments can be summarised into three main issues:

- Financial problems
- Problems due to not having the absent parent around
- Problems due to normal family arguments (which were the majority).

Financial Problems

A minority of the teenagers in our study indicated that the worst thing for them about living in a lone parent family was the financial problems they had. The following comments were made:

"Money is the most difficult thing."

"The lack of money is a problem."

"Money problems."

Problems due to not having absent parent around

Some teenagers felt that the worst thing for them was not having their other parent around. A few girls who lived with their fathers spoke about specific problems that existed for them because their mother was not around:

"It is hard if you are living with your Daddy and you have women's problems."

"It is difficult if you need a women to talk to about women's problems."

"Not being able to talk to my Mum."

However, there were a few more general comments in relation to the absent parent:

"The worst thing is that I only have one parent."

"The worst thing is that we are all girls."

"I never get to see my Mum and Dad happy together."

Problems due to normal family arguments

For most teenagers, the worst thing about living in a lone parent family related to what can be described as 'normal family arguments', which most other families could identify with, as the following quotes illustrate:

"The worst thing is the minor family arguments we have, but what family doesn't?"

"Me and my sister argue and drag my Mum into it."

"The constant fighting between my younger brothers."

"Me getting the blame of everything!"

"The fighting and the arguing."

"If Mum understood things about my social life more."

What do teenagers see as the best thing about living in a lone parent family?

Almost all of the teenagers in our study had a contribution to make in response to this question. The teenagers provided a variety of very positive comments:

"I have a great Mum who loves me, two great brothers & a loving sister."

"I'm loved and looked after."

"The best thing is being able to spend so much time with my Mum."

"Me and my Mum and my brother all stick together."

"It's good because you always have someone to help you."

"We are close."

"I have always someone to talk to."

"It's small and we all get on at the best of times."

Love, friendship and being able to talk to my family."

The above comments illustrate the love that these teenagers had for the parent who was looking after them, and also provided evidence that the young people also felt loved and secure within their family environment.

Summary

The vast majority of lone parents were able to describe what were the most difficult things for them bringing up teenagers alone, and their comments can be summarised into three main issues – financial problems, lack of emotional support and worrying if they are doing enough.

Teenagers highlighted a variety of issues when asked what was the worst thing about living in a lone parent family. These can be summarised into three main issues – financial problems for their parent, problems due to not having the absent parent around and problems due to normal family arguments, which were the majority.

Almost all of the teenagers were able to highlight what was, for them, the best thing about living in a lone parent family. The comments illustrated the love the teenagers felt for their parent and the fact

that they felt loved and secure within their family environment.

5.6 Specific Services Available for Lone Parents and Teenagers

The following questions are addressed within this theme:

1. What specific services are available for lone parents with teenagers?
2. What specific services would be most helpful to lone parents with teenagers?
3. What specific services are lone parents aware of in relation to their teenagers?
4. What suggestions would lone parents have for specific services for their teenagers?
5. Do teenagers know of places to contact if they needed help or advice?
6. What services are teenagers aware of, have used or would use, from a range of choices?
7. What suggestions would teenagers make for specific services in relation to lone parent families?

What specific services are available for lone parents with teenagers?

Lone parents were asked about specific services that were available to help them as the lone parent of a teenager. Two thirds of lone parents indicated that they were aware of services. Over half specified Gingerbread. Some lone parents identified general services, such as the Parent's Advice Centre, The Samaritans, and Parentline. A few lone parents spoke about the Citizen's Advice Bureaux. One lone parent spoke about attending a 'private' counsellor to help him come to terms with the break-up of his marriage. However, this was proving expensive.

What specific services would be most helpful to lone parents with teenagers?

Lone parents were also asked what type of services would be most helpful to them. Almost all of them gave suggestions. Some talked about general advice being available on all issues relating to teenagers. Others said that any advice would be welcomed. However, some gave specific suggestions.

"Help with budgeting money."

"How to deal with teenager's mood swings."

"Help with teaching them about growing up."



"Help in being able to talk to my son and understand him."

"Career advice."

"Advice from other lone parents who have gone through your experiences."

The types of services that lone parents identified can be placed into three main categories:

- Financial advice
- Emotional support
- Practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone

The following quotes illustrate the need for help in each of these areas:

The need for financial advice

"...I think the priority has to be financial...If you're getting good financial advice quickly, you know what's available to you..."

The need for emotional support

"...I think, possibly, as parents, we need maybe as a first priority...to stabilise emotions very quick, and I think maybe that's where we need to get the help from. You have to go through the normal process of grieving - that's normal - and anger and hurt - that's natural...but what I was beginning to realise is that you have to stabilise as fast as you can emotionally because if you don't the kids are going to suffer, you're going to become ill."

One lone mother spoke about the importance of help to enable lone parents to cope, so that they could then support their teenagers:

"...I thought if you help the parents cope...if there was more help for the parents then we in turn can help the children deal with the problems, especially the teenagers who think they don't need help...but if you can do it within the family...I feel I don't have a lot of support to help me cope with these issues at home."

The need for practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone

"...the role of parenting is completely devalued and there is no real appreciation of the wider range of things that impact on anyone within a lone parent family, the financial thing, the service thing, the relationship thing. It's not taken seriously. I mean I don't know if the government has a Minister for Children or Teenagers, or whatever, but nobody takes that role particularly seriously, and that needs to change."

One lone parent, who is active in her local Gingerbread group, spoke about the harm that she felt the government had done to organisations like Gingerbread in terms of their being able to obtain funding to enable services to be developed:

"I would actually say that the government did Gingerbread an awful lot of harm. Whenever Maggie Thatcher decided that all single parents were 16 year olds who wanted a flat of their own and wanted to be single parents."

Another lone mother spoke about how she felt that the stigma surrounding lone parenthood had got worse and that this, undoubtedly, impacted upon funding for projects to do with lone parents:

"...it has got worse. Funding is very hard to get, extremely hard to get...we just fundraise in Supermarkets because some of us were taking awful abuse when we were out on the street. Some people thought that everybody that is a single parent is a Gingerbread member. So if they were having bother from a neighbour who lived up the road and she had half the countryside in her house, we were all tarred with the one brush. We were all drug pushing, alcoholic tramps - every single one of us. It just gives us all a bag of stigma when people think that"

What specific services are lone parents aware of for their teenagers?

In terms of the services available specifically for teenagers from lone parent families, lone parents appeared to be aware of very little, apart from the Teens Project, run by Gingerbread. However, without exception, the parents who talked about this project, did so in glowing terms:

"I have put three through it and they loved it."

One parent recalled how both her and her son had reservations about the Project, but once her son actually participated in the project, these were quickly dispelled:

"...he was a bit reluctant to go to it at the very start. But whenever he went in he was alright. I worried about him constantly the whole weekend, but when he came back he said he couldn't wait 'til he

went to the next one, and then when he came back from that, he said 'bummer, I have to wait two years now to go back.' So, he loved it and it helped him an awful lot."

Other parents reiterated this sentiment:

"The first time my daughter went, she phoned me two or three times, and by the time she was going for the third time, she never phoned once, and she made friends, and she still keeps in contact with people. But they would all love to meet up again."

