



# *The Ecology of Family Life*

**Report of research conducted by  
The Social Issues Research Centre**

**2008**

*The Social Issues Research Centre  
28 St Clements Street  
Oxford OX4 1AB UK  
+44 1865 262255  
group@sirc.org*

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## 1 Introduction

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has commissioned an independent assessment of evidence relating to the impact of the commercial world on children's well-being. This report focuses in particular on the role of consumption in the ecology of family life in contemporary Britain, providing an 'inside' account of the changing processes of consumption that take place within different types of families. We also explore the ways in which commercial activities relate to broader relationships between family members. The first SIRC report (Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes) paves the way for the more in-depth account presented here, in which we rely on additional qualitative studies to capture the lived experiences of children and families. A study of consumption and the ecology of family life must go beyond large-scale quantitative data to focus on the details of everyday life. With this in mind, the following report is divided into three sections that deal with different aspects of the main themes, as follows:

### 1.1 Family and childhood: a paradigmatic review

The ideological significance of family and childhood is debated in terms of the social and cultural values that these ideas are seen to embody. This is the case as much in popular discourse as it is in the academic study of families and children.<sup>1</sup> Family, childhood and well-being, in this sense, can mean very different things to different people and it is important that these various meanings are unravelled if we are to avoid confusion about the subjects of our discussion. In this section we explore a number of these theoretical perspectives on family and childhood in order to paint a picture of the range of disciplinary and epistemological vantage points from which family and childhood can be understood. In turn, this will provide an insight into the kinds of physiological/biological, psychological, sociological and anthropological schools of thought that are used to fuel debates in popular discourse about family life and the well-being of children in contemporary British society, particularly in relation to consumption and the commercial world.

Debates about the impact of the commercial world on the lives of families and children are often framed in terms of two opposing discourses. On one hand, there is the argument that current anxieties over the effects of consumption and commercial

engagement are merely variations on a long-standing theme: the commercial world has always been a part of family life, and adults have always been concerned about the effects of commercial engagement on the (real or imagined) well-being of children. On the other hand, there is the perspective that childhood and family life are undergoing profound and unprecedented changes and that these changes are inextricably tied to the novel forms of commercial engagement generated by processes of social and economic globalisation. Both perspectives involve either negative or positive interpretations of the effects that consumption has had on experiences of childhood and the nature of family life. In recognising both sides of these arguments, SIRC intends to outline a balanced middle ground between both continuity and change in our understandings of how the commercial world affects children and family life.

### 1.2 Space and time in family life

Examining how families and children experience time and space is a useful way of thinking about the significance of consumption and commercial engagement in day-to-day aspects of contemporary family life. Section 3 of *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes* presents a broad perspective of trends in time use over the past several decades in families' and children's engagement in the commercial world. Building on this picture, in this section we explore the ecology of modern family life in more detail by looking at specific examples of how they spend time together or apart as well as the kinds of social space that they inhabit. Changing patterns of consumption, the increasing importance of consumer culture and uses of digital media and new technology are all important sub-themes within the broader issue of how the physical, temporal and social worlds of family life are figured in contemporary Britain.

### 1.3 Pennies and pounds: the socioeconomic relations of families and children in the present

This section of the report looks specifically at the significance of consumption as a social activity within family life, focusing on the ways in which children earn money, how they spend it and the role that children play in family consumption and expenditure more generally. Key to the analysis in this section are the processes by which children, parents and other family members negotiate social and economic exchanges in the context of a shifting balance of power within family life.

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<sup>1</sup> Buckingham, D. (2000) *After the Death of Childhood: Growing up in the Age of Electronic Media*. Polity Press

### 1.4 Theoretical framework

In keeping with sociologists of childhood such as Alan Prout and David Buckingham<sup>2</sup>, SIRC takes as its starting point the idea that childhood and family life are social phenomena, constructed and defined according to social and historical contexts. As such, the changing nature of modern Britain obliges us to reconsider how we think about childhood and the role of children in consumer society. In this sense, while it is important to incorporate points of view that highlight the potential negative effects of the commercial world on the lives of children, it is also necessary to recognise the active role that children play in shaping their engagement in both the family and the marketplace.

### 1.5 Defining consumption

Analysis of the impact of consumption on the lives of children and families also involves a broader recognition of the social importance of consumer culture in everyday life. As in the first report (*Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes*), an analytical division between the commercial and the social is seen as being artificial. SIRC's analysis of existing statistical data and relevant qualitative studies proceeds with this connection between economic and social factors firmly in mind. Here, consumption is considered to be an inherently social activity that is of key importance in the construction and mediation of social identities.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding the role of consumption in the lives of children and families in this way also involves a consideration of the notions of social and cultural capital.<sup>4</sup> We use these notions in the context of unequal access to processes of consumption, reflecting factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. Children can experience the negative impacts of commercial engagement because of their inability to consume particular kinds of goods (nutritious food, for example, or designer clothes associated with a particular social status), or because of their engagement in patterns of consumption that are seen to involve social transgression (underage 'binge' drinking or watching 'too much' television, for example). Alternatively, consumption can have positive impacts on children's social and cultural capital in terms of providing a way to engage

actively in commercial activities as part of the self-making process – whether through identification with certain sub-cultural movements (emos, skaters, chavs, and so on)<sup>5</sup>, through the production of user-led media content online (as in the case of Bebo profiles or Youtube videos), or more generally through greater access to information, educational resources, cultural artefacts (books, films, etc), opportunities for travel, etc. Recognising this variety of experience and the social, cultural and economic factors involved is key to understanding how children and families engage in different ways with the commercial world. There is no one simple way of defining the relationship between consumption, childhood and family life in contemporary Britain.

### 1.6 Methodology and sources of data

In the context of the key themes outlined above, SIRC has conducted an extensive literature search to identify the most salient research across a broad range of disciplines, including sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies, educational studies, social psychology, developmental psychology, media studies, human geography and more. Outputs from leading think tanks and social research centres have also been included in the analysis alongside more detailed quantitative data from relevant government departments and the Office for National Statistics.

Because of the market value of some types of data it is often difficult to access research that deals specifically with the consumer activity and spending patterns of children and young people. Original research conducted by SIRC in 2007, however, explored these issues in some detail – focusing not only on patterns of spending but also on its social value. This research also provided insights into the nature of consumption and expenditure as a factor in relationships within families and groups of friends by examining, for example, perceptions of ownership of goods within households among parents and children and at the different ways of 'earning' pocket money through employment, 'good' behaviour or the performance of certain household tasks. Material from this and related studies is included in our analyses.

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<sup>2</sup> Prout, A. (2005) *The Future of Childhood*. Routledge; Buckingham, D. (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Miles, S. Anderson, A. & Meethan, K. (Eds) (2002) *The Changing Consumer: Markets and Meanings*. Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1986) The Forms of Capital in J.E. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory For Research in the Sociology of Education*. Greenwood Press.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of modern youth tribes, see the SIRC 2004 report, *Young People 'Talking Not Taking' Drugs* – [http://www.sirc.org/publik/talking\\_not\\_taking.shtml](http://www.sirc.org/publik/talking_not_taking.shtml)

## 2 Family and childhood: a paradigmatic review

### 2.1 Figuring families and childhood

Because ideas of 'family' and 'childhood' are so heavily laden with meanings and values, they are often invoked in order to articulate anxieties and concerns, or to advance interests related to broader social and political issues – from healthy eating to environmentalism, poverty, war, responsible motoring and consumption. The ideological significance of family and childhood is also framed by the range of social and cultural values that these ideas are seen to embody. This is the case as much in popular discourse as it is in academic study of families and children.<sup>6</sup> Family, childhood and well-being can mean very different things to different people. Unravelling the various meanings is necessary in order to avoid confusion about the subjects of our discussion.

In this section we summarise a number of theoretical perspectives on family and childhood and the different disciplinary and epistemological standpoints from which family and childhood can be viewed – the physiological/biological, behavioural, psychological, sociological and anthropological schools of thought that are often evident in both formal debates and popular discourse about family life and the well-being of children in contemporary British society.

### 2.2 A question of consumption

Key to these debates are questions surrounding the nature of consumption and its impact on the lives of children and families. From a sociological or anthropological perspective, consumption, from listening to music to buying washing powder, is best understood as a process of communication – a way of defining who we are in relation to others.<sup>7</sup> What we buy and how we spend our time are key factors in expressing belonging to a specific social group or ideological point of view.<sup>8</sup> This is evidenced as much in individual choices about brand loyalty as it is in decisions to 'go organic', 'go green', avoid 'chavs', or to buy jazz instead of house music.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, access to consumer items is not universal.

Entrenched structural inequality and disadvantage play an important role in limiting the participation of some families and children in particular consumption behaviours and the forms of identity that they represent.

In relation to children, debates about consumption and contemporary consumer society are generally divided, rather arbitrarily, between negative and positive camps. At one extreme, different forms of consumption are considered to have a wholly dangerous and debilitating influence on children and young people who are presented as exploited, passive victims of messages from marketing and advertising agencies. At the other extreme, consumption is seen as an unproblematic positive activity, particularly well-suited to young people who are universally savvy and active in their engagement with the commercial world (not least in terms of their knowledge and uses of digital technology). Consumption in this sense is seen as a liberating social force because it provides individuals with unfettered choice in terms of the consumption behaviours that they use to define themselves.

Neither of these perspectives is, on its own, sufficient to provide an understanding of the complexities of consumption as both a commercial and social activity. We explore, therefore, a 'middle road', considering both the positive nature of children's commercial engagement as active consumers and the potentially harmful effects of particular forms of consumption, as well as the ambiguities in between. It is also important to address questions about the scale of change that current consumption activities represent. Are children and families genuinely experiencing unprecedented new social, cultural and economic conditions as a result of changing consumption patterns, or are we still worried about the same commercial influences that have always caused anxiety for parents and families? What, in the end, is different about consumption and family life today? Here again we explore both sides of the debate in order to find a middle road between continuity and change in the kinds of consumption activities that take place in the daily lives of children and families.

### 2.3 A quick look at ideas of family and childhood: 1950 to the present

In order to understand how childhood, family and commercial engagement are framed in different ways in the present, it is

media and the construction of a new underclass, *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2 (9), 9-28.

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<sup>6</sup> Buckingham, D. (2000) *After the Death of Childhood: Growing up in the Age of Electronic Media*. Polity Press. p. 104

<sup>7</sup> See the ESRC Cultures of Consumption project, <http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> Miles, S., Anderson, A. & Meethan, K. (2002) *The Changing Consumer: Markets and Meanings*. Routledge

<sup>9</sup> In relation to the role of consumption in the 'chav' phenomenon, see Hayward, K. & Yar, M. (2006) The 'chav' phenomenon: consumption,

essential that we look (albeit rather briefly) at how these have been conceptualised in the recent past. The historian Harry Hendrick points out that by the middle of the twentieth century, 'childhood' had come to be understood as a discrete and uniform stage in the process of development towards adulthood. Childhood had also become an essential aspect of the 'domestic ideal' of family life and, therefore, was a focus for government policy and popular anxiety related to social cohesion, social welfare and the future of the nation.

Psychological, psychoanalytical and psychiatric theories of child development came to dominate popular understandings of how children might be influenced and nurtured in a way that would secure cohesion and well-being, with a particular focus on 'positive' family relations (particularly between mother and child) as the foundation for the 'successful' intellectual, social and emotional growth of children's minds.<sup>10</sup>

Providing children with the appropriate forms of care, stimulation, instruction and affection has, in the last century, become the very substance of building a better society. As a result, since the late 1940s children and families have become an increasing focus for welfare reform, while the potentially negative social and moral effects of the commercial world have continued to provide a salient ideological contrast to the increased interventions of the state and the nurturing influence of parents. The rising significance of children in the public sphere has also aided in the process of seeing children both as individuals and as citizens with particular rights – or, more accurately, as citizens who are frequently denied particular rights in contemporary British society on account of being 'vulnerable' children. Ironically, an increased recognition of children's individuality in this sense has also encouraged a construction of childhood that emphasises the notion of children as victims in need of adult support and protection. These remain key themes underpinning contemporary debates about childhood, family and the potential risks and benefits of engagement in the commercial world, as we outline below.

### 2.4 The spectre of youth; the shadow of adulthood

Given the recurrent spectre of 'troubled' childhoods – currently aglow with notions of 'toxicity' (see below) – it merits asking why it is that these and other perceptions of childhood and family have become normalised. Broadly speaking, Western

conceptualisations of children have been characterised since the Middle Ages either by innate innocence and naivety or by the supposed ability of children to transgress or threaten a real or imagined moral and social order. Children are either to be protected, or protected against. In this sense adult perceptions of childhood arguably say as much about how adults order and construct perceptions of adulthood – and, in turn, of adult society – as they do about notions of what it means to be a child. This is an issue that underpins much of the debate about the impact of the commercial world on children and families.

### 2.5 Developmental imaginings of childhood

Nancy Lesko argues that this recurrent concern for the moral well-being of young people is rooted in the fact that the social distinction between adults and children has historically rested on biological/developmental models of progression from a period of emotional, physical, social and psychological nascence in childhood, through turmoil in adolescence, to a state of completion and balance in adulthood. Children are, according to this perspective, the irrational, incomplete opposite of adult social order and stability.<sup>11</sup> Many studies of the impact of commercial influences on the lives of children take this developmental perspective, at least implicitly, as their starting point.

It is important here to distinguish between the biological markers of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and their construction as social phenomena. There is certainly nothing to be gained in this analysis if we ignore the very real developmental processes that young people undergo as they mature physiologically, hormonally and psychologically. A developmental perspective of childhood is not mutually exclusive to a socio-cultural analysis in this sense. Nor would it be valid to suggest that developmental and psychological perspectives of childhood and family life necessarily conflict with sociological and anthropological ideas of how such social categories are constructed.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, however, biological processes exist alongside the social processes that give childhood and family meaning and, while recognising their interconnectedness, it is important that the two are never conflated.

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<sup>10</sup> Hendrick, H. (1997) *Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretative Survey, 1800-present*, in A. James and A. Prout (Eds.) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. Routledge.

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<sup>11</sup> Lesko, N. (2001) *Act your age! A cultural construction of adolescence*. Routledge Falmer. pp.2-6.

<sup>12</sup> Kroger, J. (2004) *Identity in Adolescence: The balance between self and other*. Routledge.

Similarly, the notion of progress – in physiological, social or moral terms – continues to underpin contemporary popular discourses of childhood and family life. We continue to conceive the process of being a child in terms of progress towards an ideal and complete adult form. Families, of course, are instrumental in that they are the social context in which this process is seen to take place. 'Successful' families produce children who have passed 'correctly' through the various transition points on their path towards adulthood. Within this paradigmatic view, consumption becomes a variable that can either help or hinder the developmental progress, as is shown in the developmental approaches to measuring the effects of advertising on children that we note below.

While human bodies and minds may progress biologically towards adulthood (or alternatively and slightly more depressingly, regress towards death), it is far less easy to define the social phenomena of childhood and family in such strict, linear terms. Although this theoretical perspective is well established in anthropology, sociology, areas of social psychology and related disciplines, public discourse is still primarily framed in terms of a strict developmental model. Whether as an anti-social 'hoodie' or as a child engaging in supposedly misanthropic, degenerative virtual relationships online, 'toxicity' appears to be a ready negative alternative to the adult ideal of what it means to be a 'good' child. This is a key point when considering the validity of arguing that the impacts of consumption on children and families can be measured according to a simple positive or negative dichotomy.

### 2.6 Childhood and family as social constructions

How, then, might we conceptualise childhood and family (and, in turn, consumption) in social terms that recognise but move beyond a strict, dichotomous developmental model?

Fortunately, social anthropologists have already spent some time worrying about this. Indeed, the study of kinship, the articulation of relationships between biologically related individuals, is widely recognised as the cornerstone of traditional social anthropology. The 'invention' of kinship can be traced back to Lewis Henry Morgan's *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity*.<sup>13</sup> In this seminal work, kinship terms and their genealogical referents were first developed as a way of better understanding family ties as a means of social

organisation. This cemented the idea of kinship as an innate institution grounded in biological relatedness – in consanguinity or blood ties. Later studies proposed kinship as the skeleton of social structure, fundamental to politico-judicial processes and the maintenance of order in so-called 'primitive' societies.

