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Judge links crime to broken homes

A leading crown court judge has sparked controversy by claiming many offenders come from single parent families.

Judge John Curran: 'Children require love and attention'

Judge John Curran told a youth conference on crime that single teenage mothers often made bad parents because they were too young to have children.

The judge made a wide-ranging attack on the breakdown of family values during his speech in Cardiff.

The single parent support group Gingerbread Wales has criticised the judge for generalising.

Judge Curran told the all-Wales high sheriffs' seminar on tackling crime and anti-social behaviour: "This is not a case of 'judge slams single mums'.

"Many of the parents who create this kind of environment for their children are themselves very young and inexperienced and are just plain ignorant of what is required to bring up a happy, well-adjusted child."

He said that the vast majority of separated parents raised their children successfully, but added: "A depressingly common theme of the early lives of offenders is the separation of the parents at a very early stage of the child's life.

It's got nothing to do with money or throwing expensive presents at Christmas at the child

"The fact is, however, that all too many of those who end up in the criminal justice system do so against a background of an absent parent - usually the father."

Judge John Curran

'Broken home'

He said a "disturbing number" of single mothers were in their teens and under the age of consent at the time of conception "or even the birth".

Young offenders' fathers were "frequently young offenders themselves, and either not on the scene at all or, if they are, setting a positive bad example by their behaviour".

He urged parents not to feed their children junk food or be "parked" in front of the television all day, and said they required "constant love and attention".

"It's got nothing to do with money or throwing expensive presents at Christmas at the child."

The judge also said parents must recognise that children took priority in a relationship and they had to learn to "stick together" until the children were adults, unless a relationship was abusive.

Judge Curran, who has 40 years experience in criminal law, said "the broken home" was at the root of much of the crime he saw.

"It's rather an old-fashioned term I suppose but I've got to the stage in life where I regard being old-fashioned as a virtue and so I'll stick to it," he said.

'Generalising'

Margaret O'Sullivan, from the support group for lone parents Gingerbread Wales, told BBC Radio Wales: "I don't think the judge should generalise, saying it's always children from single parents that get into trouble.

"A lot of lone parents aren't young single mothers."

She said she had suffered from vandalism and burglary caused by children from two-parent families.

I don't think it matters if you're a teenage mum as long as you're good to your children and caring

"I don't think if there is a father around it always means that the children are good. It depends on the role model in the family as well," she added.

Teenage girl, Bridgend

Children's commissioner Peter Clarke, said he agreed with some of the things the judge said, but told BBC Wales the most important thing for children was to have "parents who provide the guidance which will allow them to grow up into young citizens".

Teenagers questioned in Bridgend, south Wales, had mixed opinions on the judge's views.

One boy commented: "I think being a teenage parent is too young because you can't look after a baby on your own. You're not old enough."

However a teenage girl said: "I don't think it matters if you're a teenage mum as long as you're good to your children and caring.

"My mother was 18 when she had me. I feel she's given me good discipline - she taught me what's right and wrong."