The only problem identified in terms of the Teens Project was the fact that only two teenagers from each Gingerbread group can participate at any one time. Therefore, lone parents felt that there was a need 'more of the same', as this comment from a lone mother illustrates:

"...you can only send two, and if you have got another two that would go, they can't go, they have to wait until next year. So if they could facilitate more, then maybe three or four of our group could go together."

In addition to the Teens Project, one lone parent identified the services of 'Relate' and another spoke about the 'School Counselling Service'.

What suggestions would lone parents have for specific services for their teenagers?

The suggestions lone parents gave for services for their teenagers can also be placed within three categories:

- Practical advice
- Emotional support for their teenagers
- Education about the common experiences of lone parent families

Practical advice

"A Family Centre"

"Their own Advice Line or Help Line"

"Support Service to help them complete forms for University"

Emotional Support

"To explain that it is not their fault and they are not alone"

"To explain that what they are going through is not new"

"Support for my son as he lacks a role model"

Education about the common experiences of lone parent families

Other lone parents spoke about the need for someone to educate or explain to their teenagers about the common experiences faced by lone parent families:

"To help them understand how the lone parent feels and how hard it is to cope"

"To let them know that it's hard for Mum financially alone"

These comments would suggest that some lone parents are finding it difficult to get across to their teenagers the stress they are under; and that they feel this might be better understood by their teenager if it was explained by someone else, other than themselves. One lone parent felt that the schools should "be made more aware of the issues that lone parent families face", and this was reiterated by other parents.

However, as some lone parents stated, it is often difficult to get teenagers to participate in formal services. The following suggestion was made by one lone parent, which might help to solve this problem, as well as addressing the gaps that exist in the current service provision:

"...I think the need is for access to properly qualified counsellors for the children. Obviously you can't make them go, but maybe if a short video was made that young people could identify with. You could borrow it from somewhere like Gingerbread and take it home and slip it in for five minutes. If it is was cleverly put together by these advertisers and the children could look at it and say you know counselling isn't a bad thing, it's normal, we're not alone, it's actually very common to be a child from a broken home..."

Another lone parent suggested that perhaps a well-known figure that young people would look up to might be used to add credibility to such a video:

"...they would say 'look they're talking to me, I'll listen to them more than I'd listen to my mum or dad."

Do teenagers know of places to contact if they need help or advice?

We also asked teenagers about their knowledge and experience of specific services for them. Over half of the teenagers in this study indicated that they knew of places to go to if they needed help or advice about personal issues.

However, in keeping with the perceptions of lone parents, the majority of teenagers indicated that

they would prefer to talk to someone outside their family about problems they might have. Indeed the vast majority stated that it would be good to have a specific service that offered help/advice specifically for teenagers from lone parent families, and around two thirds of the teenagers indicated that they felt that teenagers from lone parent families had particular problems that other teenagers might not have.

During the focus group sessions, teenagers were asked if they thought it would be helpful to get together to talk about issues with other young people in similar circumstances. One teenage male commented:

"I think it helps 'cause then you know that it's not just you that has the problem."

A female respondent had this to say:

"...you would be better talking to someone who has been in that situation. There's no point going and speaking to someone who hasn't 'cause they're not going to know what to say to you...it would be better speaking to someone who has been there and they could give...advice and they could talk about their experiences together..."

Another teenager had this suggestion:

"...you would probably want to speak to someone who is the same age and then you would maybe like advice from someone who is older."

The teenagers were asked if they were aware of a range of services, if they had used these services, and if they would use them if needed. These services were Contact Youth, Relate Teen, and Gingerbread's Teens Project.

Contact Youth

The vast majority of teenagers were not aware of Contact Youth, and only one teenager had used this service. However, over half of the teenagers said they would use the service if they thought they needed help or advice.

Relate Teen

Again, the vast majority of the teenagers in this study were not aware of the services of Relate Teen, and none of the teenagers had used the service. About half stated that they would use the service if they thought they needed help or advice.

Gingerbread Teens Project

In contrast to the above services, the majority of the teenagers in this study were aware of the Teens Project. This may have been due to the fact that

the questionnaire each of teenagers filled in, gave some information about the Teens Project. However, only around one third of the teenagers in our study had actually been involved with the Project. Without exception, they all enjoyed the project and benefited from it. The following comment sums up their experiences "*The Teens Project was brilliant!*". The remaining teenagers indicated that they would participate in the project if they had the chance.

Teenagers were also asked to give name of other organisations, help line or places they could go to for help or advice. Around half of the teenagers listed specific services. Some of these included details of organisations or youth groups that teenagers were involved with, such as:

"Greater Shankill Alternative."

"Falls Road Women's Centre."

"Pennyburn Youth Group & Community Centre."

"My Church"

A few teenagers stated more general services such as:

"Brook Advisory Clinic."

"Nightline."

"Childline."

The teenagers were also asked what types of services they would suggest for teenagers growing up in lone parent families. A few took the opportunity to highlight the Gingerbread Teens Project. Other suggestions included:

"A Buddy scheme where you could meet new friends and talk to people in the same situation."

"A football club that doesn't cost too much."

"A freephone number available for lone parent families."¹

Summary

It would appear that there are gaps in the services available both for lone parents of teenagers as well as for the teenagers themselves. The service gaps for lone parents can be placed within three categories:

- Financial advice for lone parents
- Emotional support for lone parents
- Practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone

¹ Gingerbread operates a freephone advice line for lone parents.

The service gaps identified for teenagers can be placed within the following three categories:

- Practical advice for teenagers
- Emotional support for teenagers
- Education about the common experiences of lone parent families

The Teens Project was very popular with all those who had the chance to take part in it. However, it is only possible to participate in the Project if your parent is a member of Gingerbread ², and this wasn't the case for all of the teenagers in our study. This is due to funding restrictions, which limit the numbers, and at the time of writing the project is currently under threat because of lack of funding.

5.7 Suggestions as to what could make things better for Teenagers and for Lone Parents

Four questions are addressed in this section:

1. What would make things better for you and your teenagers?
2. What good advice could you offer to other lone parents of teenagers?
3. What would make things better for your parent?
4. What would make things better for you as a teenager growing up in a lone parent family?

What would make things better for you and your teenagers?

For lone parents, having their financial and emotional needs met was important, as this quotation illustrates:

"I think the financial thing is very important. You have to get stabilised financially... When these bills come in the door and you can't pay them it just all boils up. You do your best but, you know, it does all build up in you, and then other letters come to the door and you don't pay them and your phone is threatened to get cut off. So I think that has to come quite high up. But then again it's emotionally I find difficulty because you like socialising. My friends are all married, there's very few of them in my situation, so I find that very difficult. I find it difficult to be in happy families... So emotionally I find that I need my needs met somewhere and they're not being met... I feel I need somewhere to get emotional support."

One lone parent had a specific suggestion for government policy:

"Government should pay lone parents to stay at home during the teenage years"

Another lone parent reiterated the sentiment, but spoke more specifically about younger children:

"...the answer isn't necessarily the New Deal thing. A couple of years ago the big emphasis was about getting lone parents back into work. But I felt that if that had happened to me when my kids were young, I would have been completely stressed out. Why don't they pay for us to look after our kids, rather than for us to pay somebody else to do it, maybe in a way that we wouldn't want."