Michael Young and Peter Willmott's investigation into the impact of the development of housing estates on working-class family relations in the 1950s demonstrated the increasing recognition of the importance of the family as an institution of social organisation in industrialised society.<sup>14</sup> In their account, kinship networks and family solidarity were emphasised as key factors in processes of social change. This study, however, demonstrated the tendency of earlier anthropological work to view family relationships as immutable and fixed. Family relationships continue to be an important area of anthropological insight, but it is the shifting and contextual nature of their expression that is increasingly emphasised.

Social anthropology also provided a basis for early studies into the nature of childhood as a social phenomenon, notably in the work of Margaret Mead. While her analysis was constrained by an overt focus on psychosexual theory, Mead strongly emphasised the socio-cultural specificity of different experiences of childhood and, in so doing, raised important questions about positivistic, universal understandings of how children develop, both socially and psychologically.<sup>15</sup>

'Anti-essentialist' theories of identity from across the social sciences have since questioned the basis of a variety of markers of identity that might otherwise be presented as innate or universal – particularly those of national identity, ethnicity and gender.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1990s studies in the 'new' sociology of childhood have similarly focused on the deconstruction of childhood as a fixed social category, recognising both the individual agency of children and the role of asymmetrical

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<sup>14</sup> Young, M. & Willmott, P. (1957) *Family and Kinship in East London*, Pelican.

<sup>15</sup> See Mead, M. (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*. Harper Collins.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso; Banks, M. (1996) *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions*. Routledge; Barth, F. (1989) The Analysis of Culture in Complex Societies. *Ethnos*, 54 (3-4), 120-142; Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

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<sup>13</sup> Morgan, L.H. (1997) *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity*, University of Nebraska Press.



structural forces in the process of defining childhood and children.<sup>17</sup>

Anthony Giddens has more generally argued that as processes of globalisation continue to blur the boundaries of traditional categories of social organisation such as class, gender and age, individual social identities are becoming more complex and multi-faceted. Individuals are more able to be selective and reflexive about the aspects of particular kinds of social identities that they wish to or feel obliged to adopt, depending on social context and one's position within broader social structures.<sup>18</sup>

Giddens' notion of non-traditional, reflexive identity runs parallel to the anthropological notion of cultural complexity – the idea that processes of globalisation continue to erode the supposed boundaries between different cultures, presenting instead a cultural flow or continuum within which people access and interpret objects, information, meanings and ideas in different ways, depending on their position within both local and global social structures. The idea of complexity allows us to consider how childhood and family are constructed socially not only in the immediate social space of living rooms or neighbourhoods, but also within broader global and transnational networks.

What Ulf Hannerz<sup>19</sup> describes as the 'distribution' of this cultural flow is similar to Pierre Bourdieu's<sup>20</sup> notion of cultural capital. Both refer to the relationship between one's ability to access and interpret particular kinds of cultural artefacts and one's position within broader global and local social structures of asymmetry. While individuals are actively engaged in consumption behaviours, they do so within structural frameworks that serve to reproduce existing systems of inequality and disadvantage. Conceptualising consumption activities in these terms allows us to see them as part of the building blocks of social identity – the objects, images, ideas and meanings by which we are defined – in the same fluid and multi-faceted way that identity itself can be conceptualised.

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, James, A. & Prout, A. (Eds.) (1997) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Routledge Falmer.

<sup>18</sup> Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Hannerz, U. (1990) *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the social organization of Meaning*. University of Columbia Press.

<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1986) The Forms of Capital, in J.E. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory For Research in the Sociology of Education*. Greenwood Press.

Only a complex set of cultural tools is best suited to the task of constructing and understanding complex multiple identities.

### 2.7 New social theories: new social realities?

The above theoretical perspectives suggest not only that the nature of social identity has fundamentally shifted in recent years but also that new conceptual paradigms have been developed for understanding identity and social organisation. These changes have important implications in terms of recognising new forms of social relationships within families and new ways in which consumption is being used as a vehicle for structuring these relationships. At the same time, it is important to be cautious about over-stating the extent of the social change that such theories explain. There is, after all, a difference between new social theory and new social realities. Balancing the recognition of new forms of social identity against the fact that structural forces continue to shape the lives of children and families allows for a more measured consideration of the extent of change that has taken place in recent years.<sup>21</sup>

With these theoretical and epistemological schools of thought in mind, we now move on to consider how these perspectives have been used to frame both the positive and negative aspects of change and continuity in current debates about children, families and the commercial world.

### 2.8 Toxic Childhood? 21st century concerns in perspective

The idea of children as victims, prone to the negative impacts of the commercial world, is one that has characterised much of the academic and popular debate related to consumption, childhood and family life during the course of the twentieth century. Positioned ideologically in contrast to the perceived benefits of parental guidance and health and education provision for children and young people, commercial activities present an attractive and morally ambiguous influence that exists, at least in part, beyond (or aside from) the controls of parents or government. As a result, consumption activities have for decades provided a useful focus for alarmist perspectives about the decline of childhood and the family.

Most recently, this negative perspective of commercial engagement in the lives of children has formed the basis for contemporary concerns about the rising 'toxicity' of childhood.

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<sup>21</sup> See Furlong, A. & Cartmel, F. (2007) *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives*. Open University Press.

In September 2006 an open letter signed by more than 100 professionals in the fields of child development and education was published in the national British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*. The signatories to the letter – including the Director of the Royal Institute, Baroness Susan Greenfield and celebrated children's author Phillip Pullman – expressed their grave concerns about the future of childhood and education in 21st century Britain. They argued that the rise of consumer capitalism and the increased importance of new digital technologies is eroding the cognitive and creative capabilities of young people – children are spending more time in front of computer screens developing 'virtual' social relationships instead of engaging in physical activity and 'face-to-face' communication. Increasingly, they use consumer products as markers of who they are and where they belong, eat unhealthy foods and are under great pressure from manipulative marketing and advertising across a variety of different media.

Children, the authors of the letter claim, are growing up faster, and entering 'adult' spheres of experience at increasingly young ages. From Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and criminal hoodie gangs to childhood obesity and paedophilia online, children are increasingly faced with 'adult' problems. Because of these changes in how children engage with the commercial world – or rather, in how the commercial world encroaches on the world of children – childhood has become 'toxic'. These issues have taken on central importance in both government policy and in public discourse regarding the declining moral, social and civic values, and intellectual competencies, of young people in contemporary Britain.<sup>22</sup>

Following this line of thinking, educationalist Sue Palmer has championed the campaign against toxic childhood. In her aptly titled *Toxic Childhood: How modern life is damaging our children ... and what we can do about it*, she suggests that the social and technological changes wrought in the UK during the last twenty-five years have the potential to harm seriously the future of the nation's children.<sup>23</sup> According to Palmer, processes of globalisation, the rise of consumer society and the rapid development of new communications technologies have caused a range of 'toxic cocktail' side-effects which are damaging to the social, emotional and cognitive development of children.

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Margo, J. & Dixon, M. (2006) *Freedom's Orphans: Raising youth in a changing world*. IPPR.

<sup>23</sup> Palmer, S. (2006) *Toxic Childhood: How modern life is damaging our children ... and what we can do about it*. Orion.

The knock on effects of this toxic childhood are, she claims, already evident in statistics on substance abuse among teenagers as well as in underage 'binge' drinking, eating disorders, self-harm and suicide. She argues that our present technology-driven culture is clashing with our biological heritage and damaging our children's ability to think, learn and behave in ways that will improve their well-being. In the United States, Julie Schor's popular book *Born to Buy* supports these claims in even more explicit terms. According to Schor's rather limited statistical analysis, 'less involvement in consumer culture leads to healthier kids, and more involvement leads kids' psychological well-being to deteriorate'.<sup>24</sup>

Susan Greenfield's arguments echo these concerns but move beyond psychological models to place toxicity firmly within the scientific frame of neurophysiology. She argues that screen-based entertainment and technology provides instant gratification and, therefore, produces excess amounts of the hormone dopamine – the chemical that is partially responsible for feelings of well being, motivation and reward. Dopamine directly affects receptors in the nucleus accumbens and excessive levels can result, Greenfield claims, in an under-functioning prefrontal cortex, reducing the ability of young brains to absorb information in the here-and-now as well the ability to consider the consequences of past, present and future actions.<sup>25</sup>

The arguments that Greenfield puts forward concerning the particular effects of hormones on parts of the brain are certainly supported by evidence. It is much more difficult, however, to demonstrate that all screen-based activities result in 'instant gratification' or, more importantly, that Western notions of individuality – the human characteristic apparently so damaged by these toxic new technologies – is in fact an innate, universal quality of mankind.

Despite the good intentions that underlie arguments about the poisonous influence of modernity on children and families, then, the notion of toxicity would seem an unhelpful metaphor within which to frame debate about the experiences of children today.<sup>26</sup> This is not, of course, to say that the potential dangers facing contemporary children should be dismissed. Instead,

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<sup>24</sup> Schor, J. (2004) *Born to Buy*. Scribner, p.167.

<sup>25</sup> Greenfield, S. (2003) *How 21st Century technology is changing the way we think and feel*. Allen Lane.

<sup>26</sup> See Alexander, P. (2007) Rethinking the Toxicity Debate: The vitality of contemporary childhood, *Education Review*, 20 (1), 57-64.

given the level of public concern about the well-being of contemporary children, it suggests that there is a need for empirical research in this area, rather than emotive speculation.

### 2.9 Concerns about consumption are not new, but contemporary conditions present new social contexts for children and families

We also need to place these contemporary concerns about consumption, children and families in historical perspective. Although Palmer, Greenfield and many others are concerned that the modern world is generating an emotionally and cognitively depleted consumerist society that is ill-equipped to serve the best interests of children, this idea is far from novel. Published in 1957, American social commentator Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, for example, provided a similarly stark warning about the dark powers of advertising, marketing and consumption at a time when consumer society was still in its nascent stages in the United States and Britain.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Packard explored the ways in which children were, in the late 1950s, becoming 'consumer trainees' – already well aware of differences between brands such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. In contrast to more innocent times, young 'moppets' were being groomed to be future consumers.

These kinds of concerns can be traced even further back to before the beginnings of the consumer age itself. Pre-empting by over a century Greenfield's concerns about the potential neurological decline of the Internet generation, American doctors in the late 1800s warned of the dangers of 'neurasthenia', a completely fictional degenerative disease caused by the excesses of modern life that would reduce the 'nerve force' of young people and leave them in a state of 'nervous bankruptcy'. Similarly, 19th century 'penny dreadfuls', 'video nasties' of the 1980s, and the unregulated frontiers of the Internet today have all provided grounds upon which adults have battled against the exposure of young people to the allegedly harsh realities of modern society.<sup>28</sup>

There is, then, evidence that we have been concerned about the impact of the commercial world on the well-being of children for quite some time. In each of the cases above, ideas of childhood and family serve as a vehicle for anxieties about social order, although the focus of concern has changed as patterns of consumption have developed and expanded over time. Again,

this is not to say that such anxieties are always unjustified – the world is not, and has never been, a perfect place and children and families are certainly prone to the real dangers that the commercial world can present. Nor does this imply that the conditions of the commercial world itself have remained constant over time. On the contrary, aspects of children's and families' commercial engagement have changed markedly in recent years, and some of these changes have doubtless had a negative impact on the lives of certain families and certain children. But recent social, economic and technological changes make up part of a much longer history of social change that has caused the 'safe-keeping' of childhood and family life to be an ongoing focus for concern and debate. From a historical perspective, current concerns about the disappearance of childhood and the disintegration of the family are, in fact, the rule rather than the exception in academic and popular discourse related to children and families in Britain.

Bearing this in mind it should come as no particular surprise that UNICEF, along with many others, stand by the claim that the nature of commercial engagement has a negative impact on young people in the present because it conflates the acquisition of material possessions with the attainment of emotional well-being. UNICEF recently placed the UK at the bottom of a multi-dimensional index of child well-being, suggesting that although levels of child poverty have reduced in recent years, rising living standards have dramatically inflated what are perceived to be necessities. There is certainly evidence that levels of child poverty remain high in the UK, and that a large number of children are unable to access the kinds of consumer items and leisure activities that are widely considered to be aspects of a rich and normal life.<sup>29</sup> These indicators of real changes in recent levels of inequality and disadvantage, however, should not be conflated with broader, long-standing ideological concerns about the well-being of children and families. Childhood and family life, as ideas, remain endangered, as they always have been, but the source of the threat has shifted to reflect the particular sociocultural contexts in which contemporary children and families live.

### 2.10 Changing childhoods, changing adulthood

How, then, might we define the particular sociocultural contexts in which contemporary children and families live, and how different are these from conditions in the past?

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<sup>27</sup> Packard, V. (1957) *The Hidden Persuaders*. Penguin

<sup>28</sup> See Springhall, J. (1998) *Youth Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta Rap. 1830-1996*. MacMillan.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the Families and Children Study, 2006.

Perspectives from the sociology of childhood suggest that aspects of the social lives of children and families have indeed been significantly changed in recent years. As already suggested, these changes are better understood in slightly more ambiguous terms, rather than being presented as entirely positive or negative. With reference to the cultural artefacts (or consumer items) that are used in the process of defining childhood and family, for example, Alan Prout argues that the spread of global consumer capitalism has allowed for an increased diversity in terms of how childhood is defined. An increased flow of goods, images and ideas, in part made possible by rapid developments in digital technology, has led to reinterpretations of these products in different cultural settings.<sup>30</sup>

It would, of course, be equally valid to argue that in some ways globalisation encourages the homogenisation of constructions of childhood, as more and more children define themselves according to megalithic, pervasive global brands, products and fashion trends. In either case, consumption – from listening to music online, to buying designer clothes – is of prime significance in the construction of social identities for young people.<sup>31</sup> In the Western world in particular, these processes of consumption frequently involve both social exchanges on both a global and a local level. Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep include the participation of children and young people in consumer culture as part of what they define, following Arjun Appadurai, as 'youthscapes' – the real and imagined spaces in which children and young people are actively engaged in shaping global and local social structures.<sup>32</sup>

It is also important to emphasise, however, that adults – particularly the majority born during or after the rise of mass consumer culture following the Second World War – actively participate in consumption as well. Indeed, beyond legal restrictions on certain consumer objects and activities there is no clearly defined line that distinguishes adult spheres of consumption from those of children and young people, especially in converging, deregulated digital media. Nick Lee argues that youth culture itself, or at least the markers that are traditionally associated with youth such as pop culture, are

available to and consumed by people of any age. The iconography of youth is consumed by adults and vice versa. As consumer culture becomes more pervasive and increasingly interwoven into communications technology, it is difficult to contemplate how a young person (or indeed an adult) in Britain today would be able to construct a social identity without at least some of the points of reference that youth markets provide.<sup>33</sup>

### 2.11 Changing media environments

Henry Jenkins makes the important point that the scope of the media and the forms that media texts take are themselves also rapidly changing.<sup>34</sup> The boundaries between media and consumer products are increasingly blurred as marketing strategies spread the profits of one into the other.<sup>35</sup> Increased access to the Internet, mobile phones, television and other media has allowed children and adolescents to access 'adult' domains that might otherwise be far more difficult to enter. With this expanded repertoire of cultural knowledge, children and adolescents have the opportunity to subvert the supposed divide between adults and themselves.

This is not a passive engagement with consumer culture. The crushing effect of online file sharing on the global music industry, the rise of social networking online and Web 2.0 are evidence that young people play a fiercely agentive role in global economic, political and cultural spheres. Simultaneously, in order to accommodate the increased cultural repertoire of both young people and adults, products and entertainment programming traditionally targeted at young people are accessible to adult audiences as well. Children can be adults online while their parents watch *The Simpsons*. This additional blurring of boundaries between childhood and adulthood has obvious implications for the nature of social relations within the family.

