

# British children among Europe's most deprived

Roger Dobson and Steven Swinford Sunday Times August 06, 2006

CHILDREN in Britain are among the worst off in Europe, with many living in dysfunctional families that refuse to eat together or talk to each other, researchers have found.

A report comparing data on children and teenagers across the 25 European Union countries ranks Britain as 21st on an index of "child wellbeing". Children fare worse only in Latvia,

Estonia, Lithuania and Slovakia.

The data, which will form the basis of a Unicef report, indicate that the government should try to tackle the breakdown of the family unit. About one in six British children lives in a

single parent family.

"It is a worrying indictment of government policy that a highly developed country such as Britain is ranking as poorly on child wellbeing as the former eastern bloc countries," said

Anastasia de Waal, head of family and education at Civitas, the think tank.

The government has tackled family breakdown through financial subsidy. It has failed to tackle the root causes."

The report, published in the Social Indicators Research journal, analyses surveys and national statistics to create 51 indicators of child wellbeing across the EU.

It reveals that in many families in Britain children and parents are barely on speaking terms. Just 60.49% spoke to their parents several times a week. An OECD survey of nearly

10,000 15-year-old British children found that only 66.74% sat at the table to eat with their parents, the lowest proportion in Europe.

A separate survey discussed in the report found that fewer than half of 4,000 children aged 11, 13 and 15 regarded their friends as "kind and helpful".

Dr Terri Apter, a social psychologist at Cambridge University, said Britain's culture of working long hours was contributing to a gulf between parents and children. "Busyness has a

cachet. If people are not working longer hours they may well be going out to do something. The lives of children are just as packed," she said.

Nutritionists are also concerned about the quality of children's diets. The report states that according to a survey by the World Health Organisation (WHO), only 26.7% of British

children aged 11, 13 and 15 eat fruit on a daily basis. Just over half eat breakfast before school.

According to further WHO data, Britain's 14 and 15-year-olds are the fourth fattest in Europe, with 15.8% classified as overweight measured by their body mass index.

Claire MacEvilly, a nutritionist with the Medical Research Council's human nutrition unit, said: "People who sit round a table to eat tend to have healthier food. All the evidence shows that by the time kids get to school it is too late."

One of the report's most shocking findings is the level of drug and alcohol abuse among British teenagers. A survey of 4,000 15-year-old schoolchildren, by a European school

survey project on alcohol and other drugs, found that more than a quarter had been drunk 20 times or more, the second highest level in Europe. A total of 38% had used cannabis.

British teenagers were also more promiscuous than their European peers. More than a third of children claimed to have had sex by the age of 15, the highest level in Europe. In Spain

the proportion was 16%.

Professor Al Aynsley-Green, the children's commissioner, described the report as shocking. "This should blow out of the water any complacency that people have over the standing of young people in our society. We have not been valuing them as they deserve," he said.