

# **Family breakdown and divorce**

## **Headlines**

1 in 10 adults in Kirklees are either divorced or separated.

2 in 5 children experience family breakdown, at least half of which occurs by age three.

Family stability in the UK and Kirklees has been in continuous decline for four decades, and adults and children today are increasingly faced with the challenges of families which are dysfunctional (often because of mental health issues), fractured (through separation or divorce), or fatherless (15% of babies are born into homes with no resident father)<sup>1</sup>.

This is especially the case in the most deprived groups in society but family breakdown is also affecting people across the socioeconomic spectrum, however this section focuses on the breakdown of relationships where dependent children are present.

## **Why is this issue important?**

Relationships can break down for a number of reasons such as personality and relationship problems, illness, drinking, physical abuse, emotional abuse, financial or work problems, neglect of home and children<sup>5</sup>. The impact of the actual event of breakdown can cause other problems such as stress. Stress incurred through divorce negatively affects almost every adult who goes through the experience, but the effects will differ substantially from person to person. The fact is that marital dissolution is a crisis and a profoundly stressful life event for many people.

It is within the family environment that an individual's physical, emotional and psychological development occurs. It is from the family that individuals learn unconditional love, understand right from wrong, and gain empathy, respect and self-regulation. These qualities enable individuals to engage positively at school, at work and in society in general. The absence of a stable, nurturing family environment has a profoundly damaging impact on the individual, often leading to behaviour which is profoundly damaging to society. Family breakdown is particularly acute in the most deprived communities. It is in these areas where the highest levels of worklessness, addiction and offending can occur<sup>2</sup>.

The 2011 Census showed that out of the 330,768 adults living in Kirklees nearly half (47%) were living in a couple (married or civil partnership), 1 in 8 (12%) were cohabiting, 1 in 3 (32%) had never married or been in a civil partnership and 6% were widowed.

1 in 10 (10%), i.e. 34,000 people, were either divorced, separated or married/in a civil partnership but not living as a couple. These figures reflect the position on Census day, not the number who have ever been divorced or separated.

National data shows that:

- The number of lone parent families has risen consistently from 0.5 million in 1970 to 2 million in 2009<sup>2</sup>. Locally, in 2011 there were just over 12,500 households in Kirklees who had one parent and one or more dependent children; 9 out of 10 of these were female<sup>8</sup>.
- 40% of children experience family breakdown, at least half of which occurs by age three<sup>2</sup>.
- By the age of 16 nearly half (48%) of children will be living in a home with only one paternal parent<sup>3</sup>.
- Amongst married couples, divorce is concentrated in the early years of marriage: 1 in 7 couples divorce between the 2nd and 6th wedding anniversaries<sup>4</sup>.
- Unmarried cohabiting parents remain at least twice as likely to split up across every category of income and education<sup>2</sup>.
- The number of divorces in 2010 was highest among men and women aged 40 to 44<sup>6</sup>.
- In 2010, 20% of men and 19% of women divorcing had their previous marriage end in divorce<sup>6</sup>.
- Locally since 2001 the proportion of people who are married has dropped 5% to 47%, and cohabitation has increased by 2% to 12% in 2011<sup>8</sup>.

Divorce rates have changed little in 25 years and may now be falling. Divorce tends to be concentrated in the early years of marriage. One third of all the divorces that are going to happen do so during the five-year period from the 2nd to the 6th anniversaries. Annual divorce rates peak during the 4th, 5th and 6th years of marriage and then decline steadily over time<sup>4</sup>.

The likelihood of staying together for life has fallen from 75% amongst couples marrying in the 1960s, to 65% amongst couples marrying in the 1970s, to 55% amongst couples marrying in the 1980s, 1990s or 2000s<sup>2</sup>.