### 2.12 Recognising diversity in children's and families' experiences of consumption

We need at this point to exercise some caution when assessing the potential abilities of children as active consumers. Sociologists of childhood and youth are sometimes guilty of portraying contemporary young people in uncritical, positive

<sup>30</sup> Prout, A. (2005) *The Future of Childhood*, Routledge Falmer. p.30.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Miles, S. (1998) *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*. Open University Press; Buckingham, D. (2003) *Multimedia Childhoods*. In M.J. Kehily, & J. Swann (Eds.), *Children's Cultural Worlds*, Wiley

<sup>32</sup> Maira, S. & Soep, E., (Eds.) (2005) *Youthscapes: The popular, the national, the global*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>33</sup> Lee, N. (2001) *Childhood and Society: Growing up in an age of uncertainty*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergent Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Buckingham, D. (2003) p.198; OfCom (2008) *The OfCom Communications Report*.

terms, describing them as existing at the vanguard of culture, especially in relation to digital technology or 'cosmopolitan' consumer identities.<sup>36</sup> These overly simplified visions of a homogeneously positive youth identity are just as problematic as those that mark contemporary childhood with an all-infecting toxicity. Such homogenous imaginings of children's consumption behaviours also disguise the degree of variation between the experiences of children according to social factors such as class, gender and ethnicity. As mentioned in Section 3 of Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes, approximately 3.9 million children in the UK lived in low-income households in 2006-2007.<sup>37</sup> Those children were far more likely to experience material deprivation – that is, the inability to access particular consumer items and leisure activities considered to be a normal part of social life – than children in households earning more than 60% of the median household income. Ethnic minority groups, and Bangladeshi and Pakistani households in particular, are affected by high levels of child poverty and material deprivation.

In relation to media consumption in particular, research conducted by Sonia Livingstone and her colleagues suggests that socioeconomic status is an important factor affecting the 'digital divide' in children's access to computers and the internet –<sup>38</sup> although the increasing popularity of media devices with convergent functionality (mobile phones with internet connectivity, for example) have allowed internet access to expand far beyond the limits of home computers.<sup>39</sup> Livingstone also points to differences in age and gender in terms of children's media consumption habits.

### 2.13 The power of negotiation

The above suggests that children's and families' engagement with the commercial world is by no means uniform or static. The kinds of social and economic relationships that exist between parents and children are obviously likely to change according to social and cultural context. Instead of emphasising the image of children as toxic victims or the idea of children as consumer whiz kids, it would seem more helpful to think dynamically in

terms of the mediated, negotiated nature of the day-to-day relationships between children and adults, both as consumers and as family members. Sonia Livingstone argues that the blurring of boundaries between the identities of children and adults is key to understanding the dynamics of power within families in contemporary Britain.<sup>40</sup> While parents remain more knowledgeable and more experienced than their children in certain areas, hierarchical family structures of authority and control are for some developing into more democratic systems where negotiation is key, not least in terms of approaches to consumption.

Sharon Boden and Chris Pole, for example, have identified the consumption of clothing as an ongoing source of conflict between parents and children, particularly with regard to the sexualisation of girls clothes.<sup>41</sup> While Rachel Thompson and Janet Holland<sup>42</sup> point to the fact that the changing social roles between children, young people and adults in relation to consumption remains a relatively unexplored area of research, their own study suggests that young people consider reciprocity and mutual respect to be key factors in legitimising the moral authority of adults. According to the young people interviewed, being an adult is not enough on its own to secure the trust and respect of younger generations.

### 2.14 Uncertain adulthood

Nick Lee highlights shifts in social and economic conditions for adults when describing the ambiguities of the current 'age of uncertainty for grown-ups'. Essentially, Lee argues that adults can no longer necessarily expect to follow uninterrupted, linear career paths or experience ostensibly stable, unchanging family structures that mostly characterised the lives of their parents.<sup>43</sup> According to this perspective, becoming an adult does not necessarily involve adopting the kinds of social roles that might be associated with the stability of a stereotypical adult life. The notion of the 'unfinished' adult has significant implications for the authority of adults in Western societies, particularly within the context of the family. As they are no

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<sup>36</sup> Buckingham (2000), Chapter 3; Kjeldgaard, D. (2005) Youth identities in the global cultural economy: Central and peripheral consumer culture in Denmark and Greenland, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6, 285-304.

<sup>37</sup> Palmer, G., MacInnes, T. & Kenway, P. (2007) *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion*. New Policy Institute/Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>38</sup> Livingstone, S. and Bovill, M. (2001) *Children and their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study*. Routledge.

<sup>39</sup> Ofcom (2008).

<sup>40</sup> Livingstone, S. (2004) *A commentary on the research evidence regarding the influence of food promotion on children*. Research Department for the Office of Communications (Ofcom).

<sup>41</sup> Boden, S., Pole, C., Pilcher, J. & Edwards, T. (2004) *New Consumers? The Social and Cultural Significance of Children's Fashion Consumption*. Cultures of Consumption Working Paper Series – [http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/working\\_papers/Boden%20Working%20aper2.doc](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/working_papers/Boden%20Working%20aper2.doc)

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, R. & Holland, J. (2002) Young People, Social Change and the Negotiation of Moral Authority, *Children and Society*, 16, 103-115.

<sup>43</sup> Lee, N. (2001).

longer willing or able to uphold the traditional distinctions between parents and children that were seemingly maintained in previous generations, contemporary Western adults are unable to present themselves as the unquestionable, 'expert' superiors of their children. Patterns of consumption are important in this shift in the balance of power between generations, as we explore in more detail in section three of this report.

### 2.15 Emerging adults – transitions from childhood to adulthood

Focusing on the younger end of Lee's 'uncertain adult' spectrum, Jeffrey Arnett provides an interesting and more explicitly defined conceptual framework for consideration of how constructions of childhood, adulthood and family have changed in recent decades. 'Emerging adulthood' is the term he uses to define a period of uncertainty, exploration and opportunity that takes place roughly between the late teens and late twenties. As Arnett puts it, "young people of the past were constricted in a variety of ways, from gender roles to economics, which prevented them from using their late teens and early twenties for exploration. In contrast, today's emerging adults have unprecedented freedom."<sup>44</sup>

It is important to emphasise that this is not a universal claim made of all contemporary twenty-somethings. Arnett is right to point out that the nature and extent of emerging adulthood is relative to social and cultural context. As with Erik Erikson's psychological notion of 'prolonged adolescence', emerging adulthood is a product of relatively affluent, industrialised contemporary societies in which institutionalised education has been extended into the late teens, if not further.<sup>45</sup> Even within affluent societies such as the UK, experiences of emerging adulthood are strongly influenced by socioeconomic status, class, ethnicity and gender. When it comes to making decisions, one has to be rich enough, or privileged enough, or socialised in a particular way to worry about what to do when one 'grows up'. But for many 'emerging adults', recent social and economic changes have delayed entry into the social roles and relationships traditionally associated with adult identity. As we noted in *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes*, emerging adults are now marrying later, having children at a later stage and developing a wider range of

professional and intellectual skills along career paths than in previous generations.

These changes, Arnett notes, allow emerging adults a greater amount of time to explore a more diverse range of experiences before entering into more stable circumstances.<sup>46</sup> This period, however, is also unanchored; emerging adults must negotiate and renegotiate their identities in relation to multiple social positions, leading at times to conflict and uncertainty.

### 2.16 Negotiating relationships between parents and older children

While Arnett's notion of emerging adulthood still relies on the assumption of a linear progression towards the stability of adulthood, the idea of increasingly blurred boundaries between childhood and adulthood is very useful in the context of exploring the role of commercial engagement in family life. Being neither an extended adolescence nor a young adulthood, emerging adulthood defines a distinct, novel and uncertain experience of age identity. Janet Holland and Rachel Thompson's research into youth and transitions to adulthood in many ways lends support to Arnett's notion of emerging adults.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, they expand on Arnett's work by highlighting that while young/emerging adults approach the transitions towards adulthood along diverse and fragmented trajectories, they nevertheless maintain a common, normative perception of what it means to be an adult – in terms of marriage, financial independence, living in or buying one's own house, etc.

This raises interesting questions about the continued importance of economic exchanges between parents and children as the latter grow older and begin to construct adult identities. There would appear, in the case of Thompson and Holland's research, to be considerable conflict between the desire to self-identify as an adult and the inability to achieve the normative markers of what it means to be grown up, among which financial independence is key. For all the opportunities and freedom that emerging adulthood might represent, it is also characterised by a kind of liminality.

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<sup>44</sup> Arnett, J. (2004) *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from late teens through the twenties*. Oxford University Press. p.7.

<sup>45</sup> Erikson, E. (1968) *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. Norton.

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<sup>46</sup> See also in this context Fox, K. (2006) *Life-shopping, YEPPIES, Peter-Pan Syndrome, The New Collectivism and the Quarter-life crisis*, (2005) Social Issues Research Centre. <http://www.sirc.org/publik/yeppies.shtml>

<sup>47</sup> Holland, J. & Thompson, R. (2004) *Youth Values and Transitions to Adulthood: An Empirical Investigation*, London South Bank University.

### 2.17 Interdependencies between parents and children

This issue ties into our earlier comments about the significance of progress as an idea that structures how we think about childhood, adulthood and family life. Based on a developmental model, popular understandings of the transition from childhood to adulthood place great importance on the notion of moving linearly from dependence to independence, even though the lived experiences of these transitions are seldom so clear-cut. Within this framework the prolonged dependence of children (particularly in financial terms) can readily be associated with moral sanctions and feelings of shame or inadequacy on the part of both parents and children. Research conducted in a number of European contexts by Claire Holdsworth and David Morgan, however, suggests that transitions into adulthood might be better understood in terms of a series of connected interdependencies between parents, children and other family members.<sup>48</sup> They highlight that while the idea of independence remained important for participants in their study, individuals defined independence in a variety of ways, depending on social and cultural contexts. For young adults in Northern Europe, remaining financially dependent on parents and/or living at home was considered to be a mark of failure and a constraint on freedom, while those in countries such as Spain and Portugal emphasised the ways in which relationships with parents would shift over time to accommodate the increased levels of autonomy and freedom associated with adulthood.

At the same time, participants also recognised the emotional dependence of parents on children and the ways in which parents made it more difficult for children to sever the apron or purse strings. Holdsworth and Morgan are careful to point out that the economic ties between parents and children are embedded in a complex framework of other social and emotional interdependencies. In this sense the consumption behaviours of adult children might be subject to rules and restrictions enforced by parents when living in the family home. Alternately, parents might express their acceptance of children's constructions of adult identities by relinquishing control over such behaviours. In either case, parents and children are involved in a complicated process of navigating the meanings given to their social, emotional and economic interdependencies.

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<sup>48</sup> Holdsworth, C. & Morgan, D. (2005) *Transitions in Context: Leaving Home, Independence and Adulthood*. Open University Press.

### 2.18 Representations of children and family in public discourse

The perspectives presented in the sections above suggest that while concerns about consumption and the well-being of children and families are nothing particularly new, children and families today are in certain ways presented with new and complicated social contexts in which they must negotiate multiple roles and identities. Processes of globalisation, the development of new media and new digital technologies, and the recognition of the active engagement of children in the process of constructing different identities all play a part in shaping these new social contexts.

Despite the development of more nuanced sociological perspectives over the past 10 years, however, dualistic models of childhood, children's identity formation and the impact consumption activities are still commonly invoked in popular discourse to support particular ways of imagining contemporary childhood. Why, we might ask, are these representations of children so persistent? Such understandings are perhaps so popular because they often present childhood as an unequivocal social, emotional and psychological category of being. If we begin with the a priori assumption that childhood is a universal category, without considering how childhood is socially constructed in different ways, it is easier then to make clear-cut claims about what kinds of positive or negative impacts the commercial world may have. This, in turn, allows adults more readily to decide how they might control such effects.

Just as children and families are involved in the commercial activities of work, production and consumption, so too are they engaged in the active negotiation and reproduction of these ideas about childhood and family life through popular culture. From children in literature, to Family Life magazine, to families in cartoons, soap operas and advertisements on television, popular representations of childhood and family life play an integral role in the processes by which children and families construct a sense of who they are.

In the following parts of this section of the report we look in more detail at representations of childhood and family life in public discourse as a means of examining the ways in which ideas about childhood and family life are bought and sold – not only in the commercial world but also in academic and political discourses about children, families and consumer culture.

One of the main problems with exploring representations of children, childhood and family in popular culture is that there exist very few comprehensive overviews that map broad changes and continuities over time. While some studies have looked longitudinally at the content of particular magazines, or have analysed representations in particular media texts in one time period (American sitcoms, for example), much less evidence exists to provide a broad, panoramic view of the different (and similar) ways in which children and childhood have been represented in popular culture in Britain. While it would be beyond the scope of this report to attempt to do this, the following draws out the key themes underpinning such representations.

### 2.19 Children in the media

The idea that the traditional notion of childhood is in jeopardy can be seen in the frequency with which children are represented in the media as either threatened and/or as threats to the broader social order. A recent Mori analysis of media articles about young people (2005) showed that 40% focused on violence, crime or anti-social behaviour.<sup>49</sup> The same report showed that in 2004, 71% of all articles about youth had a negative tone. The perceived presence of an anti-social, uncontrollable youth is frequently seen as evidence of the deterioration of values in society more generally. For their part, young people seem to agree that they are misrepresented in popular discourse. According to research conducted by the National Youth Council in 2006, 90% of young people think that they do not deserve the negative treatment that they receive in the media. A further 80% think that the media have a large part to play in creating a negative perception of young people among older generations.<sup>50</sup>

SIRC's own preliminary analysis of media coverage related to children and families provides an interesting, if brief, glimpse into the possible trends that might emerge given further research. In July and August 2008 SIRC conducted a trawl of English language news coverage in the UK to identify items dealing with issues related to children and families. The search was conducted using the Lexis-Nexis database of news articles

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<sup>49</sup> Ipsos/Mori (2005) *Young People and the Media*.  
<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/polls-05/young-people-and-the-media.ashx>

<sup>50</sup> YouthNet & British Youth Council (2006) *The voice behind the hood: Young people's views on anti-social behaviour, the media and older people*.

and appropriate keywords. Of the 143 articles identified from these, 'violence' was mentioned 94 times and the word 'crime' appeared 203 times – just slightly less than the word 'education' (247 times). This is of course a rather crude level of analysis that masks the deeper complexities of how children are represented in these texts, but the overwhelmingly negative subject matter of the articles is nevertheless worthy of note and merits further investigation.

### 2.20 Representations of children in art and literature

In contrast to the above, we have already seen that the popular portrayal of children as innocents has also persisted for some time. Idealised notions of children as pure and good are particularly evident, for example, in the 'Golden Age' of children's literature. Works by Lewis Carroll, where children are free from adult restrictions, are emblematic of representations of childhood in popular culture throughout the second half of the 19th century.<sup>51</sup> More recently these themes have resonated in the writings of Roald Dahl and JK Rowling, where children are represented as forces for good in a dangerous world. Alan Prout<sup>52</sup> refers also to earlier romantic representations of childhood in fine art, noting that these representations continue to the present day as central features of the commercialisation of childhood, only now more frequently in advertising and branding. Although today's public may have a heightened awareness of the potentially manipulative nature of media images, idealised representations of children still have a powerful romantic or nostalgic appeal.

### 2.21 Children, advertising and measuring the effects of consumption

The more extensive existing research into the effects of advertising on children provides another avenue for looking at popular representations of children and families. Advertising, particularly on television, is a primary focus for concern in popular discourse and academic studies that seek to highlight the negative impacts of consumer culture on children and young people. Most often these studies are framed in terms of specific variables and their relationship to different stages of cognitive, physiological or psychological development.

Implicit in this perspective is the notion that children are intrinsically less critically aware and more passive in processes

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Holland, P. (2004) *Picturing Childhood: The myth of the child in popular imagery*, I.B. Tauris.

<sup>52</sup> Prout, A. (2005)



of consumption and commercial engagement than are adults. Children are more vulnerable to the 'abuses' of the marketplace than grown ups and can, therefore, be unfairly influenced by marketing and advertising until they are old enough to 'know better'. Following theories of cognitive stage development made popular by Piaget, the level of 'maturity' is used as a measure of when children become sensitised to the messages and meanings of advertising and other commercial influences.

Deborah John's extensive research in this field suggests, for example, that children below the age of 7 or 8 have little, if any, conception of the persuasive intentions behind advertising.<sup>53</sup> She argues that until this age children simply see adverts as an extension of the entertainment of normal programming. As a result it can be argued, for example, that food advertising to children under this age is exploitative because children have no awareness of the bias involved in the adverts they are watching. John argues that between the ages of 8 and 12 children begin to develop a more nuanced, critical awareness of their relationship to advertisement and recognise its ability to manipulate audiences. More generally, she also argues for a stage approach to the consumer socialisation of children that points out clear transition points in children's development according to their understanding of aspects of consumption such as branding and pester power.