This quote might indicate that some lone parents might be confused as to the voluntary nature of the New Deal.

Other lone parents made suggestions that would help both them and their teenagers:

"Teachers need to be made aware of the circumstances of lone parents."
"More places to go to for help."

"More involvement from absent parent."

What good advice could you offer to other lone parents of teenagers?

Most of the lone parents in this study were willing to offer some good advice to other people in similar circumstances, based on their own experiences. Suggestions included talking, listening, being patient, remaining open minded, setting rules, developing contacts with people in similar situations, and developing trust with your teenager. Here are some of the comments made:

"Talk, tell them what you expect and ask them what they expect from you."

"Don't get caught in friction between their father and them."

"Be patient, taken time to listen, and talk to them."

"Develop a range of contacts with people in similar situations."

"Try to trust your child. Discuss with them, and avoid anger."

"Always try to befriend them."

"Don't be hard on yourself, don't feel guilty if you can't give them things."

"Never promise unless you have thought it through."

"Tell them there are people worse off."

"Remember each child is an individual with their own needs and personalities."

"Be honest, don't hide your feelings and learn to cope."

² Membership of Gingerbread is free to all lone parents.

What would make things better for your parent?

Teenagers were asked directly what they thought would make things easier for their parent. Around two thirds of the teenagers gave suggestions, and half of these suggestions related to their parent having more money. For example teenagers said:

"Support and more money."

"Enough money so she wouldn't have to work."

"If she had less things to worry about like bills."

"More money to live comfortable."

A few of the teenagers thought that if they behaved better this would make things easier for their parent.

"To behave myself and help them more no matter what."

"If I behaved better at school."



What would make things better for you, as a teenager growing up in a lone parent family?

Teenagers were asked for suggestions as to what would make things better or easier for them growing up in a lone parent family.

When asked what would make things easier for them, it was interesting to note that the comments made by the teenagers didn't actually relate to them, specifically as individuals. Some suggestions related to their family as a whole. For example, some teenagers suggested being able to spend more quality time together, or having more family activities would be make things better.

However, other suggestions related things that would help their parent. In particular, over a third of the teenagers suggested that more money or financial help for their parent would, in turn, make things better for them. Some highlighted that if their parent could afford to work that would make

things better. Linked to this, one teenager said that: *"things would be easier for me if Mum had less worries to think about"*.

It is clear from these comments that the teenagers in this study were protective of their parents, and worried about how they were coping. One girl made a lovely comment about her father, which illustrates the protective attitude of many teenagers in our study towards their parent. She said: *"My Daddy doesn't have to do anything, he's doing his best"*.

Summary

For lone parents having their financial and emotional needs met was important. However, many lone parents, in spite of their difficulties, were able to offer some good advice, based on experience, to other parents in similar circumstances. Suggestions included talking, listening, being patient, remaining open minded, setting rules, developing contacts with people in similar situations, and developing trust with your teenager.

Teenagers identified financial help as the thing that would make things better for their parent. When they were asked what would make things better for them, it was interesting to note that most of the suggestions made didn't actually relate directly to them specifically as individuals. Over a third suggested more financial help for their parent. It would appear that the happiness of teenagers in lone parent families might depend largely upon the happiness of their parent. Therefore, perhaps if the stresses experienced by lone parents could be addressed, such as the financial worries they face, then this would impact upon their teenagers who, in turn, would have a much less stressful time during their teenage years, which are a difficult time for young people in any circumstances.

6.0 Discussion

This section provides a discussion of the findings in terms of their implications for policy and practice. There are four subsections:

- Family Relationships
- Financial Circumstances
- School and Education
- The best and worst about life in a lone parent family and what would make things better

6.1 Family Relationships

In a Report by the Government's Social Exclusion Unit (2000), it is acknowledged that during the teenage years, tensions between parents and their children can often be at their greatest. This was borne out by lone parents in our study some of whom stated that they were experiencing difficulties in terms of the relationship with their teenagers. However, as the Social Exclusion Unit Report (2000) also highlighted, families are where children and young people should receive care, support, love and stability. It is encouraging to note, therefore, that the young people in this study considered the quality of the relationship between them and their parent to be, overall, very good. Moreover, the vast majority of them acknowledged that the parent they lived with tried to be fair with them and wasn't too strict, and stated that if a disagreement arose between them, they usually managed to sort it out. This would suggest that the teenagers in this study came from lone parent families where there was a sense of love, support and stability.

Having someone to talk to when difficulties arise with parents is important for any young person. The majority of teenagers in this study indicated that there were other family members they could turn to if they need help or advice. However, most stated that they would prefer to talk to someone outside the family if they had problems with their parent. Many teenagers preferred, for example, to talk to friends. However, there are cases when other 'outside' advice or help may be needed, and as this study uncovered, there are gaps in the services currently available for teenagers. For example, recommendations made by Fawcett (1999) about the need for new forms of service provision, like peer education projects for teenagers who had experienced family break-up, would appear to date not to have been developed. In addition, the teenagers in our study identified

the need for practical advice, emotional support and education about the common experiences of lone parent families. Whilst the Gingerbread Teens Project was very popular with those who had participated in it, it is only possible for teenagers to be part of it if there is funding to support the project.

There were also gaps identified in the services for lone parents in terms of dealing with problems that might arise with their teenagers. They identified the need for emotional support and practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone. Around half of the lone parents in this study attributed the problems that arose with their teenagers to the fact that the absent parent was not around. There is the need to address this lack of support, given that studies have shown that some lone mothers with dependent children have reported high rates of psychiatric symptoms, particularly anxiety and depression (Roberts, 1995). This may arise from a combination of stress with material hardship and in the local context, it is worth noting that in the largest study ever undertaken of lone mothers in Northern Ireland (Evason et al, 1999), 47% of respondents who were on income support had scores on a General Health Questionnaire which denoted mild psychiatric disorder.

It is important to recognise, however, that support for parenting is not something that is only required by lone parent families. In a survey of 2,000 parents in a range of families, living within poor neighbourhoods, two thirds stated that they would like more information about parenting and about half said they would like help or support at least sometimes (Policy Research Bureau, cited by Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Therefore, as was highlighted in the literature review, whilst lone parent families may be used as a guide to where policy assistance might have the highest pay-off, this should not entail a blanketing of lone parents with intervention initiatives. In particular, care should be taken not to stigmatise lone parenthood as a family structure (Ross, et al, 1998a).

The Labour government has involved itself with families and parenting. In 1998 it established a Family Policy Unit to direct family policy across government departments. The publication of a Green Paper 'Supporting Families' (1998) acknowledged the change in family form and

promised support for all families. (Rake (2001:224) however notes that it singled out marriage as 'the most reliable framework for raising children'). Subsequently a number of national initiatives relating to family and parenting in Britain were established, including the setting up of the National Family and Parenting Institute and the Parents' Helpline.

In January 2001, the Social Exclusion Unit Report: National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Policy Action Team Audit (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) noted that at a national level, the interdepartmental Ministerial Group on the Family was developing a number of national initiatives to support families, including services for parents of teenagers.

