

Modern Britain is 'pulling families apart'

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Sad and confused: The fate of many children, says the report

- **UK parents work the longest hours in Europe**
- **66pc can't devote enough time to children**
- **Youngsters 'feel abandoned' as divorce rises**

Family life is under threat from rising divorce rates and the longest working hours in Europe, the Children's Society has warned.

The charity says 21st century life is 'pulling families apart' and risking the development and well-being of future generations.

It claims childhoods are being damaged by parental break-ups and growing pressure on mothers to return to work.

Research for the society found that almost two-thirds of parents are not able to spend enough time with their children and half feel forced to put their career before family life.

They are increasingly turning to day care while their offspring are still young even though more than a third believe pre-school children suffer if their mothers work.

More than a third of parents find it difficult to meet their family responsibilities because of the time they spend at work.

One child surveyed reported feeling 'lonely' and having nothing to do but play on the computer and

watch TV because their parents were either arguing or working.

The charity was releasing interim conclusions from a major inquiry into the state of childhood due to be completed next year.

It follows a damning UNICEF study which found British children are the unhappiest in Europe and put much of the blame on the breakdown of family life.

Experts who submitted evidence to the Children's Society inquiry arrived at 'some consensus' that children were ideally brought up by both parents together.

Living with married parents was linked to a range of positive consequences for children.

"When a parent is lost through divorce and separation, children can feel confused, sad or abandoned," the report said.

However, divorce rates have been on an upward trend for several years while the numbers getting married in the first place are on the decline.

Parents can minimise the negative effects of separation by talking about their children's interests but many do not, the report added.

The University of York's Professor Kathleen Kiernan, who gave evidence to the inquiry, said: "There is evidence to suggest the rise in divorce has lowered the average well-being of children both in childhood and adulthood, yet the differences are small and depend very much on the resilience of individual-children."

She also controversially claimed that conflict in families staying together can be more damaging to children than a wellmanaged separation.

Two-thirds of adults surveyed for the inquiry did not believe rowing couples should stay together, even when there were children in the family.

But children were unsure and one third said parents who argue should stay together, 47 per cent said they should not while 20 didn't know.

The inquiry warned that family life was being further fractured by the trend for Britons to work the longest hours in Europe and the breakdown of extended family networks.

Mothers told the charity they felt pressured to go back to work by Government policies designed to push more pre- schoolers into childcare.

They also felt forced to return because of rising debt and house prices and attitudes in society that value achievement in the workplace. Yet experts were split over the impact of day care on children.

"Some expressed the view that children are best cared for by their parents or another trusted figure and that early years childcare can be stressful for children and harmful for their emotional, social and behavioural development and their future mental health," the report said.

"Others stressed the positive effects associated with pre-school childcare including its potential to improve aspects of children's development."

The report concluded that a good relationship between parents was more important to children than many adults realised. One study found seven out of ten teenagers believed parents getting on well was "one of the most important factors in raising happy children", against a third of parents.

Bob Reitemeier, chief executive of the Children's Society, said: "Family is hugely important in the lives of all children yet modern society appears to be pulling them apart."

He warned that without a better understanding of how to help families, "we risk damaging the successful growth and development of future generations".