Whether or not this strictly developmental model is entirely valid when exploring the effects of marketing and advertising on children is questionable. While children are certainly susceptible to the increasingly complicated methods of marketing and advertising employed to win their favour, it is difficult if not impossible, for example, to categorise all 8 year-olds as having the same level of media literacy simply because they are of the same chronological age. Media literacy varies according to the social and cultural context, and becoming an active consumer of media involves the process of interpreting meanings and incorporating them into a wider cultural vocabulary. With this in mind, Martin Lindstrom and Patricia Seybold (among others) argue for a perspective of child consumers that recognises their active participation in the process of consumption.<sup>54</sup> They argue that children are often aware of the means and ends of intensive marketing for products

such as fast food and, as a result, interpret adverts in diverse ways as part of the process of identity formation.

In a similar vein, David Buckingham argues that the role of the media has become central to the identities of children and young people, as it is for most adults.<sup>55</sup> Children live 'media childhoods' in which media content, including television adverts, provides essential building blocks for actively defining who they are, both as individuals and as members of society.

The banning of certain food and drink advertisements from children's television programming provides a useful example of attempts to control the supposed negative aspects of this kind of commercial engagement.<sup>56</sup> Daniel Cook has argued that the marketing strategies used on television – and particularly those used for advertising fast food – are so well designed and subtle as to be effective on even the most savvy of child consumers.<sup>57</sup> He suggests that children are almost always at risk because of the ingenuity and complexity of food promotion in the media, particularly given the deregulation that has accompanied the globalisation of consumer markets. In relation to TV advertisements and food choice, this perspective is supported by claims that there is a strong correlation between excessive food consumption and heavy amounts of television viewing.

According to Gerard Hastings, television food advertising directed at children accounts for 75% of all advertising spend in the UK in recent years.<sup>58</sup> In his review for the Food Standards Agency (FSA) of the impact of such adverts on children's diets he concluded that there was, indeed, a negative impact – the adverts encouraged children to increase their consumption of foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt – but that the magnitude of the effect could not be determined.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Buckingham, D. (2003)

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, the recent limits placed on food and drink advertising by Ofcom:

[http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/foodads\\_new/statement/](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/foodads_new/statement/)

<sup>57</sup> Cook, D.T. (2004) Beyond Either/Or, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4 (2), 147-153.

<sup>58</sup> This does not mean, however, that expenditure is necessarily reflective of the importance of television advertising as a marketing tool; online viral marketing is notoriously cheap in comparison with less flexible, highly regulated and expensive TV advertising.

<sup>59</sup> Hastings, G., Stead, M., McDermott, L. Forsyth, A., MacKintosh, A.M., Rayner, M., Godfrey, C., Caraher, M. & Angus, K. (2003) *Review of research on the effects of food promotion to children*. Final report, prepared for the Food Standards Agency.

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<sup>53</sup> John, D.R. (1999) Consumer socialization of children: A retrospective look at twenty-five years of research, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26:183-213.

<sup>54</sup> Lindstrom, M. & Seybold, P. (2003) *Brandchild: Insights into the Minds of Today's Global Kids: Understanding Their Relationship with Brands*. Kogan Page.

This study was criticised by others in the field of child nutrition, notably by Stan Paliwoda and Ian Crawford in a response commissioned by the Food Advertising Unit (FAU).<sup>60</sup> They concluded:

*Objectivity appears to have been compromised. We have concerns over language which appears inconsistent as well as to conclusions drawn and reported in press releases that do not stand up to verification against the original articles used in the Hastings Review ... There are grave concerns over the research methodology and the degree to which it claims to be rigorous. The Hastings Review was both pragmatic and systematic but not scientific. This study does not lend itself to replication.*

The often heated debate over the Hastings report continues today as calls for increased restrictions on the marketing and promotion of 'junk food' to children are being made in response to the alleged 'obesity epidemic' that is sweeping through the Western world. Such demands, however, overlook the simple fact that in Sweden and Quebec, where the advertising of 'bad' food items to children has been banned for many years, levels of childhood obesity are about the same as in countries where such promotion is less regulated.

While food and health issues dominate much of the debate, and associated research projects, about the impact of the commercial world on children, the negative impacts of advertising are allegedly demonstrated with respect to other types of consumption behaviour. Adopting a rather unusual approach, Karen Pine and Avril Nash explored letters written to Father Christmas and their relationship to children's television viewing behaviour.<sup>61</sup> The letters of children around four years old showed a positive correlation between the amount of television watched and items requested. In addition, those children watching more television also requested more branded items than children who watched less. A comparison group of children from Sweden (a country in which advertising to children is not permitted) found that they asked for significantly fewer branded items. The effects were more pronounced when children watched television without supervision. The authors suggest that those children who

watch more television may be socialised into becoming consumers from a very early age, constructing identities around specific brands.

Recent research conducted by the National Consumer Council (NCC) attempts to draw similar links between media consumption, other forms of consumption, and the overall well-being of children. As with similar studies, the NCC report centres on the issue of defining and measuring materialism. It is suggested that advertising increases consumption by fostering materialistic values and promoting the idea that consumption leads to happiness.<sup>62</sup> In the study, a significant positive correlation was found between TV viewing, computer use and materialism. On the basis of this the report concludes that high media exposure can be associated with high levels of materialism – whatever this might actually entail. A weaker, negative association was found between children's levels of materialism and their levels of self esteem.

What is implicit in these and many other studies is the idea that constructing one's identity through consumption is an intrinsically negative experience. For this reason alone restrictions on children's access to the commercial world through advertising and promotion are seen as justified. This view, however, is not universally shared in other areas of social science as we have noted above. It is also the case that the efficacy of such preventative measures remains to be demonstrated convincingly.

### 2.22 Consuming ideas of children and family

This is not to say, however, that representations of children in advertising do not influence how children and adults construct notions of childhood and family. On the contrary, advertising can play an important role in this context. The power of appeals to traditional ideologies surrounding childhood can, for example, be seen in popular representations of children as victims. Somewhat ironically, this is perhaps most evident in the advertising campaigns of charities and organisations dedicated to children's welfare. Patricia Holland, for example, has explored the use of 'shocking' images of children in Oxfam advertising campaigns of the 1970s, which showed children in states of distress and discomfort.<sup>63</sup> Such campaigns are successful because they jar with popular conceptions of what

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<sup>60</sup> Paliwoda, S. & Crawford, I. (2003) *An Analysis of the Hastings Review: 'The Effects of Food Promotion on Children'*, Report prepared for the Food Advertising Unit.

<sup>61</sup> Pine, K and Nash, A. (2002) Dear Santa: The Effects of Television on Young Children, *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 26 (6).

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<sup>62</sup> Piachaud, D. (2007) *Freedom to be a Child: Commercial Pressures on Children*, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion.

<sup>63</sup> Holland, P. (2004) *Picturing Childhood: The myth of the child in popular imagery*, I.B. Tauris.

childhood should be. At the same time, they also make up part of the body of media texts that both children and adults themselves use to construct notions of childhood. Arguably, in this sense, the consumption of such advertisements may be potentially detrimental to the well-being of children because it reinforces negative stereotypes about what it means to be a child.

On the other hand, children are also portrayed as powerful, agentive beings with competencies and abilities beyond those of adults – often, but not always, in relation to new digital technologies. Similarly, 'powerful' representations are often situated in spaces (real, virtual or imagined) where adults are not able to enter. Peter Pan's Neverland is of course a prime fictional example of such a space, but virtual social networks such as Bebo are in many ways similar in terms of the exclusivity that, in theory, they provide for children. David Buckingham suggests that the popular TV brand Nickelodeon promotes this kind of representation of childhood as a time when children have fun and are empowered and are superior to staid and boring adults.

A similar perception of an agentive, economically powerful childhood underpins a recent series of television advertisements for Vauxhall cars, featuring adult-like children discussing family life (and of course cars) while observing the foolish behaviour of their child-like adult parents. Examples of this kind of role reversal between traditional portrayals of adults and children can be seen in a range of popular media texts. Alan Prout, for instance, explores the example of the Hollywood film *Look Who's Talking*, as a portrayal of this kind of role reversal between adults and children. In the film, toddlers are given adult personalities, and comment ironically on the childishness of their parents.

The brief overview presented here suggests that childhood is represented ambiguously in popular culture. Children are at once pure, evil, clever, powerful – they are both victims and criminal perpetrators. This duality is not a new phenomenon and the ambiguities surrounding childhood are arguably as old as the notion of childhood itself. Such anxieties are linked to the commercial world in important ways, both in terms of the perceived threat to experiences of childhood that commercial engagement represents, but also in the ways in which different portrayals of childhood and family life are both bought and sold – not least in the emerging markets for books and social research that deal with the issue of figuring contemporary childhood and family life. The marketplace for ideas about

families and children is in this respect a very important aspect of the relationship between the family, childhood and the commercial world. The construction of popular perceptions of childhood and family life, as represented in popular discourse, is itself an activity that involves commercial engagement.

The forms in which children are represented may have changed with time but the continuity of ideals underpinning them is clear, particularly at times when the boundaries between the adult and child are increasingly blurred. The media are frequently referred to as a blight of modern day society, singled out for their corruptive influence on children and the ideals associated with childhood. The opportunity the media provide for challenge to representations about children by enabling them to be created by children themselves, however, should not be underestimated.

### 2.23 A balanced perspective of childhood, family and consumption

We have, then, some clear indications of the degree of importance that commercial activities play in the lifestyles of children, with implications for children's well-being. Most studies imply that children are negatively affected by commercial engagement because they are passively engaged in consumption and therefore have little or no agency in the consumption-related decisions that they make. As has been suggested, such assertions do not necessarily take into consideration more recent theoretical perspectives from the sociology of childhood that recognise the active role that children play in the commercial world. At the same time it would be unproductive to suggest that there is no common ground or balance between such different paradigmatic and epistemological perspectives. Indeed, it is exactly this balance that we seek to find in mapping the different ways of figuring contemporary childhood, family and the commercial world.

We have seen that although children are often actively engaged in processes of consumption (including their own consumption of ideas about childhood), they are nevertheless constrained by structural inequalities according to socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and, of course, age. In terms of social and cultural capital, processes of consumption are in this sense unevenly distributed and some children are disadvantaged particularly because they are unable to consume in the same ways as their counterparts. Richard Elliott and Clare Leonard, for example, have explored attitudes towards fashion brands in

trainers/athletic shoes and their symbolic meanings among economically disadvantaged British children.<sup>64</sup> They found that most of the children interviewed expressed strong desires to own branded clothes and that one of the main motivations for this was to fit in with peers. Children also indicated that they feared peers would refuse to be friends with them and would not want to be associated with others who were not wearing the appropriate trainers. Those who did own the 'proper' trainers, particularly the more expensive ones, were seen as having a particular power and were popular and fashionable. This is not a particularly surprising finding, but it nevertheless speaks to the significance of consumption as a vehicle for gaining or losing status (or capital) within particular social contexts.

Viewing the impacts of consumption through the lens of social and cultural capital in this way provides a means to recognise the potential for commercial engagement to both help and/or hinder the well-being of children, without resorting to essentialised notions of childhood that underplay not only the variability in children's experiences but also the dynamic nature of children's engagement in the social worlds of which they are a part. As Hugh Cunningham suggests, we are often "so fixated ... on giving our children a long and happy childhood that we downplay their abilities and their resilience. To think of children primarily as potential victims in need of protection is a very modern outlook, and probably does no-one a service".

### 3 Time and space in family life

#### 3.1 Introduction

Looking at how families and children experience time and space provides a useful framework for thinking about the significance of the commercial world in contemporary family life. Section 3 of *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes* presents a broad perspective of trends in time use over the past several decades in relation to children's and families' commercial engagement. Expanding on particular aspects of that picture, this section explores the ecology of modern family life in detail by looking at specific examples of how modern families spend time together (or apart), as well as the types of social spaces that they inhabit. Interlinking notions of home, family, childhood, risk and consumption are all important sub-themes within the broader issue of how the physical and temporal

world of family life is figured in contemporary Britain. The following questions serve as a framework for this analysis:

- How is time and space organised in modern family life?
- How do uses of time and space in family life reflect the nature of social relations within the family unit?
- What in particular does this suggest about the role of consumption within the ecology of family life?

#### 3.2 Mapping time and space in childhood and family life

Notions of time and space are central to our understandings of how childhood and family life are constructed as social phenomena. After all, it is through the activities that families do (or do not do) together, and through the spaces that they inhabit, that we are able to build an image of what it means to be a family and, in particular, what it means to be a child within the context of family life. On one level this involves a consideration of the physical and virtual spaces that children and families inhabit and the ways in which uses of space reflect social relations within the family unit. At the same time, we also need to explore the social spaces that children and other family members inhabit within the broader context of society.

In relation to time use it is similarly important to consider both how children spend their time on a day-to-day basis (that is, diurnal time use), and how childhood is conceptualised in particular ways as a period of time in the life course – what Allison James and Alan Prout describe as the difference between 'time in childhood' and 'time of childhood'<sup>65</sup>. We must also emphasise the fact that time and space, as concepts, are intrinsically linked. Here they are at times discussed separately as themes but there are obvious overlaps in terms of how time and space are experienced as part of family life.

Conceptions of time and space are complex and cannot be understood solely in terms of quantitative measurements of time use or in simple calculations of the amount of physical space that families inhabit. Our perceptions of family time and space are, in many cases, just as important as the realities of how time and space are organised. For the past century or more, for example, concerns about the fragmentation of the family and the 'disappearance' of childhood have frequently been couched in

<sup>64</sup> Elliott R. and Leonard, C. Peer Pressure and Poverty: Exploring Fashion Brands and Consumption Among the British Poor, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 3 (4).

<sup>65</sup> James, A. & Prout, A. (1997) Re-presenting Childhood: Time and Transition in the Study of Childhood, In A. James & A. Prout (Eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. Routledge/Falmer.

terms of threats (sometimes imagined, sometimes real) to family time and space. Little empirical data exist, however, to suggest that these threats (principally described in terms of commercial engagement) have in fact reduced the amount of time and space that family members share. Indeed, as popular anxieties about threats to family life persist, it would seem that the number of ritual occasions for reinforcing notions of family (and therefore childhood as well) are actually increasing, and increasingly involve consumption practices as a means to bolster our sense of family togetherness.

With this in mind the historian John Gillis points to the importance of exploring how families construct 'quality' family time as a way of countering the so-called 'time famine' of modern life. Existing time use studies often conflate family time with the broader category of 'leisure' (while also marginalising the time use of children), therefore disguising the particular social significance of cyclical, ritual family events such as family dinners, birthdays, family holidays, etc. Gillis highlights the need to take into account the coexistence of both linear and cyclical (or ritual) conceptions of time if we are to understand how time is given symbolic meaning within the context of family life. A similar approach can be adopted in order to understand better the social construction of space in family life.<sup>66</sup>

It is also important to highlight the fact that experiences of family time, space and consumption vary considerably according to social context and in relation to factors such as socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity. The meanings given to family time and space, therefore, shift from family to family, and within families depending on the role and social position of each individual.

### 3.3 'Troubling' times of consumption

With these perspectives in mind we turn first to consider briefly the role that time plays in the construction of contemporary notions of childhood and the family, with a particular focus on the contested role that consumption has to play in these processes. Generally speaking, experiences of childhood are often rigidly structured according to the different kinds of status (and related expectations) that are attributed to children, depending on their age. In British society we are faced with increasingly blurred and fragmented points of transition

between less easily defined age grades – between childhood and adolescence, or adolescence and adulthood, for example. At the same time, age classes are strictly demarcated through the education system, which apportioned particular kinds of social, moral and intellectual competencies to children according to their year group and corresponding chronological age.<sup>67</sup> It is not uncommon, along these lines, to hear teachers admonishing children for being 'immature' or not 'acting their age' as a way of enforcing particular kinds of 'appropriate', age-related behaviour.<sup>68</sup>

Structuring experiences of childhood according to age in this way is connected to the broader perception of childhood as a prelude to adulthood, rather than as an experience that has its own intrinsic social value. Childhood is in this sense highly regulated in social terms according to expectations of a childhood 'past', against which the adult 'present' can be measured in positive or negative terms. Hence, a 'good' childhood nurtures a balanced adult, while 'troubled' times during childhood engender neurosis and maladjustment later in life. Navigating a safe, happy, secure and educationally productive passage through the time of childhood is, therefore, perceived as essential to emotional and psychological success in the next stage of the life course.<sup>69</sup>

Processes of consumption can turn this perception of time on its head in ways that are very unsettling to dominant notions of childhood, as can be seen in the issues surrounding the 'toxic' childhood debate discussed earlier. This is not least because the active engagement of children in the 'profane' world of the marketplace suggests that they are engaging in 'adult' activities before their time. An active engagement in consumption suggests that children are beings-in-the-present, rather than the still-developing precursor of 'grown up' adult consumers. This fundamentally undermines the notions of time that are commonly used by adults to regiment the experiences of children. If children are already displaying 'adult' competencies in this way before they become adults, child consumers present a challenge both to established notions of childhood as a frame of reference for experience and identity (or 'time of childhood') and to the privileged position that adults presume to hold in the commercial world.

