

Why today's parents are simply the best

Are feckless adults to blame for delinquent teenagers? Actually, a new study says that modern parents are doing a much better job than previous generations

By Jerome Taylor
and Kevin Rawlinson

FEW AND FAR between are the parents who do not worry about whether they are doing a good job of bringing up their children. Salacious headlines of teenagers running amok lead us to question each day whether we are **better preparing the next generation for adulthood than our parents did.**

Teenage anti-social behaviour is on the increase, but for how much of this should parents bear the blame? Latest research suggests that, rather than being disinterested and irresponsible, parents today are more conscientious than they were 20 years ago, spending more time with their offspring and paying more attention to where they are outside the home. In fact, they are so determined to be the perfect providers that they worry about it far more than their parents did.

Academics at Oxford University, who carried out a study of families for the Nuffield Foundation, a charitable trust, found there was "no evidence of a decline in parenting" over the past two decades. In order to understand the rise in anti-social behaviour among teenagers, we need to look outside of the home, they suggested. They did, however, conclude that today's parents are more stressed, with a 50 per cent increase in depression rates among those in the poorest families between 1986 and 2006.

So how has parenting changed? To start, the home is a different entity to

Family fortunes How life has changed

■ **Smaller families and later child-birth.** In 1971, there were 84 births per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 44. That number has since dropped to 56 births, meaning British families are getting smaller.

■ **Fewer marriages and more cohabitation.** Since 1972, the number of marriages per year has dropped from 480,000 to 306,000 and divorce has risen by a third over the same period, to 167,000 annulments per year.

■ **The average age at first marriage has also increased substantially,** from the early 20s in the 1970s to 31 years for men and 29 years for women now. Over the same period, cohabitation for women tripled to about 31 per cent of 18- to 49-year-olds.

■ **Divorce peaked in the 1990s and has since come down,** although about one in five British children still experience the permanent separation of their parents.

■ **Though starting to fall,** rates of child poverty rose markedly between the mid-1970s and the early 2000s. Inequality in household incomes grew in the 1980s and stabilised in the 1990s. More mothers now work, with 80 per cent of those with children aged 11 or over employed in either full-time or part-time work.

what it was in the 1970s. Families tend to be smaller, women give birth later, more parents have chosen to cohabit rather than marry and the proportion of children living with just one parent has tripled from the early 1970s, to reach 24 per cent.

Behavioural problems occur across family types, so how has the relationship with our children changed?

Frances Gardner, a professor of child and family psychology at Oxford, led a team that looked at comparable data taken from the past 20 years and found a marked increase in many of the factors that suggest parents are far more involved in their children's lives

"They spend more quality time with their offspring, but are much more stressed"

than they used to be. They are, for example, spending more quality time together: 70 per cent of young people spent more time with their mothers in 2006, compared to 62 per cent in 1986. The figure has also risen for fathers, from 47 per cent to 52 per cent.

And rather than have little idea where their teenagers are at night, modern parents are more likely to monitor their children's movements. In 1986, 79 per cent of parents expected to know where their children were going; by 2006, that figure had risen to 85 per cent. The proportion of children who said they regularly told their parents where they would be also increased, from 78 per cent to 86 per cent.

Professor Gardner concludes there is no concrete link between overall parenting standards and the increase in problem behaviour among adolescents, saying: "This leads us to believe this factor does not generally explain the rise in problem behaviour."

But others are less convinced. Trudi Butler, a parenting coach who runs the Parent Guru agency in Edinburgh, said the report raised as many questions as it answered. "I certainly do believe modern parents spend more time with their children than they used to and they are extremely conscientious about how they bring up their kids," she said. "But when it comes to bad behaviour, I think parents perhaps should play a greater role in disciplining their children. Obviously I would not recommend a return to 1950s-style parenting but there must be some sort of middle ground."

Dr Pat Spungin, who founded the website Raisingkids.co.uk, said she believed parents needed to do more to prepare their children for the future, beyond making them feel good. "It depends on what your definition of parenting is, but I would argue that a key element is socialising a child so they are ready for the outside world," she said. "It is so much more than just making them feel good about themselves and spending time with them. It is about making sure a child is educated and socialised but also respects authority and is grounded enough for when they themselves become parents."

Additional reporting: Jennifer Morgan