

## Children's family circumstances: recent trends in Great Britain

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**Abstract.** Recent trends in family formation and dissolution have led to an increase in the diversity of types of family in which children live and to children experiencing more disruptions and changes throughout their childhood years. Our estimates suggest that only about one half of all children can now expect to spend their entire childhood living with their married, natural parents. For policy concerning the welfare of children, it is important to recognize the large proportion of children who will experience family disruption or the likelihood of transition between family types at some point in their childhood.

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**Résumé.** Les tendances récentes de formation et dissolution des familles ont conduit à un accroissement de la diversité des types de familles dans lesquelles vivent les enfants. Tout au long de leurs années d'enfance ils connaissent également beaucoup plus de ruptures et de changements. Nos estimations suggèrent que seulement la moitié environ de tous les enfants peuvent maintenant compter passer l'ensemble de leurs années d'enfance avec leurs parents mariés ou cohabitants. Pour les politiques de protection infantile il est important de reconnaître la forte proportion d'enfants qui expérimenteront à l'avenir des ruptures familiales, ou la vraisemblance de transition entre divers types de familles à certains moments de leur enfance.

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## **Introduction**

In the last two decades there have been marked changes in the structure and dynamics of families in Britain. The primary aim of this paper is to present some data on recent changes in family life from the perspective of children. Our main concern will be the family circumstances, or living arrangements, of children and their experience of living in a lone-parent family.

The family structures in which children live have been shown to be a fundamental indicator of child welfare. The types of families in which children are brought up have implications for their financial, social and emotional well-being, both in childhood and later years.<sup>1</sup> Recently a great deal of attention has been given to estimating the changing family experiences of children in the United States (Bumpass, 1979, 1984; Furstenberg et al., 1983; Hofferth, 1982, 1985, 1988; Duncan and Rodgers, 1987) but, hitherto, little has been done in this country to analyse the information available on family structure from the perspective of children.

The types of families in which children are growing up today differ in many respects from those of the past. Recent changes in patterns of family formation and dissolution, notably increases in birth outside marriage and divorce, have led to changes in both the composition of families into which children are born and the likelihood of transition from one family type to another during the course of their childhood years. Increasing marital dissolution and childbearing outside marriage have resulted in a growing proportion of children experiencing life with a single parent, generally their mother, at some point in their lives. Lone-parent families form a special group within the community because their needs, both social and economic, differ in many ways from the traditional two-parent family. The period of living in a lone-parent family may be brief, if the parent remarries or cohabits shortly after entering the lone-adult state, but a reconstituted two-adult family is likely to have complex family, material and emotional ties which may also herald potential problems for any children concerned.

The growing proportion of children living with their mother only, mainly as a result of the recent increase in divorce but also because of increasing numbers of births outside marriage, has aroused concern for a number of reasons. One of the most important is the large difference in economic well-being between children in two-parent