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<sup>67</sup> James & Prout (1997)

<sup>68</sup> James & Prout (1997); Buckingham (2000), p.7

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Uprichard, E. (2008) Children as 'Being and Becoming': Children, Childhood and Temporality, *Children and Society*, 22, 3-313.

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<sup>66</sup> Gillis, J. (1996) Making Time for Family: The Invention of Family Time(S) and the Reinvention of Family History, *Journal of Family History*, (21) 4.

Within the context of the family, children's consumption can 'trouble' inter-generational relationships in this sense because it presents a potential subversion of the traditional hierarchy between parents and their children.<sup>70</sup> Whether through the consumption of 'adult' media content online, or through the consumption of 'adult' fashion lines for children, children's consumption behaviours present a challenge to the idea of childhood as a protected, sanctified period of time in life.<sup>71</sup>

Ironically, perhaps, it is often through ritualised family events related to consumption – Christmas or birthdays, for example – that families attempt to redress the balance between parents and children. Gift-giving on these occasions can serve as a means to reinforce the reciprocal obligations that exist between family members. Parents may be expected to fulfil their role as parents by providing children with the latest consumer items, but children are also expected to behave like children in return.<sup>72</sup>

### 3.4 No place like home – creating family space

If consumption can be considered to have a potentially troubling impact on popular conceptions of childhood as a time in the life course, the same might be said for the impact of certain patterns of consumption within the space of the family home. Some forms of consumption (eating and watching television, for example) have played an important part in the process of giving meaning to family space. Other consumption activities, however, (solitary computer use, for example), are often seen to present potential threats to traditional notions of how family space should be organised.

It is important to note here that the idea of family, and the social relationships that families comprise, are inherently tied to the physical locus of 'home' within the space of the household. Since the middle of the 19th century the physical space of the household has become increasingly important as the setting for acting out the domestic ideal of family life.<sup>73</sup> By moving most paid work away from the physical space of the household,

processes of industrialisation encouraged the predominantly middle-class conceptualisation of the home as a private space dedicated to family activities – the most important of which was, not surprisingly, the successful rearing of children.<sup>74</sup> As such, the domestic sphere of home developed as a heavily gendered space in which the mother was charged with a range of responsibilities associated with upholding the ideal of family life. This can be seen as much in the daily preparation of family meals as in other domestic activities, such as compiling family photo albums<sup>75</sup>, the process of amassing family heirlooms, or even in the deference paid to family space through mundane, ritualised, repetitive acts of cleaning.

Each of the activities mentioned above involves forms of consumption related to the social construction of the family in the space of the home. Consumption has, in this sense, become an increasingly important means of filling family time and space with objects and activities that are representative of family life.<sup>76</sup> In general terms the home has become a space for the conspicuous display of the artefacts of the family, from framed family photographs (of consumption through travel and tourism; of children at different transition points of growing up) to digital media technology and domestic appliances.<sup>77</sup> The process of buying property itself is a prime example of how the family is symbolised through domestic consumption.

Consumption as a self-making process for children and families is, of course, something that takes place in space and time. The idea of creating quality family time by sharing meals brought with it, for example, the fixing of the family meal in time and space. This is reflected in the creation and subsequent normalisation of the dining room and the living room as spaces within the family home. More recently, other forms of communal consumption – in particular, media consumption – have also served at times to order family space in a way that emphasises notions of families physically 'coming together'. Contemporary advertisements for computer gaming consoles such as the Nintendo Wii, for example, provide evidence of how new media are being increasingly marketed as a hub of family interaction,

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<sup>70</sup> Boden, S. (2006) Dedicated Followers of fashion? The Influence of popular culture on children's social identities, *Media, Culture Society*, 28, 289.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Schor, J. (2004) *Born to Buy*. Scribner.

<sup>72</sup> Hendrick, H. (1997) Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An interpretive survey, 1800 to the present, In A. James and A. Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. Routledge/Falmer, pp. 59.

<sup>73</sup> This can be seen not only in the fact that most families still live within one household but also in the ways in which statistical investigations of family life often reify the household as a locus of 'family' by using 'household' as the primary unit of analysis (see Section 1 of *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes* for more detail).

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<sup>74</sup> Allan, G. & Crow, G. (Eds). (1989) *Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere*. Macmillan.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, J. Holland and J. Spence (Eds) (1991) *Family Snaps – The Meaning of Domestic Photography*. Virago Press.

<sup>76</sup> Money, A. (2007) Material Culture and the Living Room: The appropriation and use of goods in everyday life, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 7, 355-377.

<sup>77</sup> Hurdley, R. (2006) Dismantling Mantelpieces: Narrating Identities and Materializing Culture in the Home, *Sociology*, 40, 717-733.

following on from similar discourses surrounding television viewing in the home.<sup>78</sup>

At other times, however, media consumption in particular is seen as a commercial activity that can throw family space into disarray. While this will be explored in more detail below, it is worth noting here that media consumption is seen by some parents as the most insidious encroachment of the commercial world into the lives of children and families, both inside and outside of the home. The range of 'virtual' social interactions made possible by new digital technologies provides one ready example of the ways in which the supposedly discrete boundaries of family space can become blurred and contested.<sup>79</sup>

### 3.5 Home beyond the house

This is a very important point given the nature of recent processes of social and economic globalisation, not only in relation to the expansion of family space into virtual domains but also in terms of the increased transnational movement of people and concurrent 'deterritorialisation' of the family. Within the context of transnational migration, diasporic groups and migrant families may move across thousands of miles in their interactions with one another, or indeed have more than one physical focus for family interactions. Some transnational migrants, of course, may not see family members for extended periods of time, depending on the circumstances of their migration patterns.

This is certainly the case for many migrant families in the UK and represents a shift away from more traditional, sedentary models of family organisation in space. Chinese families in Britain, for example, are frequently tied to extended family networks both in the UK and in China. Sending remittances, and travelling backwards and forwards between different family hubs has become a normal part of life for these families, as it has for those from a range of other cultural backgrounds, including white British expatriates overseas.

While agreeing with the view of culture from the perspective of transnational anthropology – that culture and community are no longer so strictly tied to locality – David Morley is right to point out that this kind of transnational (or even intra-national) mobility is still only experienced by a rather small

proportion of the British population. Most people still end up living relatively close to the villages, towns or cities where they were born. Instead, most families 'travel' through experiences of the world provided by an increasingly broad range of media. It is worth noting in this sense that the diversity of experiences of family time and space includes those that are based locally, but also stretch across the globe, either physically or virtually.<sup>80</sup>

### 3.6 Family space and social relations

Before looking in more detail at the ways in which particular patterns of consumption might 'trouble' traditional notions of family space, it will be useful to explore the ways in which the social relations of the family are reflected in the ordering of family space. Looking at the gendered nature of family homes provides one means of exploring how family space serves as a reflection of the social relations within the family.

While changes in patterns of employment and education for women over the past fifty years have begun to challenge the gendered nature of family space, the task of maintaining the domestic family sphere still rests primarily on the shoulders of women. With this in mind, and given the traditionally patriarchal structure of nuclear families in Western society, feminist critiques of family space present home as a potential site of resistance to traditional gender roles.<sup>81</sup> Aspects of family time and space normally associated with an ideal vision of the family – the family meal, for example – can also be seen as activities through which women and children are systematically marginalised and disempowered.

In comparing the spatial organisation of the houses of lower-middle class families in France and Britain, for example, Sophie Chevalier conceptualises the home as a physical expression of specific cultural assumptions and ideals related to gender.<sup>82</sup> In France, domestic spaces (e.g. dining table seating arrangements) were seen to reflect a more rigid gender hierarchy, while the more informal organisation of space in homes in Britain places less emphasis on such gender-related differences. More generally it has become the norm for working women to switch between roles when navigating the space of home, negotiating

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, 'Wii are Family', *The Guardian* (18/05/07) – <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/may/18/advertising.nintendo>

<sup>79</sup> See for example, Ofcom (2008) *The Byron Review*; 'One Click from Danger', *BBC* (7/01/08) (); 'The internet: how parents can play safe', *The Daily Telegraph* (03/04/2008) ()

<sup>80</sup> Morley, D. (2000) *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity*. Routledge.

<sup>81</sup> Gregson, N. & Lowe, M. (1995) Home-making: on the spatiality of daily social reproduction in contemporary middle-class Britain, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 20(2).

<sup>82</sup> Chevalier, S. (2002) The Cultural Construction of Domestic Space in France and Great Britain, *Signs*, 27 (3).

identities that are at times contradictory, rather than completely rejecting traditionally female roles of mother and homemaker. As such, the home has become a site in which multiple, often ambiguous, female identities are mediated. Nicky Gregson and Michelle Lowe argue that this conflict of roles and identities is an important factor underpinning feelings of guilt and inadequacy for working mothers.

### 3.7 Bedroom strongholds – children's spaces in the home

The ways in which children inhabit family space can also be seen as a reflection of changing social relations within the family. As the role of children has come to take central importance in popular imaginings of the family, so too have children gained a greater degree of personal space within the family home. Partly as a result of lower birthrates, larger numbers of children now have access to their own bedroom – a change which, on a basic level, implies that children have been afforded a larger portion of private space within the family home and, therefore, might have more freedom or independence within this space. Children's access to private space in the family home is, of course, contested and often serves as a source of ongoing conflict and negotiation, particularly in relation to the question of control and autonomy in bedroom spaces.

Angela McRobbie's analysis of the gendered nature of bedroom cultures for teenage girls, for example, points to the ways in which the private realm of the bedroom serves as a site for resistance to dominant cultural forms, both as a place to escape the social expectations of family and school with friends and as a way of expressing identity through domestic display and consumption – through posters, record collections, magazines, photographs, and so on. At the same time, McRobbie<sup>83</sup> points to the ways in which girls' uses of consumption in structuring bedroom culture also serve to reinforce gender roles and feminine stereotypes, as embodied in consumer items such as beauty products and 'girls' magazines.

Access to this kind of private space is also often age-related, with children and teenagers asserting a greater sense of control or legitimacy within personal spaces as they get older. The relative level of autonomy afforded to children according to age can clearly be seen in Sonia Livingstone and Moira Bovill's cross-cultural study of bedroom culture among young people.

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<sup>83</sup> McRobbie, A. & Garber, J. (1976) Girls and subcultures, In: S. Hall & T. Jefferson, (Eds) *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. Hutchinson.

From surveys conducted in 12 countries, including the UK, it emerged that even for young children, having their own bedroom is often the norm. Over half of 5-6 year olds, for example, do not have to share a room. The tendency to have a single room also increases with age. Of those consulted, 69% of 9-10 year olds, 77% of 12-13 year olds and 86% of 15-16 year olds had their own room. Parents accordingly offer older children a greater degree of private space as they progress towards teen or young adult identities. The relative levels of autonomy associated with the process of growing up are in this sense reflected in the degree of space afforded to children at different ages.<sup>84</sup>

### 3.8 Grown up children in the space of the family home

This is as much the case for children of school-age as it is for 'grown-up' children still living within the family home. As discussed in the previous section of this report, contemporary transitions into adulthood do not necessarily follow a strict linear path that severs dependence when offspring reach 16 or 18 years of age. Instead, young adults may remain financially dependent on parents or remain in the family home until much later in life. This involves new forms of negotiation between parents and children as their roles shift with the development of new adult identities and relationships. In their pan-European study of transitions into adulthood, Clare Holdsworth and David Morgan point out that, perhaps not surprisingly, the negotiation of space was often of key importance in navigating new social roles within the family household as children get older.<sup>85</sup>

### 3.9 Media-rich bedrooms

As homes have become more comfortable (particularly with the popularisation of central heating) the role of children's bedrooms has also shifted to incorporate a broader range of leisure and consumption activities. Where children's bedrooms were once rather cold, inhospitable places used primarily for sleeping, they have increasingly become social spaces in their own right where children are likely to spend a considerable amount of time. That this shift is also reflective of the new role that children play as consumers rather than producers of family wealth. Children's bedrooms have become a depository for a wide range of consumer items and leisure activities, prominent

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<sup>84</sup> Livingstone, S. & Bovill, M. (2001) *Children and their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study*. Routledge.

<sup>85</sup> Holdsworth, C. & Morgan, D. (2005) *Transitions in Context: Leaving Home, Independence and Adulthood*. Open University Press.



among which is the use of televisions, computers, games consoles and other digital media. Again, the private spaces of children's bedrooms become cause for concern when media consumption of this kind provides the opportunity for children (and the notion of childhood) to stray beyond the boundaries set for them by parents and other adults. While parents often facilitate the creation of rich media environments in children's bedrooms, such environments can also present challenges to the very ideals of family 'togetherness' that parents wish to pursue.

### 3.10 Variations in children's experiences of home space

It would, of course, be misleading to suggest that all children reside in warm, cosy, media-rich bedrooms. On the contrary, there are many children who live in households where private space and consumer items are lacking. Given that roughly 3.9 million children lived in low income households in the UK in 2007, there exists a substantial proportion of children who experience material deprivation, including limited access to both the private space of one's own bedroom and to the kinds of media that children normally experience at home – television, a computer, internet access, etc. It is worth noting, in this sense, that Bangladeshi and Pakistani families are disproportionately represented within low income households in the UK, but also have the highest numbers of children per household. Arguably this suggests that such families have less space in the household per child and must distribute a smaller level of income between a larger number of offspring.

In terms of media technology specifically, the 2006 Family and Children's Study suggests that while the vast majority of families have a computer at home (95%), figures are higher for couple families where both adults are working (99%) compared with lone parent families where the parent works more than 16 hours per week (95%) or where the parent works less than 16 hours (77%). OfCom's 2007 Media Literacy Audit similarly suggests that households with lower incomes are less likely to have access to media within the home.<sup>86</sup> It is important also to note, however, that many media platforms used within the home or the bedroom are also mobile – mobile phones, Mp3 players, portable gaming devices and so on. Such devices may enrich bedroom environments, but they can obviously also be used in other spatial contexts, including those outside of the family

home. Ownership or use of these particular media platforms, therefore, should not necessarily be considered a mark of having a media-rich bedroom environment, but instead is an indication of media use more generally.

### 3.11 Confining children – risk, consumption and the public/private divide

Bearing these kinds of variations in mind, the overall increase in private space (and the more recent increase in access to new digital media) in some ways suggests a greater degree of agency and autonomy for many children within the space of the family home. At the same time, it is worth questioning why it is that children are primarily situated in the private spaces of bedrooms and family homes in the first place. The domestication of leisure may have expanded the scope of experiences of children indoors, but it has also helped to constrain children's movement within the 'safety' of the family home. The increased amount of space afforded to children in this sense is also an indication of ongoing attempts by adults to limit the range of physical environments open to children, and in so doing to limit the number of real or imagined risks to which children and/or the idea of childhood itself may be exposed.

### 3.12 Risk

Notions of risk provide a useful lens with which to view this particular aspect of how time, space and consumption are figured in the lives of children and families (see also Section 2 of Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes). Ulrich Beck, along with other social theorists such as Anthony Giddens, emphasises the significance of perceptions of risk as an aspect of social life in contemporary societies. Arguing that the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks, Beck suggests that the negotiation of risks plays a fundamental role in determining how we organise our lives in space and time.<sup>87</sup> Key to Beck's notion of risk is the idea of the 'private' as the only domain in which people, and particularly children, are perceived to be safe, even though the opposite is in fact more often the case.<sup>88</sup>

### 3.13 Children indoors

This is specifically related to the notion that the 'indoor' child is deemed safe, good and responsible, while the outdoor child, unsupervised in the unstructured public sphere, embodies social threat. The perceived risk of uncontrolled, 'outdoor'

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<sup>86</sup> Ofcom (2008) Media Literacy Audit: Report on UK Children's Media Literacy.