6.2 Financial Circumstances

The problem of child poverty has attracted considerable research attention and, since the late 1990s, has been identified as a priority for government. Piachaud and Sutherland (2001) estimate that over one quarter of children live in families that are below half average income level, representing 3 million children living in poverty. The incidence is twice as high in one parent families as in two parent families. This study has highlighted the difficult financial circumstances faced by lone parents and their children. According to Insley (2002), children are expensive enough when there are two parents to meet the costs, but for a single parent, the burden can prove overwhelming. This can be worse during the teenage years, when young people face peer pressure to conform to the latest styles and fashions, and when the demands upon their parents increase. Moreover, it may be compounded by the fact that for many lone parents who come to lone parenthood through divorce, there is a significant decline in their standard of living, which might be particularly difficult for teenagers to accept. For the vast majority of lone parents and teenagers in our study, irrespective of their route to lone parenthood, their financial circumstances were poor.

Research has shown that where no parent is in paid work the incidence of poverty is over five times that in families with one or more paid workers (Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001) which emphasises the link between worklessness and poverty and may provide justification for the government's focus on employment as a key anti-

poverty strategy. However, the answer is not simply a case of getting more lone parents to enter the labour market. As can be seen from this study, despite the fact that half of the lone parents in our study were in employment, for most, money was a problem. Without exception lone parents expressed concern about how this might impact upon their teenagers. They worried that they could not give them what their friends had and that their children might come to resent them for this. Their concerns reflect the reality of living on benefit or in low wage employment. Fimister (2001) noted that Income Support fell short of meeting the needs of children in one parent families by as much as £5.95 a week. Moreover, One Parent Families, Scotland, 2001, recognised that economic hardship increased the risk of psychological and behavioural problems among children and may negatively affect their nutrition and health.

In March 1999 Tony Blair prioritised the abolition of child poverty as a key policy objective (Blair, 1999). In the first annual report on Poverty and Social Exclusion (DSS, 1999) the government acknowledged that 'Lack of income, access to good-quality health, education and housing ... all affect people's well-being'. The government's method of alleviating poverty has, to a large extent, focused on 'encouraging' unemployed people into jobs. This continues to be an important part of the strategy to limit the welfare dependency of lone parents. Employment is seen as central to the long term economic well-being of lone parents and their children.

As in the rest of the UK the number of women in the labour market in Northern Ireland has been steadily increasing but statistics show that the experience of labour market activity for women is very different from that of men. Women of working age in Northern Ireland are still less likely than men to be economically active (65 per cent among women, 80 per cent among men) and their level of economic activity is lower than for women in Britain (74 per cent) (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2003). Data published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (2003) indicate that women's economic activity rate decreases proportionally with the number of children and that women are much more likely to work part-time: 42 per cent of female employees work part-time compared to 6 per cent of male employees. Women's earnings in Northern Ireland are on average 80 per cent of men's.

A number of authors have reviewed the impact of the initiatives introduced by the government to get more lone parents into employment. (see for example, Gray 2001; McKie et al, 2001) and this body of work helps to explain the concern amongst lone parents in our survey about their financial circumstances and the persistence of poverty despite participation in the labour market. The welfare to work strategy for this group centres on three key areas, the New Deal for Lone Parents, the introduction of new in-work benefits and greater financial support for childcare. Although the New Deal for Lone Parents is voluntary they are obliged to attend an interview when the youngest child reaches school age. As expected, the vast majority of participants on the New Deal for Lone Parents are women. Gray (2001) argues that those lone mothers who are induced to enter the labour market will tend to be lower skilled than those already working and this will reduce their earning potential. This analysis is supported by Rake (2001) who questions the emphasis on labour market participation per se rather than the quality of employment or the longer term prospects of workers. She concludes that for many participants the real barriers to labour market participation may not be at the point of entry to the labour market but in the mobility and prospects once there.

The Working Families' Tax Credit introduced in 1999 was a means tested benefit for families in work. It was more generous than its predecessor, Family Credit, with a higher maximum payment and a lower taper and aimed at making low paid work more attractive. An important part of the WFTC was the attachment of a childcare credit covering 70% of childcare costs up to a maximum of £100 payable for one child. The Children's Tax Credit introduced in 2001 replaced the Married Couple's Tax Allowance and the tax allowance for lone parents. This was paid to parents in all families with children under 16 (except higher rate tax payers). Responsibility for the administration of these Tax Credits was placed with the Inland Revenue representing a shift in provision from social security benefits and a significant transfer of fiscal support for children to the Inland Revenue. Many of the lone parents we talked to were anxious or disillusioned about the prospect of them being better off in paid work. The relationship between earnings and benefits, especially the loss of benefits linked to Income Support such as free school meals and Housing Benefit, was a key concern.

In April 2003 the Working Families' Tax Credit was replaced with Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. To be eligible for Working Tax Credit people need to be working at least 16 hour per week (additional credit can be gained by working 30 plus hours). The Child Tax Credit brings together the various strands of support for families with children. It is a single system for both working and non-working parents of children under 16 (19 if in full-time education).



Some commentators (see Bradshaw, 2002; Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001) conclude that government policies aimed at addressing poverty should reduce the number of children in poverty, but this would largely be the case for those with working parents. However, not all lone parents can or want to seek paid work. A number of studies have indicated inequalities in health between lone mothers and couple mothers, linked to socio-economic disadvantage (Shouls et al, 1999). Research in Northern Ireland (Spence, 1996; Evason et al, 1999) has also identified high levels of ill health among lone parents. In the latter study, one quarter of lone mothers on income support reported that their capacity to work was affected by their own ill health or disability, while over a third of these respondents had at least one child with long standing health problems. Therefore it is clear that poor health in parents or children can be a major barrier to getting paid work, which was a key finding of an English evaluation of a training initiative for unemployed lone parents (John et al, 2001).

Sole responsibility for caring may make it more difficult for lone parents to work sufficient hours to qualify for Working Tax Credit and lone parents who participated in this research spoke in depth about the difficulty and stress of bringing up children alone. Half of the teenagers interviewed said that if they lived in two parent families their parents would have more time to spend with them. The emphasis on getting lone parents into work

needs to be balanced with strategies for improving the quality and conditions of employment and the long term training needs of lone parents (Gray, 2001). There is also a need to resolve the tensions inherent in UK Social Policy regarding the extent to which the state expects lone parents to be financially independent through labour market participation or whether it will support them in their caring role. If there is a clear expectation that they must work then there needs to be a much more comprehensive system of childcare provision and assistance provided by the state to facilitate this. If lone parents are not to be compelled to work more attention needs to be focused on improving the circumstances of families with no working adult by raising unemployment benefits. It is clear that there is a tension in social policy between getting parents into work and government's concern with the standard of parenting as illustrated by government initiatives related to family and parenting in Britain, as discussed above. This tension needs to be resolved if the quality of life of lone parent families and the life chances of the young people growing up within these families is to be improved.

