

## Different families and different long-term commitments for couples

### Different Types of Family

**Single Parent Family** - these are families where one adult provides the care for the family. People raise children in single parent families for lots of different reasons, including: relationship breakdown; divorce; death of a partner; a partner having to work in another country, and many more. Some adults choose to be single parents from the start, when they are planning a family. Single parent families can be headed by the mother, by the father, by a grandparent or another adult. There are around 2 million single parents in the UK today.

**Nuclear Family** - this is the term for the 'traditional' family structure, which consists of a mother, a father, and their children. The parents are typically a heterosexual married couple, and their children are biologically theirs. There are not as many nuclear families in the UK today as there used to be, but it is still a very common family structure, with 36% of families being described as nuclear in 2009.

**Same Sex Family** - these are families where the parents are in a homosexual relationship (both parents are the same sex). The parents may be married or in a civil partnership, or they may be living together in a committed relationship. The children in a same-sex family may be biologically related to one of their parents, or they may be adopted. Although same-sex families are relatively new in mainstream society, research shows that there is generally no difference to these children's outcomes compared to children from nuclear families. There are around 20,000 children in same-sex families in the UK today.

**Step Family** - these are families where at least one of the parents has a child from a previous relationship. Step families are sometimes referred to as blended families. Although there can sometimes be issues with two families coming together to form a new family, children in step families often find that they benefit from having more adults and siblings in their family. In 2011, step families made up 11% of the total of couple families in the UK.

**Extended Family** - these are families where the adult or adults who are taking the role of parent are actually a different relative, for example grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. The children in an extended family might live with their wider family including their parents, or with particular members of their wider family alone. Children might live with their extended family for a number of reasons, including: financial circumstances; cultural traditions; a family member's care needs, and many more. The number of

children living in extended families in the UK is increasing, and is currently estimated to be 200,000.

**Adopted Family** - these are families where the parent or parents are not biologically related to their children. The parents have chosen to legally adopt their children, which is a permanent and official process, meaning that the adoptive parents are fully responsible for the welfare and upbringing of the children. Many children who are adopted have been in the care system first. Around 3000 children are adopted in the UK per year.

**Foster Family** - these are families where the children are being looked after by foster parents for a particular length of time. Foster parents are adults who are not related to the child. They are paid by the government to look after children who need care which their biological parents cannot provide. Children in foster families are given a safe place to live and develop, with the aim of getting them back into their original families if possible, or into a more permanent family. There are around 55,000 foster families in the UK.

### Long term relationships are there for those who wish to start a family in a couple

#### **How are 'marriage' and 'civil partnership' defined?**

Marriage is the legal recognition of two people, usually romantic partners and usually not related, joining together to form a union. There are different definitions of marriage around the world and in different cultures. The people getting married are called spouses. A man who is married is often called a husband, and a woman who is married is often called a wife.

When spouses are married, they have certain rights and obligations. For example, if a married couple opens a joint bank account, the money belongs equally to the two spouses, regardless of who put most of it in there. A spouse will inherit all of the money if the other spouse dies. However, by the same token, if a spouse dies in debt, those debts will be inherited by the other spouse.

A civil partnership is defined as a legally recognised relationship between two people of the same sex who aren't related by blood to each other. The people in a civil partnership are referred to as civil partners. In most of the United Kingdom, same-sex couples can get legally married (as opposed to civilly partnered). However, same-sex marriages are not performed or recognised in Northern Ireland. In many parts of the world, same-sex marriage has replaced or is replacing civil partnerships.

Civil partners have similar rights and obligations to spouses. For example, if one partner dies then the other partner is likely to inherit their property. Similarly, if one partner dies with debts then the other partner is likely to inherit those as well.

### **Why do people get married?**

There are lots of reasons that people get married, and these have changed across different time periods and cultures. In the modern Western world, we often think of marriage as an expression of romantic love. However, this isn't the only reason that people marry. Some marry for financial security; some marry in order to unite particular families or make allegiances between tribes; some marry in order to start a family; some marry because it is expected of them; some marry in order to have sexual relations with their partner, and many more reasons not mentioned here.

### **What types of marriage are there?**

There are lots of different types of marriage. For example, there is monogamy (marriage to one person for your whole life); serial monogamy (marrying more than one person in your life but only having one spouse at a time), and polygamy (marrying more than one person at a time, having several spouses at the same time). Polygamy is illegal in many parts of the world, but is legal in some parts of Africa and Asia.

Other types of marriage can include arranged marriage, which is where a person's family find a suitable spouse for the person to marry. In an arranged marriage, both the potential spouses have the right to refuse to marry each other, and there is no pressure for them to go ahead with the marriage if they don't want to. This is different from forced marriage, which is where someone is forced to marry someone they don't want to marry. Closely related to this is child marriage, which is where at least one of the spouses is below the age of 18.

### **History of the Family**

Families have changed throughout the ages. Gender roles and the role of children have changed in the UK, and there are many different expectations of families, parents and children in the world today. In Victorian times, children were seen as cheap labour and were expected to work extremely long hours from a very young age. Children would do dangerous jobs, like cleaning machines in factories for 16 hours a day with no break. In richer families, Victorian children would be expected to spend their time studying,

before getting married and having families of their own at a young age. Victorian society also had very strict expectations about the roles of men and women: fathers were expected to be the only wage earner in the family, and mothers were expected to dedicate their time to their children. Lack of contraception meant that Victorian women had lots more children than women typically have today, so families were often very big.

In the 1950s, almost every family was made up of a married heterosexual couple (a mother and father). Divorce was very rare, and society didn't approve of people getting divorced. Women had very limited choices for careers, and they were expected to give up work when they had children so that they could stay at home and look after them and do the house work while the men went out to work. Most children started work at the age of 14.

Today, families are much more varied, and expectations of children, men and women have changed. There are lots of different family setups, and relationships between children and their parents have improved. However, while the majority of families are safe for children, there are unfortunately some cases of abuse within families. Abuse is never acceptable, and if you experience abuse from a family member, you can report it to Childline on 0844 892 0235.