<sup>87</sup> Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Madge, N. & Barker, J. (2007) *Risk and Childhood*. Risk Commission/RSA

children is perhaps most starkly evidenced in the fact that the most recent British Crime Survey (BCS) report on anti-social behaviour includes 'young people hanging around on the street' as one of a number of anti-social activities listed in its survey data. A third of respondents agreed that this rather vague category of public social interaction between young people was the most troubling form of anti-social behaviour in 2006/7 – followed closely by 'rubbish or litter lying around'.<sup>89</sup>

In contrast with an outside world overflowing with potential risks and dangers, including other children, the space of the family home is imagined as a haven in which children are sheltered and childhood is safeguarded.<sup>90</sup> Controlling the physical movement of children within the space of the family home becomes a way of attempting to limit the exposure of children to the negative aspects of modern society – not least among which are patterns of consumption that fall outside of the realms of what is deemed appropriate for children and young people. David Morley points to the importance of structured, routinised time spent in a regimented home space in this sense as a means for parents to instil the habitus – that is, the implicit behaviours that are expected and accepted within a particular sociocultural context of their culture through a range of rules and regulations.<sup>91</sup> Outside of the house, and away from the supervision and surveillance of parents, children's movements and actions cannot be so easily controlled. Being inside and close at hand facilitates the regulation of children and childhood. Of course, controlling time and space in this way is made much more difficult when children are given access to the broad expanses of information and social interactions available online, as we explore below.

### 3.14 Children outside?

The extent to which children (and therefore childhood) are spatially marginalised in this way can also be seen in the absence of ('good') children both in actual physical spaces and in debates about how public spaces are designed and designated. Although children are consumers of their local spaces, they remain conspicuously absent in ongoing discussions on transport and urban development. Adrian Davis and Linda Jones argue, for example that there have been few attempts in the UK to modify the urban environment such that

children's needs are met.<sup>92</sup> Rather than considering the behaviour and needs of children as a distinct social group, city development policy frequently treats them as objects to be fitted into the adult world. This highlights the issue that decisions impacting the spatial organisation of family life and the management and design of urban environments may not necessarily reflect the ways in which children themselves experience the world.

### 3.15 Rural spaces

The lack of structured or positive public spaces for children in urban settings is often contrasted with idealised notions of 'healthy' pastoral spaces made available to children in rural settings. Representations of the rural idyll, however, can be seen to disguise the growing spatial restriction of children in the 'natural' environment as well. In contrast to the imagery drawn upon by numerous after-school institutions (the Scouts, for example), access to 'natural' environments is itself now a highly commodified, controlled and supervised phenomenon.

With this in mind it is interesting to note that the rate of expansion of after-school clubs in rural areas has been significantly greater than in urban or suburban locales. Approximately one-third of all such clubs in England and Wales are located in rural areas. Gill Valentine and John McKendrick<sup>93</sup> argue that restrictions on spatial mobility, as well as the existence of fewer organised play opportunities for young people, have resulted in the 'double deprivation' of rural children – an observation consistent with research conducted by Fiona Smith and John Barker.<sup>94</sup> In their interviews, a majority of children said they found living in a rural environment limited and boring. Even the youngest children felt that while such environments were good places to be as a child, remaining there might cause them problems as they got older.

### 3.16 Cotton wool kids?

Recent popular anxiety about the potential threats that children face in the public sphere is countered by increasing levels of concern about over-protected 'cotton-wool kids' and

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<sup>89</sup> British Crime Survey, 2006-2007 – <http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/statistics/statistics066.htm>

<sup>90</sup> Buckingham (2000) p.71.

<sup>91</sup> Morely (2000) p.20.

<sup>92</sup> Davis, A. and Jones, L. (1997) Whose Neighbourhood? Whose Quality of Life? Developing a New Agenda for Children's Health in Urban Setting, *Health and Education Journal*, 56 (4).

<sup>93</sup> Valentine, G. and McKendrick, J.H. (1997) Children's Outdoor Play: Exploring Parental Concerns About Children's Safety and the Changing Nature of Childhood, *Geoforum*, 28 (2).

<sup>94</sup> Smith F. and Barker J. (2001) Commodifying the Countryside: The Impact of Out of School Care on Rural Landscapes of Children's Play. *Area*, 33,2.

'helicopter' parents who do not allow their children to experience the risks and dangers of the real world. There exists, in this sense, an increasing perception of risk related to the very process of avoiding risks. Over-cautious parents run the risk, according to this argument, of producing neurotic, naïve children, ill-equipped for the challenges of modern living.<sup>95</sup>

### 3.17 Variations in children's experiences of public and private spaces

There is, of course, considerable variation in the degree of autonomy that parents give to their children. In her ethnography of Brompton in South London, for instance, Gillian Evans provides an interesting example of the ways in which children's negotiation of public and private space are mediated according to consumption behaviours, but also according to gender and ethnicity.<sup>96</sup> Evans suggests that among the working class families of Brompton's council estates, girls are far less likely to play outside than are boys, partly because of ingrained beliefs about the dangers that face girls on the streets but also because of beliefs about the domestic role of daughters in the family home. Girls are expected to stay at home with their mothers while boys are expected to play outside.

Time and space are, in this sense, far more strictly regulated in the lives of girls than they are in the daily experiences of boys. This presents difficulties for parents (and particularly mothers) because they are aware that while boys also face dangers in the public sphere of the street it is also on the street that boys are able to engage in the construction of the kinds of masculine identities that will allow them to retain respect and security among their peers. Evans also suggests that both male and female Bangladeshi children in her neighbourhood were far more restricted than most white children in terms of their movements beyond the front door.

In relation to consumption, the movements of many local children are described in terms of the development of a complicated network of exchange surrounding the swapping of Pokemon trading cards. Children (mostly white boys) on Evans' council estate move from house to house, through the

playground or in the street according to a growing network of children who are involved in the exchange of these cards, with older and more experienced children attempting to out-swap the younger novices with whom they. This negotiation of time, space and commercial activity provides a colourful example of the active ways in which some children are able to organise their own lives in spite of, or in the absence of, parental supervision.

### 3.18 Blurring the line between public and private

Neither a strictly public nor private perspective of children in space is, then, on its own, particularly helpful in terms of understanding how children themselves actually navigate the perceived risks and constraints of public and private spaces. Indeed, the boundary between public and private is itself increasingly blurred, not least by consumption practices that take place within the privacy of the family home. Jeni Harden, for example, describes how children internalise the notion of home as a safe place because home is the locus for people and things that are 'known' – there are no 'weird' people at home, and therefore home, for some at least, represents a secure and comforting space.<sup>97</sup>

At the same time, the children in Harden's study were also aware that the public sphere could easily penetrate the safety of the home, primarily through television programming. Not surprisingly, children recognised swearing and violence as negative aspects of the outside world brought into the home through media consumption. While the children in the study were, in this sense, complicit in official discourse about the dangers presented to children from adult media and in adult public spaces, they were also actively engaged in constructing their own understandings of the public/private divide through negotiations of both parental and legal restrictions on what they did, and where.

### 3.19 The public in the private: media consumption, space and time

Sonia Livingstone provides another example of negotiation in relation to the blurring of public/private boundaries for children and parents.<sup>98</sup> Building on Giddens' notion of the

<sup>95</sup> See, for example, 'Ed Balls Calls for the end of 'cotton wool' culture in schools', *The Times* (2/10/08) <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article4869894.ece> ; Generation Angst, *The Times* (22/01/08) [http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/women/families/article3225968.ece](http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/families/article3225968.ece)

<sup>96</sup> Evans, G. (2007) *Educational Failure and Working Class White Children in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>97</sup> Harden, J. (2000) There's No Place Like Home: the public/private divide in children's theorizing of risk and safety, *Childhood*, 7 (1), 43-59.

<sup>98</sup> Bedrooms, of course, were the site of self-making through media for young people well before the rise of new media technologies – see Larson, R. (1995) Secrets in the Bedroom: Adolescent's Private Use of Media, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 24 (5), 535-550.

'democratisation of the private sphere' – that is, the increasingly agentive role that children play in negotiating family time, space, and spending – Livingstone suggests that digital technologies and new media provide a space in which children and young people are able to shape and mould notions of identity beyond the confines of the social and physical space of the family home. Staying at home, she suggests, is now framed by 'going out' via the internet. Morley makes a similar point by highlighting the presence of global cultural influences within the local space of the home environment.<sup>99</sup> Virtual spaces online present an alternative public sphere where children and young people (and adults) are able to engage in a host of social interactions beyond the family. Of course, such spaces also serve as powerful platforms for the cross-marketing and advertising of consumer items for the child- and youth-markets.

Negotiating the public/private divide online has a number of implications for children and families both in terms of time and space. Media-rich bedroom environments can, for example, encourage children to spend more time either watching television or online rather than in the communal spaces of the family. Of course, neither of these activities are necessarily solitary, but they may not involve other family members. Livingstone's own research suggests that approximately 71% of children in the UK had their own computer and 19% had Internet access in their own bedroom in 2002.<sup>100</sup> Livingstone and Bovill also found that 40% of the young people they spoke to engaged in 'identity play' on the internet, and 30% made new acquaintances in this way, maintaining online social networks through constant and repetitive online communication. While television still dominates as the main 'bedroom' media, children are interacting socially and constructing social identities using the internet and using other technology – principally mobile phones – within the context of their bedrooms.

Figures from Ofcom suggest similar trends for the children's use of media in the home. While television still dominates children's media use, bedroom access to the internet is increasing, and is frequently unsupervised by adults. In 2005 3% of 8-11 year-olds and 13% of 12-15 year-olds had internet access in their bedrooms. In 2007 these figures had risen to 9% and 20% respectively. In 2007, children aged 8-11 had an average of four media devices in their bedrooms, compared with

an average of 6 for children aged 12-15. Roughly two thirds of children watch TV, use the internet or listen to the radio in a room where no adult is present. Of children aged 8-15, 16% watched TV on their own, while 14% were solitary users of the internet.

As suggested above, such media consumption practices can be a vehicle for anxiety, conflict and negotiation between parents and children, although they appear to be far less worrying for parents than the perils of the outside world. Ofcom data suggests that only one in ten parents consider the internet to be a major concern, while one in twenty consider television viewing to be a major concern. Parents are particularly ambiguous about the impact of the internet on children, seeing it as both a potential threat and a great benefit to their children's well-being. In connection with this, roughly one third of parents claimed to place no restrictions on media use, and half had no form of controls over internet access.<sup>101</sup> In comparison with parents' regulation of children's movement outside, in the Families and Children Study 2006, 79% of all children aged 11-15 agreed that they always or nearly always told their parent where they were going when leaving the house. This represents a considerable shift towards the autonomy and independence of children and young people.

The proliferation of media in the home can, then, be seen in one sense to promote what Patrice Flichy has called 'living together separately'. That is, family members reside in the same physical space but their social interactions are increasingly disembodied and virtual.<sup>102</sup> The most recent communications report from Ofcom also highlights the increasing popularity of media 'stacking', or using different media simultaneously. Family members can be sat next to one another watching television, while at the same time existing in entirely different social networks online or via text. While this may indeed lead to 'living together separately', in some households, it is also worth considering the ways in which families may remain connected while not being in the same physical space. Just as parents and children might be engaged in different virtual and face-to-face social exchanges while in the space of the family home, they are also capable of maintaining social ties with family members through digital technologies while at work, at

<sup>99</sup> Morley (2000).

<sup>100</sup> Livingstone, S. & Bovill, M. (2002) *Bedroom Culture and Media Use*.

<sup>101</sup> Ofcom, (2008) Media Literacy Audit.

<sup>102</sup> Flichy, P. (1995) *The Dynamics of Modern Communication: The Shaping and Impact of New Communications Technology*. Sage.

school, or while out in the less structured, and therefore potentially more threatening, world of public spaces.

Indeed, in this latter case mobile phones present an interesting example of technology used by parents as a means of monitoring the movements of children and used by children as a means to remain socially connected with friends. Mobile phones can become a facilitator of both increased parental control and increased independence for children. Here we have an interesting example of how media consumption has the potential both to bolster traditional understandings of the social relations within the family and to present new and innovative ways in which family relations may be negotiated, both at home and elsewhere. Further research in this area of family life would provide interesting insights into the ways in which consumption is serving to structure family relations in new ways.

The implications of these observations is that participation in shared family social interaction depends ever less on place. The physical dimensions of the home by no means indicate the limits of the public domain, just as the discretely private nature of the family home is undermined by the presence of an increasingly broad array of media content. Consumption plays an important role in the negotiation of identity across these boundaries and in this sense is key to understanding the nature of time and space as part of the social lives of children and families in contemporary Britain.

The following section of this report moves on to look more closely at the ways in which negotiated processes of consumption are woven into the social and economic fabric of contemporary family life – from earning pocket money, to choosing the family holiday, to deciding who 'owns' the family television.

## 4 Pennies and pounds: family spending in the present

### 4.1 Introduction

This section of the report looks specifically at the significance of consumption as a social activity within family life, focusing particularly on the ways in which children 'earn' money, how they spend money and the role that children play in family consumption. Crucial to this analysis is the notion that children are active consumers and that consumption plays an integral role in the construction of social identities in contemporary British society. While children are not

universally savvy to the more persuasive intentions of the marketplace, children (like adults) nevertheless are actively engaged in processes of production and consumption.

Consumption in this sense is conceptualised as a key point of negotiation between parents and children. In exploring these issues we seek answers to three main questions:

- What is the socioeconomic role of children in contemporary family life?
- How are economic decisions negotiated within the social relations of the family unit?
- What is the significance of consumption in these exchanges?

Because of the commercial value of the data it is often difficult to access research that deals specifically with consumer activity and spending patterns of children and young people. Original research conducted by SIRC, however, has specifically explored such issues in order to reveal how much young people spend, what they spend their money on and how this money is 'earned' – its social value.<sup>103</sup> This research has also provided insights into the nature of consumption and expenditure as a factor in the relationships within families - looking, for example, at perceptions of ownership of goods within households from the standpoints of both parents and children and at the different ways of 'earning' pocket money through employment, good behaviour or the performance of certain household tasks. Along with other key sources of data, this research provides the basis for the analysis that follows.

### 4.2 The increasing costs of children

To begin with, we should consider how much children actually cost and where this money goes. Children cost a lot of money, although exactly how much is rather difficult to ascertain. We often ignore, for example, that families with children require larger homes than their childless contemporaries. The cost to parents of raising children within these enlarged spaces varies significantly, of course, from family to family depending on a range of socioeconomic factors. Just as families are different, so too are their expectations and understandings about childhood and the financial dependence of children. For most, the cost of raising children increases as children become older and more aware of the significance of consumption as a part of social life. For many, larger costs are also incurred as children enter the

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<sup>103</sup> SIRC (2007) Coming of Wage Report (Children's Mutual)

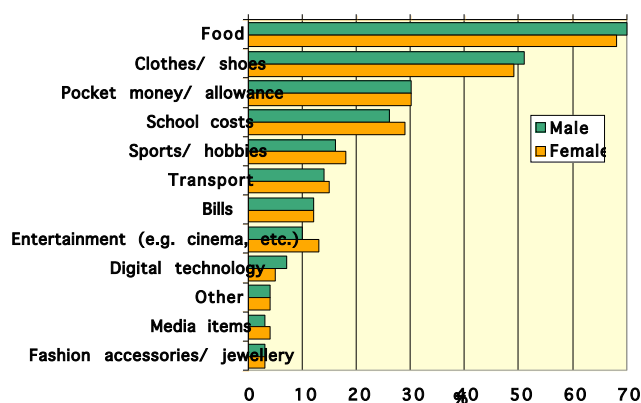
increasingly expensive worlds of further and higher education, meaning that the costs of raising today's 'children' can continue far beyond the normally recognised 'transition' ages of 16 (leaving compulsory education), 18 (leaving further education) or 21 (leaving higher education).