Teenagers in our study were, undoubtedly, aware of their parents' financial difficulties. Many teenagers expressed the view that *'they no longer asked for things they didn't need'*, and, perhaps more importantly, most had come to realise that *'they may not always need the things they want'*. Indeed, it was clear that for many young people in our study, there appeared to be an element of guilt attached to asking their parents for material things, because they knew they didn't have much money. Despite this, however, it was encouraging to observe the positive, and often mature attitudes of many of the teenagers in our study to their financial circumstances. For example, when discussing the vignette, which focused upon problems that had arisen between a teenager and her mother due to financial hardship, teenagers in the study demonstrated their ability to negotiate solutions to such problems, together with an ability to understand their parent's perspective. This is not to say that the parents and teenagers we spoke to didn't face the usual teenage problems and family rows. However, lone parents can take some encouragement from these findings, which clearly demonstrate that in the face of all odds, and despite the stigma and rhetoric attached to lone parent families, lone parents can and do deliver positive parenting, which results in responsible, and thoughtful teenagers.

Whilst it was not surprising that lone parents in our study had real worries about the financial outlook for them and their families, it was surprising that many still managed to display a positive attitude. However, as other studies have shown, being optimistic is an important coping mechanism for lone parent families. Ford-Gilboe (2000) found that some lone parents in her study had the ability to focus upon the positive rather than the negative in order to create a good atmosphere in the home. Other lone parents expressed the need to have hopes and dreams, whilst for others what motivated them was the determination to show others that lone parent families can survive and thrive despite their circumstances.

6.3 School and Education

Some researchers have sought to make generalisations in terms of the link between family structure and educational achievement. In studies that have compared one parent and two parent families in terms of the educational outcomes of their children, it has been found that living in a two parent family increases educational attainment, partly because two parent families have higher income (Knox 1996; Wojtkiewicz, 1993; Manski et al, 1992; Krein and Beller, 1988, cited by Lang and Zagorsky, 2000). In their analysis of the NLSCY findings, Ryan and Adams (1998) found that what any given family can do will depend to a large degree on the socio-economic conditions of that family.

Without exception, the lone parents in our study indicated that they were committed to ensuring that their children were given the best possible chance to achieve their full potential, and the majority of lone parents and teenagers indicated that they felt that their educational achievements were not being affected by living in a lone parent family.

However, concerns were expressed by many of the lone parents we spoke to in relation to their teenager's third level education opportunities. Some lone parents couldn't envisage how they would be able to afford to support their child through university, yet without exception, lone parents indicated that they would sacrifice whatever was necessary in order for their child to have this opportunity. Given that single parent families are twice as likely to fall below the poverty line, Government needs to take action to ensure that young people are not deterred from pursuing third level education because of the financial worries they might have.

Many lone parents also stated that their financial circumstances had created problems in relation to everyday issues faced by their child in school. Indeed, many parents expressed concerns about schools' general lack of awareness of, or indifference to, their financial circumstances. In particular, they felt that both them and their teenagers were regularly placed in awkward situations by schools asking them directly or indirectly for 'donations', which turned out in many cases to be compulsory, and which many lone parents couldn't afford to pay. Other lone parents stated that their teenagers were often disadvantaged, relative to their peers, because of the fact that they could never afford to send them on school trips.

This is an important issue for lone parent families. However, it is a complex one to resolve for a number of reasons. First, many of the parents we spoke to felt that the school didn't need to be made aware of their family structure. Indeed, some parents were of the opinion that this might have negative implications for how they and their children were viewed by schools, some of which might, in their view, look down on lone parent families. Second, whilst teenagers largely didn't care if their friends in school knew about their family background, some of the young people also indicated that it would be better if schools didn't know their family circumstances. Generally speaking, neither lone parents nor teenagers wanted the school to provide specific counselling services for lone parent families. They felt that this would set them apart, and create further stigma.

While these findings are in keeping with the research carried out by Wade and Smart (2002), who found that children preferred to keep their family lives private when in school, this is not to say that schools have no part to play in addressing the problems faced by lone parent families. American research suggests that some school based programmes can help to reduce the risk of adversity for children in changing families, but there is little British research on this topic, particularly in relation to secondary schools. A recent British study of school based support work for children whose parents have separated (Wilson et al, 2003) compared the acceptability and impact of individual and group-based support for primary school children. In this research, a majority of children and parents had found the support helpful, leading to sustained improvements across a range of measures including self-esteem,

perception of school relationships, perception of adult support, and difficult behaviour.

It is outside the scope of this research to explore the range of services provided in schools in Northern Ireland for families undergoing change, but it is the case that various forms of support can be accessed through established and developing services provided by the Education and Library Boards (for example, the educational mentoring service in the Southern Board area and the Belfast Board's Parent Support Programme). However, none of the teenagers or parents interviewed in the course of this research mentioned any contact with such services. It is possible that had they known about them, teenagers and parents would be happy to access in-school support services.

The issue of family change and family diversity features in training for new teachers in at least one Board area and should certainly be widely promulgated in in-service training for all teachers. Undoubtedly, teachers do have a certain amount of power because they are in control of an entire group of children. However, with that power also comes responsibility. As noted by Rich-Harris (1999), they can influence the attitudes and behaviours of the entire group, and this may have long-term effects both inside and outside of the school environment.

Therefore, as suggested by Wade and Smart (2002), perhaps schools can play a positive role in terms of providing a contact point for the wider community for the dissemination of information about the diversity of families, and issues surrounding family change. This might help to address the stigma which many parents and young people feel is attached to being part of a lone parent family. In turn, it might also make it possible for schools to become more aware of the circumstances, and in particular the financial hardship, generally faced by many of these families and, therefore, be more sensitive to their circumstances.

Perhaps what should be emphasised, is that there is a continuing need for schools to take into account the whole child in the context of the whole family and the community:

"children occupy all three worlds of the family, the school and the community; these institutions simply cannot be kept apart" (Ryan and Adams, 1998).

6.4 The best and worst about life in a lone parent family, and what could make it better

For lone parents, the most difficult things for them about bringing up teenagers alone were summarised into three main issues – financial problems, lack of emotional support and worrying if they were doing enough.

As discussed earlier, financial self-sufficiency is difficult to achieve for lone parent families, whether they be male or female-headed households. Many lone parent families in our study found themselves caught in a poverty trap. They couldn't afford to live on income support, but because of low wages, and the lack of affordable child-care, many of them couldn't afford to work either, despite the Government's latest strategies. Added to this was the lack of emotional support experienced - they were often too busy or just too tired to make time for themselves.

But young people need to know that their parents are happy too. What came out of this study was that teenagers worried about their parents. In fact, for some of teenagers in our study, the worst thing for them about living in a lone parent family was the financial strain their parents faced on a daily basis. It would appear that the happiness of these young people might not be easily separated from the happiness of their parent.

The question is what can be done to alleviate the anxiety, to meet the practical and emotional needs, and to increase the happiness of each of the individuals within these families?

The most obvious point to note is the need to address their financial needs. Undoubtedly, improving in the financial circumstances of these families would go a long way toward addressing the practical as well as the emotional problems faced by lone parents and their teenagers.

However, there is also the need for a much wider range of support services than are currently available for lone parent families with teenagers. Some of the young people in our study indicated that they did have specific problems due to not having the absent parent around. Some lone parents spoke about the difficulties they had experienced in gaining access to counselling services both for them and their teenagers. In fact, lone parents and teenagers in our study identified a range of service gaps. Lone parents expressed the need for financial advice, emotional support

and practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone. Teenagers spoke about the need for practical advice and emotional support, and education about the common experiences of lone parent families.

