

How do parents influence their children’s attitudes to life?



*In December 2014, the government’s **Horizon Scanning Programme** published a report on the **Social Attitudes of Young People**. **Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde** takes a closer look and shares insights into the significant roles that parents play in shaping their children’s take on life. Svenja is a doctoral researcher at LSE’s **Department of Media and Communications** and contributes to the **Parenting for a Digital Future** research project.*

From the moment a child is born, parents wonder (and worry) about the role they will play in shaping their child’s outlook on life. While it’s easy enough to get lost in the nature vs nurture debate, it’s perhaps more conducive to ask children themselves. The government’s *Horizon Scanning Programme* took a stab at this, publishing its report on *Social Attitudes of Young People* three months ago.

The report assesses whether and how the social attitudes of young people in the UK today differ from previous generations, and how they might evolve in the future. Based on a comprehensive review of the social science research, and a handful of focus groups with 41 young people, the report shows how peers, school, community and – hugely important – parents, together influence and mutually reinforce the social attitudes and aspirations of children and young people:

Socioeconomic background matters. While aspirations are generally high among young people, their parents’ socioeconomic background determines young people’s outlook on success in life. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds express lower aspirations and expectations to succeed. According to **research** by the Prince’s Trust, 26% of young people aged 16 to 24 from poor homes felt that “people like them don’t succeed in life.”

Attitudes are transferred from parent to child. For example, parental experiences and attitudes to education influence a young person’s likelihood of wanting to stay in further education after 16. The Department of Education’s **longitudinal study of young people in England** (LSYPE) recently found that 90% of 13-year-olds whose parents are in “higher managerial and professional occupations” plan to continue with school, compared to 67% whose parents have “routine occupations”.

The relationship with parents is a key predictor of wellbeing. High levels of family harmony, along with parents who are supportive and willing to grant autonomy to their children, facilitate children’s wellbeing and life satisfaction, according to the 2013 **The Good Childhood Report**. Although child/parent relationships vary a lot, most UK 11- to 15-year-olds find it easy to talk to their mothers (83%) and fathers (69%). Interestingly, parental supervision and monitoring of 16-year-olds has increased over the past two decades, as the Nuffield Foundation’s 2012 **Changing Adolescence Study** found. Even so (or perhaps because of this evident parental concern?) teenagers reported that they choose to spend slightly more time with their families than they did 20 years ago.



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It is impossible to know how young people’s attitudes, behaviours and experiences will change over time. However, the Horizon Scanning Programme offers some telling predictions in relation to parenting:

- If intergenerational disparities in income and wealth increase over the next 10 years, many young people will rely increasingly on older family members for substantial financial and other support.
- Young people’s resilience to future challenges will depend heavily on the level of support they receive during their childhood from parents, along with peers, schools, mentors and their local community.
- The route to independent adulthood is getting longer and more complex. For more advantaged young people who can depend on parental support, this period is often spent in full-time education, resulting in valuable opportunities to experiment and learn. But for those who cannot rely on such assistance, this period is likely to be a more precarious and less positive experience – and compensatory resources and support structures may be ever more important.
- The phase of **‘emerging adulthood’** will continue to be a stage in the lives of many young people. For those whose families are willing and able to support them, this could mean a longer time spent living with parents. Multigenerational households may therefore become more common, with intergenerational relationships being reshaped as a result of increased mutual dependence.

Looking ahead, the report observes that innovations in digital technology are a key driver of socioeconomic change. What we need now (since it was largely missing from the report) is an equally thorough investigation of the current and coming role of digital technologies in young people’s lives – at home, in school, for their social relations, and their future work and place in society.

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