Calculating the cost of childhood is also complicated because children are so central to the idea of family life, making it hard to discern where spending on children begins and ends. Does buying a larger car to accommodate a larger family, for example, amount to spending on children? Is it possible to quantify the influence that children have on parental spending habits for food, clothes, or entertainment? Is the cost of university part of the cost of raising a child, or part of the cost of fulfilling certain ideals about parenthood and social identity, or both? Answering these questions involves a recognition not only of the potential real costs of childhood but also of the social value of children to parents and of the reciprocal social ties that underpin economic exchanges between family members.

One commercial estimate of the total cost of childhood from birth to the age of 21 is £186,000 (excluding private school fees) – equivalent to roughly £24 per day.<sup>104</sup> SIRC's own estimations of the costs of childhood for 2007, based on a YouGov poll of 2,000 nationally representative parents, are rather lower at an average of £57.64 per week. This research also indicated that the average weekly cost of an 11 year old, identified as the least expensive age, amounted to £43.19, while the most expensive age group, 13 year olds, cost their parents an estimated average of £63.10 per week.

In SIRC's research, parents in focus groups explained the rising costs of children with age in terms of heightened brand-awareness, the relationship between consumer identity and broader friendship networks at secondary school, and the costs of schooling itself. When asked to identify the highest single type of expenditure on children, the most frequent response among parents was food (69%). From Figure 1 we can see that clothes, allowances, and school costs were other significant outlays. It is evident, then, that aside from costs related to education, consumption plays a key role in the 'necessary' costs attributed to raising children.

**Figure 1. Perceived categories of expenditure on children – by gender of parent**



The financial demands placed on parents at different stages of children's lives were framed by parents in terms of 'definitive stepped costs', or the particular points at which the costs of meeting children's needs are seen to change significantly. As one focus group participant commented:

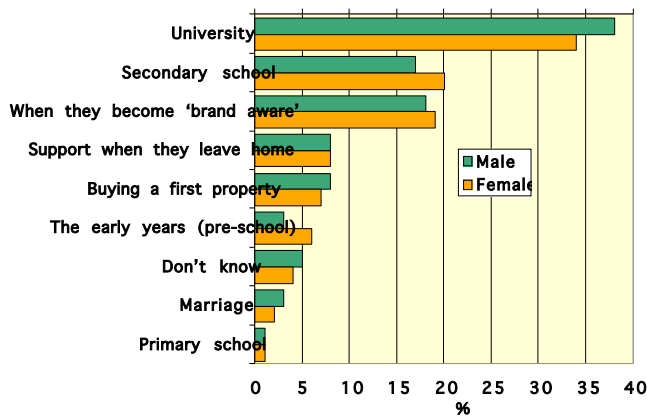
*"So you have your first kid and it's 'right, I need thousands here, I've got a cot to buy ...' The next stepped cost is when you come to have two [children], or if you're like me you have four, you suddenly think 'crikey, I've to go out and buy a seven-seat car' ..."*

This notion of 'stepped' costs mirrors the broader framing of spending on children (and children's approaches to consumption) in terms of discrete chronological age bands – something which on its own helps to normalise thinking about the growth and development of contemporary children in terms of spending and consumption. Each of these 'stepped' costs, from starting school to getting married, can be seen to involve certain expectations and obligations about consumption practices. While these do not always involve the active engagement of children, they nevertheless involve the need for different understandings of consumption activities, as in the example above. Different stages in children's (and parent's) lives are, in this sense, directly associated with ideas about shifts in spending and consumption habits.

This can be seen as much in the present as it is in parents' future projections of spending on children. SIRC's findings indicate that parental perceptions of cost vary slightly according to gender and age, as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

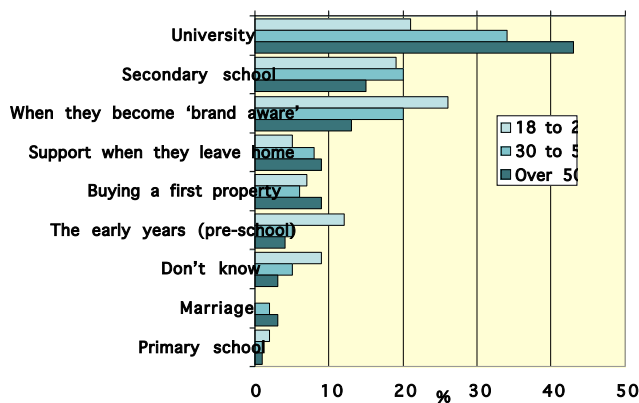
**Figure 2. Perceived steps in cost of children – by gender of parent**

<sup>104</sup> Annual Cost of a Child Survey (2008) Liverpool/Victoria.



The perceived significance of the cost of university, for example, increases as parents get older. Those over 50 are more than twice as likely as the 19-30 cohort to report this stage in their children's lives as being the most expensive (43%). This difference is undoubtedly due to the increased likelihood of older poll respondents having children approaching or already in higher education. Focus groups revealed that parents of younger children had only a modest awareness or understanding of the actual costs involved in supporting a child through university.

Figure 3. Perceived steps in cost of children – by age of parent



### 4.3 Children's influence on parental spending through pester power

The correlation between types of family consumption behaviour and the experiences of childhood and family life can be seen more generally in discussions about the changing socioeconomic role of children in the family as they grow older. The socioeconomic role of younger children is normally framed primarily in terms of complete economic dependence on parents and having little or no control over personal funds or pocket money.

While not spending individually, however, children often exercise control over family spending through 'pester power' or other ways of influencing parent's consumption choices. The term 'pester power' has obvious negative connotations in terms of the nature of children's engagement in this decision-process, implying from the outset that the negotiation of consumption practices between children and parents is a site for conflict and disagreement.<sup>105</sup> This may well often be the case, but it is also arguable that children, as active and important members of the family, are entitled to have some influence over family spending and that the negotiation of family consumption choices is therefore a process of dialogue rather than one in which the interests of parents are necessarily pitted against those of their children.<sup>106</sup>

In any case, the parent participants in SIRC's research highlighted the significance of children's increasingly agentive role in family consumption choices as a key shift in terms of the costs of raising children. The level of direct influence children have over their parent's spending varied, however, depending on the aspect of family spending being discussed. Children appear to have most influence over parents when it comes to purchasing food items, holidays, hardware (electrical goods, for example) and gifts for friends and family. Girls, in particular, were reported by parents to have influence when purchasing presents while boys had more impact on parental choices of electrical goods, gadgets, music and games.<sup>107</sup> Children's opinions were perceived to be less important by parents, however, in the context of large investments such as cars or properties.<sup>108</sup>

The significance of pester power or, more neutrally, children's role in family consumption, is indicative of the broader trends towards negotiation as a key element of social and economic relations between parents and children. A more democratic approach to deciding where the family money goes allows children actively to influence certain consumption behaviours, often in ways that are more subtle and complex than the notion of 'pestering' might suggest. At the same time, it would be

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Chaplin, L.N. & John, D.R. (2007) Growing up in a material world: Age differences in materialism in children and adolescents. *Journal of consumer research*, 34.

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, Nickel, A., & Cullen, P. (2004) The child-parent purchase relationship: 'pester power', human rights and retail ethics, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 11(2), 75-86.

<sup>107</sup> SIRC (2007) p.67.

<sup>108</sup> See also Foxman, E., Tansuhaj, P. & Ekstrom, K. (1989) Family members' perceptions of adolescents' influence in family decision making, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15.

unhelpful to overstate the power that children wield in family purchasing decisions. Although children expect to have a say in family consumption, they are often willing to accept the ultimate authority of parents to act 'fairly'.<sup>109</sup> This is echoed in findings from the Young People's Social Attitudes Survey 2004 which suggest that the majority of young people think parents essentially 'know best'. Only 26% of young people consulted thought that children were not given enough freedom by their parents.<sup>110</sup>

The 'democratisation' of family structures is also noted by Gill Jones in a report for the Family and Parenting Institute. She notes that many young people and parents comment on the increasing openness in families, regarding issues such as finance and sex, compared with the previous generation. While most parents welcomed this trend, there were some who felt slightly threatened by it.<sup>111</sup>

If children on the whole still respect the better judgement of their 'experienced' parents, even in the more democratic and open family structures, research conducted by Sharon Boden also suggests that parents feel a strong sense of duty to educate their children about responsible consumption.<sup>112</sup> Despite feeling it was their duty to set an example to their children, however, parents also reported feeling complicit in the processes of consumption affecting their children. They perceived their behaviour as simultaneously influenced by, and in turn influencing and reaffirming the importance of consumption behaviours. David Piachaud argues that this ambiguous approach to consumption is reflective of a broader culture of 'irresponsibility' that currently exists in relation to the increasingly individualised nature of regulating consumption behaviours in British society.<sup>113</sup>

### 4.4 Pocket money is unrelated to parental income

The practice of providing children with an allowance, or 'pocket money', marks another significant step in the developing socioeconomic role of children within the family. Pocket money has been a popular form of providing children with disposable income since the consumer boom of the 1950s, before which it would have been more likely for money to flow in the opposite direction, from children to parents (see *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes*, Section 2).

According to contemporary studies of family expenditure, the majority of young people now receive an allowance of this kind. Of the parents polled by SIRC, for example, 61% claimed to give their children an allowance. A further 32% stated that they gave their children money on an ad hoc basis when they needed something. This figure is supported by data from the child-focused marketing organisation Childwise, who suggest that approximately 69% of children received pocket money in 2007.<sup>114</sup>

The most recent report on children's spending from ChildWise also suggests that the amount of money received by children though both pocket money and earnings has increased overall in recent years, although not by a significant amount.<sup>115</sup>

According to Childwise, the average amount of pocket money and earnings acquired by children per week increased from £8.80 in 2000 to £9.90 in 2007. This is a slight decrease on figures for 2006. According to SIRC, in 2007 the average allowance for young people across between the ages of 11 and 18 was slightly lower, at £8.43 per week. Figures from the Halifax Pocket Money Survey 2007 provide a similar average weekly allowance of £8.01.

In the SIRC study the average amount of money received by those aged 11-16 was estimated to be £12.70 for boys and £15.90 for girls. For those aged between 5 and 10, the average pocket money and earnings per week was £4.40 for boys and £4.70 for girls. Not surprisingly, the average amount of weekly pocket money received by young people increases with age, from £3.38 for 11 year olds to £10.72 for 18 year olds. Only 5% of children claimed not to receive a specific amount, while a

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<sup>109</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2005) *Children's Involvement in Family Decision-Making*, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0365.asp>

<sup>110</sup> Park, A., Phillips, M. & Johnson, M. (2004) *Young people in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12-19 year-olds*. National Centre for Social Research <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR564.pdf>

<sup>111</sup> Jones, G. (2005) *Young adults and the extension of economic dependence*. Family and Parenting Institute.

<sup>112</sup> Boden, S. (2006). Another Day, Another Demand: How Parents and Children Negotiate Consumption Patterns, *Sociological Research On-Line*.

<sup>113</sup> Piachaud, D. (2008) Freedom to be a Child: Commercial Pressures on Children, *Social Policy and Society*, 7, 445-456.

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<sup>114</sup> Childwise, (2008) *The Trends Report*.

<sup>115</sup> ChildWise (2008) *Trends from the ChildWise Monitor Report 1994-2008*.



further 2% stated that parents and carers provide them with everything they need, and so they did not receive an allowance.

The Families and Children's Study 2004 (FACS) <sup>116</sup> estimates of pocket money given to 11-15 year olds is broadly consistent with those above. Analysis of their data shows that the median amount is between £5 and £12.50.<sup>117</sup> Interestingly, however, FACS also reveals that the amounts of pocket money that children receive is almost totally independent of the income of their parents, as summarised in Table 1. Here we can see that the distributions of pocket money in families where parents are in the top 20% income bracket are very much the same as those where parents are in the lowest quintile.

**Table 1. Pocket money received by 11-15 year olds by parental income (% in each category)**

Family Income quintile	£0	<£5	£5-£8	£8-12.5	£12.5-25	£25+
Lowest	14	31	5	20	19	11
Second	15	32	7	19	16	11
Third	12	38	8	15	18	11
Fourth	16	31	8	18	15	12
Highest	17	27	8	18	19	11

The FACS data suggest, then, that Working Class parents provide their children with pocket money that represents a higher proportion of their income compared with Middle Class parents. This is consistent with the findings noted in Section 2 of Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes that lower income families are more likely than those in higher income brackets to go without luxuries in order to provide money and/or goods for their children.

This is not to say, of course, that inequalities in 'purchasing power' are absent among British children. Pocket money and earnings are not the only means of access to consumer goods for young people and the range of one-off payments by parents for specific items may well be greater among the better-off families than, say, among lone-parent families that are reliant on state benefits.

While there is little documentation of such inequalities in the UK, the work of Elizabeth Chin in the United States throws into sharp relief the different consumption opportunities and patterns of largely White middle class young people and those in the largely Black poor inner city areas.<sup>118</sup> She seeks to dispel the idea that rich and poor youngsters in America aspire to the same kinds of status-giving consumer items. Less advantaged children, she argues, are more often driven by considerations of practicality than 'bling' in their purchasing decisions. She stresses that young African Americans, therefore, are often constrained in their more general access to prevailing consumer culture.

While Chin's case is forcibly made, her evidence is sometimes unconvincingly anecdotal and based primarily on her ethnographic study of 22 children on shopping trips. Her support for the idea that riots in cities across the United States in 1967, and the later Los Angeles riots in 1991, were, as the Professor of communication arts John Fiske had earlier suggested, a form of 'radical shopping'<sup>119</sup> might also strike some as a little off the mark. Nevertheless, she is correct in our view to highlight the effects of race, class, poverty and ghettoisation on consumerism that are often overlooked in official statistics and commercial market research.

Perhaps a more convincing, and certainly more familiar to UK readers, perspective on the impacts of inequality and exclusion in children's lives is provided by the lecturer in social policy, Tess Ridge. She notes the extent to which children in poor families experience not only problems in terms of their access to the commercial world but also, perhaps as a result, difficulties in maintaining peer relationships and pursuing academic goals in school. If ever there was a clear demonstration of the overlap of, or congruity between, the commercial and the social worlds of children, it is provided here.<sup>120</sup>

#### 4.5 Allowances and the changing relationships within the family

As with the process of affording children a greater portion of private space within the household, the practice of increasingly giving children amounts of personal disposable income is reflective of the changing social relationships within the

<sup>116</sup> Lyon, N., Barnes, M. & Sweiry, D. (2006) *Families with children in Britain: Findings from the 2004 Families and Children Study (FACS)* Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 340.

<sup>117</sup> Because the FACS data for amounts of pocket money are divided into an even number of categories, the median spans two categories.

<sup>118</sup> Chin, E. (2001) *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>119</sup> Fiske, J. (1994) Radical Shopping in Los Angeles: Race, Media and the Sphere of Consumption. *Media, Culture, and Society*, 16:469:486.

<sup>120</sup> See, for example, Ridge, T. (2002) *Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: From a Child's Perspective*. Policy Press.

family. As children move closer to the perceived autonomy of adulthood, parents are likely to afford children a greater degree of economic independence in the spending choices that they make. Indeed, negotiating spending is closely linked to broader ideas about the successful development of children in both social and economic terms.

The majority of parents consulted by SIRC, for example, expressed the desire to instil in their children a sense of the value of money and the importance of hard work. This was manifested not only in direct relation to money but more generally with respect to other kinds of rewards systems as well. Gold star charts, for example, were frequently seen as a precursor to children learning about the relationship between money and good behaviour and, subsequently, to the relationship between money and work.<sup>121</sup>

Nearly half (49%) of parents linked children's allowances to general help around the house, while 46% also emphasised the importance of good behaviour at home as a factor determining whether children were given their allowance. Accordingly, the majority of parents who implemented an allowance system withheld money if certain tasks were not completed within a specific period of time. Only 17% of parents said that their children did not need to do anything at all in exchange for an allowance. Just as values relating to the work-ethic and the domestic obligations of children are embedded in the negotiation of pocket money, so too are moral statements about being 'good'. As with the 'naughty' and 'nice' caveats for reciprocal exchange during Christmas, the moral sanctioning of pocket money draws a direct link between consumption, expenditure and the broader values and beliefs held to be important by parents.