Finally, it should be noted that the last thing lone parent families need is the additional pressure that comes from being the victim of public prejudice and of being portrayed as just a burden on the state (NCOPE, 2002). There is still a stigma attached to being part of a lone parent family. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will go some way towards highlighting the good news about lone parent families, namely, that there is no moral panic concerning the young people being brought up in these families. This study has shown that lone parents are good parents, who provide loving and caring environments, despite the deprivation that many experience. As noted by Burges and Roberts (1995):

"...It is too simplistic to associate lone parenthood with inevitably higher chances of deviant or delinquent outcomes for children...it is increasingly agreed that the key influence in children's upbringing is how they are cared for – and how consistently – by their parents, and their relationship with them."

In fact, for the vast majority of the teenagers in this study, the best thing about being brought up in a lone parent family was the relationship they had with their parent, as the following comments illustrate:

"I'm loved and looked after"

"I have always someone to talk to"

"We are close."

Whilst these comments sum up what was the best thing about life for teenagers in their family, this doesn't mean that teenagers were not aware of the difficulties there were both for them and for their parents, and indeed between them and their parents at times. However, overall the young people in this study were grateful for what their parents were trying to do in what they knew to be very difficult circumstances.

Undoubtedly, teenage years for any family are stressful. However, it is clear from this study that these can be more difficult and complex when there is only one parent on hand to deal with them. Therefore, more recognition is needed of the

particular problems lone parents face during the teenage years, such as:

- increased financial pressures due to one wage or none, which are compounded by teenage peer pressure in relation to material possessions;
- the feeling of isolation, and no one being there to reassure you that you are doing a good job;
- the lack of support that is available to lone parents to help them deal alone with the complex issues all teenagers face, both in the home, and outside of the home;
- the lack of understanding in schools, particularly in relation to financial strain faced by lone parent families, and how this impacts upon teenagers;
- the faulty perceptions of lone parenthood that may still exist in society today.

Perhaps what is most important to note from the perspective of teenagers is that they were aware of the financial pressures their parents faced, and they indicated that if these were addressed then, in turn, their lives would be also be better, and their outlook more optimistic. Moreover, there was, undoubtedly, a lack of both practical and emotional support available, apart from that provided by their family, for teenagers who indicated that they faced particular problems that other teenagers might not have.

Finally, there is no doubt that the family matters to the young people and lone parents in this study. There were very many positive strengths to note about the relationships between lone parents and their teenagers. However, if family life is to be made better, then the range of issues highlighted by lone parents and teenagers in this study need to be speedily addressed. Section 7 contains recommendations which are made on the basis of this research.

7.0 Recommendations

7.1 Financial Circumstances

- Income Support falls short of meeting the needs of children in one parent families and should be increased.
- The emphasis on getting lone parents into work must be balanced with strategies for improving the quality and conditions of employment and the long term training needs of lone parents. The mobility and prospects of lone parents within the labour market could be enhanced by greater access to a wider range of pre-employment and in-work training courses than is currently available.
- The relationship between earnings and benefits, especially the loss of benefits linked to Income Support such as free school meals and Housing Benefit for those on Working Tax Credit, should be addressed.
- An increase in the Minimum Wage would make employment a more viable option for lone parents.
- It is clear that there is a tension in social policy between getting lone parents into work and government's concern with standards of parenting. This tension needs to be resolved if the quality of life of lone parent families and the life chances of the young people growing up within these families is to be improved.
- If there is a clear expectation that lone parents must work then there needs to be a much more comprehensive system of childcare provision and assistance provided by the state to facilitate this.

7.2 Education

- Educational mentoring and parent support programmes such as those currently offered by a number of Education and Library Boards would provide valuable support within the education system if more widely available.
- Schools should further develop their roles as a contact point for the wider community for the dissemination of information about the diversity

of families, and issues surrounding family change.

- Schools should ensure awareness of the financial hardship faced by many one parent families and be as sensitive as possible to their circumstances.
- Teachers should be supported by in-service training which addresses these issues.

7.3 Support Services

- Support services should be available to lone parents with teenagers to provide financial advice, emotional support and practical advice on bringing up teenagers alone.
- Support services should be available to teenagers from one parent families to provide practical advice, emotional support and education about the common experiences of one parent families. This is best offered within peer support projects.
- There should be access to free counselling services both for lone parents and their teenagers.

Appendix 1

The Teens Project within Gingerbread N.I. (supporting one parent families) recently received funding from the Youth Council for Northern Ireland to undertake research into the needs and circumstances of young people from one parent families in Northern Ireland. The research is being carried out on behalf of Gingerbread by the University of Ulster.

It is important for us to hear the views of young people themselves, and in an attempt to find out what would be the best way to achieve this, we consulted some young people from lone parent families. They advised us that it would be useful to provide a multiple choice questionnaire which young people could fill in. We would be really grateful if you would take the time to complete this questionnaire. Most of the questions only require you to tick the appropriate box. However, some questions ask you to write down your own views, and we would really like to hear these. We would stress that the questionnaire is completely confidential. No names are asked for, and in no way will your views be traced back to you.

It is important that you know that you can refuse to take part in this research if you would prefer not to. Also, if you are under 16, you need to ask a parent for their permission to fill in the questionnaire and/or to participate in any group discussion about the issues contained in it. Your group leader will be able to provide you with a consent form if you need one.

Everyone who completes a questionnaire has the opportunity of being entered into a Prize Draw for £50 of HMV vouchers. If you wish to enter the draw, please detach the slip below and write down a contact number. These details will not be used for any other purpose.

Please detach this slip and give it to your group leader who will forward it on to us, or hand it to one of the researchers. If you prefer, you can send the slip with your contact details to:

Dr. Valerie Bunting
School of Policy Studies,
University of Ulster,
Cromore Road,
Coleraine.

I wish to be entered into the Prize Draw for £50 of HMV Vouchers.

My contact details are:

.....
.....

We are conscious that some of the issues raised in the questionnaire may be of a sensitive nature. If you feel you would need to talk to someone about any of these issues, or if you need help or advice, please contact any of the following numbers:

Gingerbread:
Confidential and impartial advice for one parent families
Telephone: 0808 808 8090

Children's Law Centre
CHALKY: Advice and information for kids and young people,
Telephone: 0808 808 5678 or 028 90 43424

We are conscious that some of the issues raised in the questionnaire may be of a sensitive nature. If you feel you would need to talk to someone about any of these issues, or if you need help or advice, please contact any of the following numbers:

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Telephone: 0808 808 5678 or 028 90 43424

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEENAGERS

Please tick the appropriate box, or fill in the details asked for, throughout each section of this questionnaire. If there are any questions you would rather not fill in, just leave these blank.