## What significant factors are affecting this issue?

Half of couples divorcing in 2010 had at least one child aged under 16 living in the family<sup>6</sup>. A breakdown in the parents' relationship or significant ongoing conflict in the home (whether or not this leads to a relationship breakdown) can have a negative impact on a

child's outcomes. This can be through the direct effects of conflict and indirectly through a reduction in parenting capacity. Children react in many different ways, becoming aggressive, anxious or withdrawn, which in turn can have an impact on behaviour, mental health and educational achievement<sup>1</sup>. However, these negative impacts are not evident for all children of separated parents and research has highlighted that the nature of parental conflict, parenting quality and the number of changes in family structure can play a role in how children are able to handle conflict<sup>7</sup>.

Stress is one of the major factors impacting upon an individual's ability to maintain their health. We all experience stresses or "life events", the effects are magnified for those individuals and social groups that have limited social support, a limited ability to control one's social situation/environment, poor social networks, and low levels of social integration.

Life experiences shape us all. Individuals are often keen to help others going through similar life events, such as major life transitions, difficult circumstances, such as money problems or job loss, and experiencing illness or loss. This support is often rewarding for the individual as they feel people are benefiting from their experiences, and also the recipient feels two benefits: firstly that people have been through this before and also reassured by the fact that someone really understands the situation that they are in<sup>7</sup>.

## Which groups are most affected by this issue?

Low-income families, especially those in poorer neighbourhoods, are exposed to a variety of experiences that place extraordinary stress on the couple and family relationships. In addition to the constant stress of making ends meet financially, and of working in unstable, low paying jobs, and being at more risk of being in poor quality housing, domestic abuse is also more prevalent in low-income households<sup>4</sup>.

Dependent children are significantly affected by family breakdown<sup>4</sup>. How a child or young person will react to a separation of their parents can differ greatly, and there is no such thing as a "usual" response. Many children get through the whole process relatively easily (of course this also depends on the situation and how the parents are handling things), whilst others struggle a lot more. Similarly, some children will change the most during the initial phase of the actual separation, and return "back to normal" soon afterwards, while some children will only show changes in behaviour in the long run<sup>7</sup>.

On top of the emotional impact, separations often force lifestyle changes upon the child or young person. They must adjust to only having one parent around at a time, and possibly

even moving house or changing schools, etc. These lifestyle changes bring additional stress with them, and can make coping with the separation even more difficult.

Amongst UK families with dependent children, the highest rates of marriage, and the lowest rates of cohabitation and lone parenthood occur amongst Asians. In the census year 2001, 85% of Indian families with dependent children were headed by a married couple. At the other extreme are the various groups classified as “black” in which 50 to 60% of families are headed by a lone parent, typically the mother, and another 10% are headed by a cohabiting couple<sup>4</sup>.

Disability puts additional pressure on families, particularly when associated with children or when the onset has been sudden. As well as the psychological and financial pressures, access to the support systems, which should assist, is frequently an additional source of huge pressure, further stressing the family unit<sup>4</sup>.

## Where is this causing greatest concern?

There is no specific pattern that highlights areas within Kirklees that are most affected by family breakdown. [Poverty](#) is a key issue but key differences between ethnic groups would make using poverty as a proxy indicator inappropriate and the effects of breakdown can dramatically affect an individual or family irrespective of previous social status or household income.

## Views of local people

There is currently no local intelligence on this issue. National research on children’s perspectives on parental separation highlights that children want to be told what is going on when their parents separate and some want to be consulted and involved in decisions about their living arrangements. This can also improve outcomes for those children<sup>7</sup>.

## What could commissioners and service planners consider?

- Improve services to tackle growing mental health problems causing family breakdown.
- Invest in relationship support including community-level support.
- Better facilitate family stability and minimise family breakdown by encouraging healthy family relationships.

- The importance of parenting and parental relationships, co-operative parenting post-separation, and social support suggest the types of services and interventions that are needed to support children and their parents, both at the time of family breakdown and in the longer term, include:
  - facilitating communication between parents and children
  - helping children to manage transitions and develop coping strategies
  - facilitating children's networks for support
  - maintaining school and community links
  - enabling conflict management and reduction
  - parenting support to encourage “good” parenting
  - facilitating contact with non-resident parents.
- Focus on the first three years of children’s lives and assist families during other periods of vulnerability (which may be prolonged e.g. when disability is a factor).

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