It would appear, however, that children are not always clear about what is expected in return for disposable income. In total, 37% of children claimed that in order to receive their allowance they were expected to help around the house, while 26% received money in exchange for behaving well at home. Girls reported doing more in exchange for pocket money than did boys. Approximately 38% of children stated that their allowance was not dependent on performance, behaviour or completion of allocated tasks.

This lack of common understanding about the rules related to receiving pocket money can be unpicked in a number of ways.

<sup>121</sup> SIRC (2007)

Pamela Worton and Jacqueline Goodnow, for example, suggest that discrepancies between children and parents arise both from the differing perspectives and approaches of individual parents and from the uncomfortable match between the idea of instilling values about money and work and the practice of expressing intimate social ties through spending and consumption.<sup>122</sup>

In the case of the SIRC focus group participants and interviewees, part of the misunderstanding was derived from parents' overtly-negative perceptions of their children's capability to manage money, in keeping with popular discourse about the 'reckless' spending habits of young people. For their part, SIRC found that 46% of young people disagree with adult concerns about their level of financial awareness, believing that they knew more about money and finance than previous generations precisely because of their exposure to commercial interests.

Part of the explanation for parent's assumptions in this context might lie in fact that the majority were of 'Generation X' – mostly born in the late 1960s and 1970s and growing up as emerging adults in the Thatcherite 'loads-a-money' years when financial profligacy was already an established norm. Parents, in thinking about their own children, may reflect on their personal experiences in those time and assume, quite wrongly, that little has changed in terms of young people's attitudes towards their personal financial affairs.

Parents and children also disagreed about the significance of pocket money as a source of income. In the SIRC research there was a consensus among young people that working for their money was preferable to receiving an allowance. For most, working was a key way of gaining a degree of financial independence from parents, which also meant avoiding the potential social and economic sanctions that come with borrowing money from mum and dad. Comments from the young people interviewed serve to illustrate this point:

*"Well my parents, if they give me money to buy something, like if I wanna do something or take the car, they're like 'well I gave you money to do blah, blah, blah' and like if they want me to go and pick up my brothers or something they always kind of go back to the fact that they've lent me*

<sup>122</sup> Worton, P. & Goodnow, J. (1995) Money and Children's Household Jobs: Parents' Views of their Interconnections, *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 18 (2), 335-350.

*money for something, so it kind of gets frustrating.*"  
(Female, 18)

Parents, on the other hand, were more likely than young people to say that the allowance was the main source of their children's money (84% and 77%, respectively). Only 15% of parents said that their children derived the majority of money from part-time work, whereas 23% of young people claimed that this was the case. This is consistent with the view held by the majority of parents that gifts from family and friends, part time work, grants and benefits were not important sources of financial support for their children.

A possible factor underpinning this divergence of opinion is the fact that some parents were less willing than others to acknowledge the greater financial independence of working children. There are obvious implications for the balance of power within families when children gain greater control over income and spending, not least because financial independence is often considered a key marker of adult identity. Parents are, in this sense, less likely to recognise the increased financial independence of children, either because it implies a transgression of the normative position of children in the family, or because it suggests that children are in fact moving closer towards adulthood.

#### 4.6 Children's earning and the sense of independence

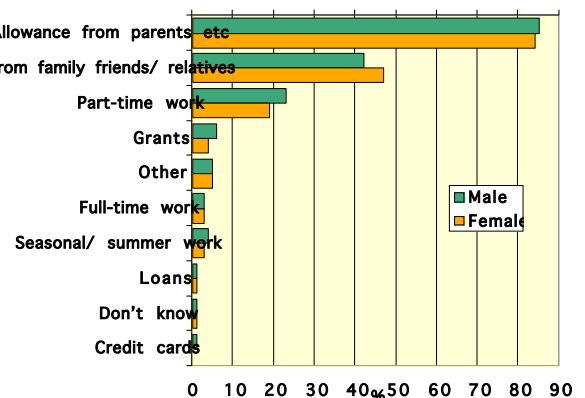
As suggested above, paid work is an important aspect of children's spending and consumption activities precisely because it involves a move away from financial dependence on parents. Earning money from paid work serves as another 'step' in the changing socioeconomic role of children within the family. While children's work is considered in more detail in Sections 2 and 3 of *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes*, it is important to note here that work is a normal part of everyday life for many children. Anne Connolly and Jane Kerr report that, as might be expected, older children are more likely to work than younger ones, with 40% of 15 year olds working compared with 23% of 11 year olds. Almost one third (32%) of the 11 to 15 year old children consulted had worked for money in the week before the interview. Of the children who had worked, 86% worked up to 5 hours, 12% worked from 6 to 15 hours and 2% reported working over 16 hours each week. The total number of hours worked by children increased with age, with children aged 15 years old being more

likely to report working 6 hours or more per week (25%), compared with children aged 11 years old (5%).<sup>123</sup>

While data from Childwise suggest that the number of young people receiving income from work has diminished significantly over the past 10 years, there exist few other sources of data to support this claim. Indeed, it would seem that the opportunities for children's work have actually increased, at least in terms of the variety of jobs that are now available to people under the age of 18.<sup>124</sup>

Research by SIRC suggests that a considerable proportion of children between the ages of 11 and 18 earn some money from paid employment. The money received from paid work, however, is still far less than that received from parents, guardians or other family members, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Children's sources of income, by gender.



While children's engagement in paid work allows them to experience at least the illusion of financial independence, and greater access to the commercial world, work also has additional benefits. Jim McKechnie<sup>125</sup> and his colleagues, for example, report that working is perceived by children as relieving boredom and as a way of acquiring 'adult' experiences.

#### 4.7 Gender differences in children's spending

There are, then, a number of different ways in which children access disposable income, most of which also involve some

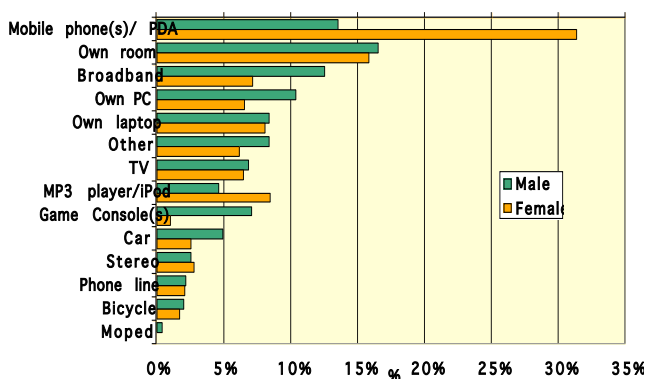
<sup>123</sup> Connolly, A. & Kerr, J. (2006) *Families with Children in Britain: Findings from the 2006 Families and Children Study (FACS)*, Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No. 486. (See table 14.8a).

<sup>124</sup> Morrow, (2004)

<sup>125</sup> McKechnie, J., Lavalette, M. & Hobbs, S. (2000) Child employment research in Britain. *Work, Employment and Society*, 14, 573-580.

form of social obligation in terms of the negotiation of relationships with parents. We now turn to explore some of the ways in which this money is spent, as well as the social factors that are involved in shaping children's spending choices. This report has already firmly established the significance of consumption in children's lives, emphasising the ambiguous role that consumption can play as both a positive and negative influence on children's well-being. Children's consumption habits obviously cover a broad spectrum of items and activities, many of which have been explored through the course of this report and in *Childhood and family life: Socio-demographic changes*. SIRC's own research confirms the trends noted elsewhere about the specific kinds of consumption activities and consumer items that are particularly important in the lives of children and young people (and, often in the lives of adults as well). Predictably, these often take the form of new digital technologies. Of young people taking part in the research, 88% owned a mobile, while girls in particular were more attached ('can't live without') to this particular item. Boys were more concerned with access to broadband, PCs and games consoles, as shown in Figure 5.

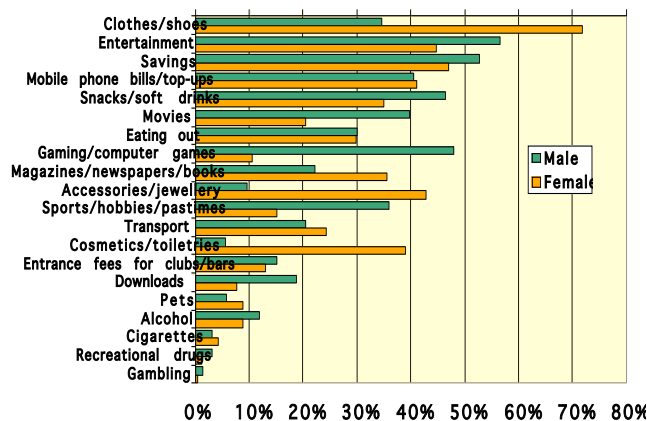
Figure 5. Importance of consumer products, by gender.



The ChildWise Trends Report 2008 notes that, in 2007, boys and girls aged 11-16 spent more than any other age group.<sup>126</sup> Only 14% of girls reported buying computer software for themselves compared to 42% of all boys. During the same year, 53% of boys between the ages of 11 and 16 reported buying DVDs and videos for themselves compared with 42% of girls of the same age. These data are consistent with SIRC's findings that girls spend significantly more money on clothes (73%), accessories (43%), magazines (36%) and toiletries (39%) than their male counterparts, as shown in Figure 6.

<sup>126</sup> ChildWise (2008)

Figure 6. Categories of spending, by gender



Boys, on the other hand, spend most of their money on games (48%), sports/hobbies (36%), downloads (19%) and snacks/soft drinks (46%).<sup>127</sup>

Gender differences in patterns of spending are also noted in Ofcom's Media Literacy Audit. While this report is mainly concerned with children's and young people's consumption of different types of media it notes that while parents estimate that their 12-15 year old sons spend an average of £10.20 per week on mobile phone use, their daughters of the same age spend significantly more – £12.60.

#### 4.8 Children are the families' savers?

A noticeable feature of Figure .6 above is that 'savings' rank as the third-most significant use of income. In our research 92% of children claimed to save money. While two thirds of these saved money in their own bank account, a proportion still relied on more traditional methods such as piggy banks (39%). More females than males reported saving money in their own bank account. Some respondents saw savings as 'left-over' money or the extra that they were able to earn but did not need to spend.

This level of saving should be contrasted with recent data relating to adult saving patterns. A report by Lloyds TSB, based on a national sample of 5,000 respondents, indicates that four out of every ten families have less than £500 in savings available to them and that many are now saving less than in the past.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>127</sup> SIRC (2007) p. 68.

<sup>128</sup> Lloyds TSB Report – Britons Are Tackling Debt But Saving Less (August 2008) – <http://www.24-7pressrelease.com/press-release/lloyds-tsb-report-that-britons-are-tackling-debt-but-saving-less-71067.php>

#### 4.9 The negotiation of consumption within families

Children's spending choices are of course frequently (but not always) mediated by the influence of parents. Indeed, discussions, arguments and agreements about consumption activities provide a framework for a range of social interactions within the family. This can be seen as much in decisions about what to watch on the family television as in parental rules about clothing choices, children's negotiations of access to the Internet, or family decisions about where to go on holiday.

As we have seen, the amount of control that parents have over the consumption behaviours of children generally diminishes as children get older because opportunities for paid work increase the possibilities of a degree of financial independence. But this is not the same as suggesting that consumption diminishes in importance as a locus of social interaction as children become adults, or that economic factors do not continue to influence the social relations of family life long after children have cut the parental apron strings. On the contrary, processes of economic and social exchange are a continuous and ongoing aspect of family life.

### 5 Conclusions

This aim of this assessment has been to explore the role of consumption in the ecology of family life in contemporary Britain as a means of better understanding the impact of the commercial world on the well-being of children and families. In so doing we have focused in turn on the academic and popular discourses shaping contemporary notions of children, childhood, family, and consumption – on our understandings of such issues within the framework of time and space and on the ways in which consumption and commercial engagement are embedded in complex ways within the everyday social exchanges between family members. In each of these areas our main intention has been to explore clearly and comprehensively the complex and contested nature of the relationship between children, families and the commercial world in order to arrive at a balanced, critical perspective of the issues involved.

We began the first section of this report by suggesting that as ideas both childhood and family are the vessels for a range of powerful beliefs and values. This is evidenced not least in the ideologically charged and polarised nature of academic and popular debates surrounding the impact of the commercial world on children and families. While recognising both sides of these arguments, our intention has been to reach a nuanced

middle ground. As a result, the theme of negotiation underpins each of the three sections of this report. Just as it is important to negotiate between different popular, political, academic and epistemological imaginings of childhood and family life, it is also essential that we recognise the importance of negotiation in both the social and economic exchanges between family members. This allows us to focus on the ambiguous, dynamic and shifting nature of the relationship between children, families and consumption, rather than privileging an overtly positive or negative perspective. In turn, this facilitates an understanding of the role of consumption in contemporary family life in terms of both continuity and change, rather than placing too great an emphasis, as do many popular and academic texts, on the 'unprecedented' nature of social life in the present.

#### 5.1 Family and childhood: a paradigmatic review

This section of the report highlights the fact that concerns about the impact of the commercial world on children and family life are not new. Worries about the negative effects of consumption – from 'penny dreadfuls' to Playstations – have characterised popular anxieties about children and families since the end of the 19th century or before. Current concerns about the 'toxicity' of childhood, therefore, make up part of a much longer history of public outcry about the threats that commercial engagement pose to the sanctity of childhood. Such concerns are more broadly reflective of popular imaginings of childhood and family life, particularly in terms of the social construction of children either as vulnerable beings to be protected, or as uncontrollable agents to be protected against.

Although we recognise the historical precedents for contemporary concerns related to childhood and consumption, this is not the same as suggesting that there is nothing new about consumption, childhood and family life in the present. On the contrary, current processes of social and economic globalisation have wrought significant changes in terms of how individuals go about defining themselves in relation to one another. While embedded structural forces serve to maintain established processes of social reproduction, individuals are also able to engage reflexively in the ongoing project of identity construction.

Consumption, now experienced on a scale much greater than in the past, is a key ingredient in this process. This is as much the case for children as it is for adults and the boundaries of what it means to be a child within a family context have become more

porous. Children's dynamic engagement in consumption activities does not always conform neatly to idealised notions of what it means to be a child. Here we should, of course, remember that conflict and negotiation between parents and children is nothing new either and that new forms of consumption also serve as a vehicle for much older forms of exchange between family members.

Inevitably, these processes of negotiation involve positive, negative and ambiguous outcomes within particular social or family contexts as new constructions of identity converge or conflict with ongoing established understandings of social relations. Analysing the impact of commercial engagement on children and families in terms of social and cultural capital, we argue, allows for a more sensitive approach that moves beyond the developmental model still dominant in popular discourse today.

### 5.2 Time and Space in family life

Following on from the arguments presented in the first section, we explore here the ways in which ideological beliefs about children and family life are reinforced through ideas about family time and space – from regular (or irregular) family mealtimes, to birthday parties and family photo albums. Children and childhood are also regulated through the control of children's movement in physical space. We argue that perceptions of risk and the desire to maintain an ideal notion of childhood combine to restrict the movement of children in the outside world. As a result, children are increasingly, but by no means completely, confined to the domestic sphere of the household.

This, however, is not all bad for children. Children mostly now have greater access to private space in the home and own or use a wide range of consumer items, including a range of increasingly convergent digital media technologies. While access to private space and to different forms of consumption varies considerably in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity and gender, media consumption is an intrinsic, everyday aspect of most children's identities. Media consumption also serves as a means of actively engaging in virtual social exchanges beyond the walls of the family home. This presents a particularly interesting area of consumption within which children appear to negotiate a considerable degree of autonomy and independence.

### 5.3 Pennies and pounds: family spending in the present

The final section of the report provides a glimpse into the earning, spending and consumption habits of children and the social significance that these practices hold within the context of family life. As in the previous sections of this report, negotiation emerges as a key theme. Parents, children and other family members are engaged in the negotiated co-construction of social identities through processes of commercial engagement. On one hand, these processes present divergent understandings of the roles and expectations that are assigned to different family members, leading to conflict and anxiety. This is particularly the case when practices of consumption are seen to transgress or threaten established notions of childhood. On the other hand, consumption and commercial engagement can also provide spaces in which children may become more actively and democratically involved both in the dynamics of family life and in society more generally. In their daily lives, children and families must negotiate the fine line between these two experiences of commercial engagement in order to reach a common ground.

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