SECTION ONE: GENERAL DETAILS:

- Are you male or female?
Male Female
- How old are you?
- Who do you live with?
Mother Father
- How many younger brothers do you have? (if none please put an X)
- How many older brothers do you have? (if none please put an X)
- How many younger sisters do you have? (if none please put an X)
- How many older sisters do you have? (if none please put an X)
- How long have you lived in a lone parent family?
- These statements are about how you feel about living in a lone parent family. Please state whether you agree or disagree with each of the following:

On the whole I like living in a one parent family
Agree Disagree

Living in a one parent family sometimes causes problems for me
Agree Disagree

If I had the choice, I would rather live in a two parent family
Agree Disagree

If I had the choice, I would rather live in a one parent family
Agree Disagree

Sometimes I wish I could live with two parents instead of one
Agree Disagree

I don't think it makes any difference whether or not you live in a one or a two parent family
Agree Disagree

I think life is easier for people who are brought up in a two parent family
Agree Disagree

I think life is easier for people who are brought up in a one parent family
Agree Disagree

There are disadvantages in being brought up in a one parent family
Agree Disagree

There are advantages in being brought up in a one parent family
Agree Disagree

Describe how you feel about living in a one parent family:
.....
.....
.....

- These statements are about what it is like for you living at home.

Please state whether you agree or disagree with each of the following.

The parent I live with is far too strict with me
Agree Disagree

The parent I live with tries to be fair with me
Agree Disagree

If I disagree with the parent I live with about something, we usually manage to sort things out
Agree Disagree

I spend a lot of time arguing with the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

The parent I live with hardly ever sees things from my point of view

Agree Disagree

It is probably hard for the parent I live with having to discipline me on their own

Agree Disagree

I probably get disciplined less, and get away with more, because I live in a one parent family

Agree Disagree

I probably get disciplined more, and get away with less, because I live in a one parent family

Agree Disagree

It doesn't matter what the parent I live with says, I do what I want anyway

Agree Disagree

I try not to give the parent I live with any trouble because I think they have enough to deal with

Agree Disagree

I play up on the fact that my parent is bringing me up alone

Agree Disagree

Even though we don't always get along, I know that the parent I live with wants the best for me

Agree Disagree

I try to behave well towards the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

I am often badly behaved at home

Agree Disagree

I would like to behave better at home, but I find it difficult

Agree Disagree

If the parent I lived with was of a different sex I think I would get on better with them

Agree Disagree

Sometimes I behave badly because I am unhappy living in a one parent family

Agree Disagree

I think it would be easier for my parent to discipline me if my other parent was living at home

Agree Disagree

Describe how you and the parent you live with generally get on

.....

Write down if there is anything you think would make the relationship between you and the parent you live with better

.....

11. These statements are about the time you spend with the parent you live with: Please state whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

I enjoy spending time with the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

The parent I live with doesn't have much time for me

Agree Disagree

I would like to be able to talk more to the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

I think the parent I live with would like to be able to spend more time with me

Agree Disagree

I would like to spend more time with the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

I feel I have to spend too much time with the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

If I lived with two parents I think they would have more time to spend with me

Agree Disagree

I would like for me, the parent I live with, and the other people who live in my home, to do more things together as a family

Agree Disagree

Me, and the parent I live with, as well the other people who live in my home, often do things together as a family

Agree Disagree

The people who live in my home have a family holiday together at least once a year

Agree Disagree

The people who live in my home rarely go on a family holiday because it would be too expensive

Agree Disagree

I would like it if I could go on a family holiday at least once a year with the people who live in my home

Agree Disagree

I think that people who live in two parent families are more likely to be able to afford family holidays

Agree Disagree

Write down how you feel about the time you spend with the parent you live with:

.....

.....

.....

- 12. These statements are about who you would confide in if you had a problem: Please state whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

I wouldn't like to bother the parent I live with if I had any problems

Agree Disagree

I could talk to the parent I live with about any problems I might have

Agree Disagree

I know the parent I live with would always be there for me if I had a problem

Agree Disagree

I would like to be able to talk more to the parent I live with if I had problems

Agree Disagree

I would like to have someone I could talk to if there were ever any problems between me and the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

I have people I could talk to if there were ever any problems between me and the parent I live with

Agree Disagree

I would rather talk to other people, like friends, if I had problems

Agree Disagree

There is no one I could really confide in, if I had a problem

Agree Disagree

I could confide in a grandparent if I ever had problems, or needed advice

Agree Disagree

I could talk to my sisters or brothers about any problems I might have

Agree Disagree

I could talk to aunts, uncles and cousins about any problems I might have

Agree Disagree

I could talk to someone in my church if I had a personal problem, or if I needed advice

Agree Disagree

I could talk to a teacher at school if I had a personal problem or if I needed advice

Agree Disagree

I could talk to someone in a youth club, or in another organisation I attend, if I had a personal problem, or if I needed advice

Agree Disagree

**SECTION THREE:
FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

13. These statements are about what it is like financially for you and your family. Please state whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

I think I get less than my friends because I live in a one parent family
 Agree Disagree

I think the parent I live with struggles to make ends meet because they are a lone parent
 Agree Disagree

Sometimes I feel guilty asking for things, because I know the parent I live with hasn't got much money
 Agree Disagree

I realise that I may not always need the things I want
 Agree Disagree

The lack of money in our family is a big problem
 Agree Disagree

I think people in two parent families have less financial problems
 Agree Disagree

I am not aware of any financial problems in our family
 Agree Disagree

The parent I live with is in paid employment
 Agree Disagree

Write down what it is like for your family financially, and why you think things are financially good or bad

.....

.....

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.....

.....

**SECTION FOUR:
EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL/COLLEGE**

14. These statements are about what it is like for you in school/college: Please state whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements

I don't mind who knows in school/college that I am from a one parent family
 Agree Disagree

I have friends in school/college who are also living in one parent families
 Agree Disagree

I sometimes feel embarrassed in school/college because I am from a one parent family
 Agree Disagree

I don't like to tell people in school/college I am from a one parent family
 Agree Disagree

I think that people from one parent families are more likely to be bullied at school
 Agree Disagree

I sometimes think that teachers think less of me because I am from a one parent family
 Agree Disagree

I sometimes think that teachers think less of my parent because they are a lone parent
 Agree Disagree

Sometimes in school/college teachers assume that everyone lives with two parents
 Agree Disagree

I think it is more difficult to get good qualifications when you are from a one parent family
 Agree Disagree

I think it is more difficult to get help with homework, or projects, when you are from a one parent family
 Agree Disagree

Sometimes I wish I had another parent living at home who could help me with school work
 Agree Disagree

Whether you live in a one or a two parent family makes no difference in relation to school/college

Agree Disagree

I think it would be good if the parent I live with could have advice on how to bring up teenagers on their own

Agree Disagree

Write down whether you think there is anything in relation to your education that is made better or worse because you live in a one parent family:

.....

.....

.....

The following is a list of services/organisations that are specifically for teenagers.

Please indicate whether you are aware of these; and if you have, or would use them.

Contact Youth: I am aware of this service

Yes No

I have used this service

Yes No

I would use this service if I thought I needed help/advice

Yes No

RelateTeen: I am aware of this service

Yes No

I have used this service

Yes No

I would use this service if I thought I needed help/advice

Yes No

Gingerbread Teens Project: I am aware of this project

Yes No

I have participated in this project

Yes No

I would participate in this project

Yes No

Write down the names of any other groups/organisations/help lines or places that you could go to for help/advice if you needed it.

.....

.....

.....

SECTION FIVE:

SERVICES:

- Groups/Organisations/Help Lines/Advice

15. This section relates to services you may be aware of such as organisations or groups specifically there to help you as a young person.

Could you please state if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

I know of places I could go to if I needed help or advice about personal issues

Agree Disagree

Sometimes I think I would like to be able to talk to someone outside my family about problems I have

Agree Disagree

I think it is a good idea for schools/colleges to employ Counsellors, other than teachers, to advise teenagers who might have problems

Agree Disagree

I think it would be good to have a service that offered advice/help specifically for teenagers from lone parent families

Agree Disagree

I think teenagers from lone parent families have particular problems that other teenagers might not have

Agree Disagree

Write down what types of services/organisations/help you think would be good to have for teenagers, like yourself, growing up in one parent families.

.....
.....
.....

SECTION SIX:
GENERAL QUESTIONS

16. Write down what you think is the best thing about living in your family:

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.....
.....

17 Write down what you think is the worst thing about living in your family:

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.....
.....

18 Write down if you think there anything that would make things better/easier for you growing up in a lone parent family?

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.....
.....

19 Write down if you think there is anything you think would make things better/easier for your parent bringing you up alone?

.....
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.....

SECTION SEVEN:
ANY OTHER ISSUES:

20 Please write down any other issues or subjects you think we should have included in the questionnaire.

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.....
.....

21 Please feel free to make any other comments about this questionnaire or about any of the issues we have covered.

.....
.....
.....

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

Make sure you have filled in the slip at the front of the questionnaire if you wish to be entered into the Prize Draw

Appendix 2

LONE PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Please tick the appropriate box

I am the lone parent of a 13-15 year old

I am the lone parent of a 16-18 year old

Question 1

As a lone parent, overall how would you describe the relationship between you and your teenager/s?

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.....
.....

Question 2

What would you say creates the most friction between you and your teenager/s?

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Question 3

Would you say there are problems between you and your teenager/s which directly relate to being part of a lone parent family? If yes, please explain what you mean.

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Question 4

What is it like for you financially as a lone parent trying to provide for your family?

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Question 5

Generally speaking, do you think your teenager/s are disadvantaged financially because you are a lone parent? If yes, please state how.

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.....

Question 6

Would you say your teenager thinks he/she is disadvantaged financially because they are from a lone parent family? If yes please explain why.

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.....
.....

Question 7

Does your financial circumstances cause problems between you and your teenager/s? If yes please state how.

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.....

Question 8

In the foreseeable future, do you see things getting better or worse for you and your family financially?

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.....

Question 9

Would you say your teenager has experienced any problems in school or in relation to his/her education because they are from a lone parent family? If yes please state in what way.

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.....

Question 10

Have you ever experienced any problems with teachers which you think have arisen because you are a lone parent? If yes please give brief details if you can.

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Question 11

Generally speaking, do you feel that lone parents are viewed by schools as being better, worse, or the same as two parent families? Please state either better/worse or the same, and give a reason if you wish.

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Question 12

Are you aware of any specific services that are available to help or advise you as a lone parent of a teenager? If yes please give details.

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Question 13

Are you aware of any specific services that are available to help or advise your teenager with any problems they may have as a result of living in a lone parent household?

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Question 14

What type of help or advice, if any, would be most useful to you as a lone parent of a teenager?

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Question 15

What type of help or advice, if any, do you think would be most useful to your teenager?

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Question 16

What would you say is most difficult for you bringing up a teenager alone?

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Question 17

What is the best advice you could give to other lone parents who are bringing up teenagers?

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Question 18

Please state if there is anything else you feel is relevant to lone parents with teenagers and which you think should be highlighted.

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Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. It is intended that the outcome of this research will benefit both lone parents and their teenagers.

We would ensure you that all of the information you provided will be treated in the strictest confidence.

Please return the questionnaire in the envelope provided. If you want to be included in the prize draw for £50 of Tesco Vouchers, please give details of your telephone number and/or an address where you can be contacted if you win! These details will not be used to contact you for any other reason, and will not be passed on to anyone else.

I wish to be included in the Prize Draw. I can be contacted at:

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If you have any further questions, or require any information about this research, please feel free to contact any of the following:

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Appendix 3

Stacey is a 15 year old girl living with her Mum and older brother and younger sister. She is angry about the lack of money in her family, and decides to write to a problem page. Here is her letter:

Dear Trish,

Sometimes I get so fed up with the way things are at home. Please tell me if I am being selfish and unreasonable.

I've lived in a one parent family since I was three – ever since my Mum and Dad split - so I've never really known anything else. My Dad's never really kept in touch and I suppose up until recently that hasn't bothered me. But it seems that everything I do or say at the minute causes a problem between me and my Mum. The rows are mostly about money. Like if I ask for extra money to buy clothes or if I ask for money to go out somewhere with my friends, my Mum always reminds me that we can't afford things, because there is only one wage coming in. She sometimes says that I forget that there are other people in the family who also need things, and that she doesn't get everything she would like. She makes me feel like I'm so selfish, but I only want what other people get – what's wrong with that? I get so fed up, that I sometimes wish I lived with two parents – at least then we might have more money! I hear my friends saying that their Dad sometimes gives them money and tells them not to say to their Mum. I feel jealous when I hear that, and it makes me angry that I don't have a Dad to go to. I suppose I blame my Mum in a way. Am I being selfish? I love my Mum, but I'm so fed up hearing her say that we've no money. I just want to be like other families who can go on holiday and do things together without having to always think of the cost. It's not fair!

SOME QUESTIONS TO GENERATE DISCUSSION:

What impression do you have of Stacey – do you feel sorry for her? Are you critical of her?

What do you think of Stacey's problem? – can you understand how she feels, or not?

How do you feel about Stacey's Mother?

Who do you sympathise with most, and why?

What advice would you give to Stacey?

What advice would you give to Stacey's Mum?

Appendix 4

Daniel is a 15 year-old boy. He lives with his older sister, his younger sister and his Mum, and he has lived in a lone parent family since he was 7. His Dad doesn't have any contact with the family. Daniel is finding it difficult being the only boy at home. He wishes he had a Dad to talk to. Daniel decided he would talk to one of the leaders at his Youth Club. This is a summary of what Daniel said:

I'm really fed up at the minute. I'm on the football team at school and the other day the teacher told us to ask our parents to come and support the team when we play in the final. Some of my mate's Dads have already been to the matches. I get annoyed with the teachers at school 'cause they just assume that everyone has a Mum and a Dad. They shouldn't do that. I wouldn't say to my mum to come and watch us 'cause I'd be to embarrassed if she came. Anyway, it's hard for her to go to things in the school because she works.

It's not that my Mum doesn't want to do things with me, but I feel like a sissy when I go out with her and my sisters. I don't like going places with them. This annoys my Mum. She's always saying that I don't tell her anything about school or about my friends.

The thing is, I feel really lonely sometimes. I have my mates, but we don't talk about personal things, or problems. I suppose I would like to be able to tell somebody when I am worried about things. I don't even know what I want to do when I leave school. Sometimes I think it might be nice to have a Dad around. Do you think anybody else feels like me?

SOME QUESTIONS TO GENERATE DISCUSSION:

What impression do you have of Daniel – do you feel sorry for him and why?

What do you think of Daniel's problems?

How do you feel about the teachers at Daniel's school?

What advice would you give to Daniel?

What advice would you give to Daniel's Mum?



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