



# Parenting today

National Centre for  
Family Research



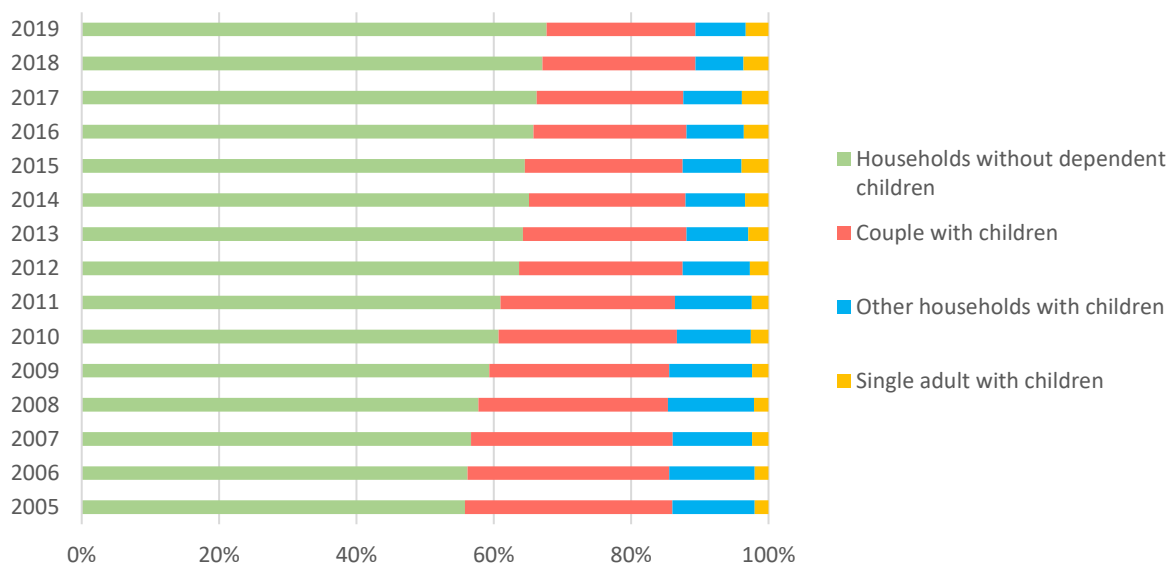
*The Malta Foundation  
for the Wellbeing of Society*

## Trends

The relationship between parents and children has always been a cherished one. Social and economic changes in recent decades have brought about a diversification of traditional family patterns. The share of households with children has declined and the fertility rate is currently the lowest in Europe. The employment gap between male and female parents remains quite high. There has also been a rise in lone parent and blended families. These trends are described in some more detail below.

In 2019, according to Eurostat Labour Force Survey data, there were 64,900 households with dependent children. The percentage of households with children has gone down from 44% in 2005 to 32.2% by 2019. This is due both to a declining fertility rate, an overall increase in the number of households and population ageing. Single parent households have increased from 2% of all households in 2005 to 3.3% in 2019; that is, from 2,600 to 6,700 single parent households. This latter figure is conservative as it does not include those single parents who live with their parents. According to the most recently available statistic from Eurostat, in 2013 25.9% of all births occurred outside marriage. There are no readily available data on blended families in Malta, nor are there data on couples who cohabit and have children, or on the number of families or individuals who adopt or foster children. Under Maltese law, persons who are LGBT may also adopt children, either as individuals or as same-sex couples.

Figure 1. Total households in Malta 2005-2019



Source: Eurostat, 2020

The mean age at which women have their first child has risen by 2.3 years since 2007, to stand at 29.2 years in 2018 - identical to the mean age in the European Union. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the total fertility rate hovered around 2, until starting a steady decline from 2.07 in 1992 to reach 1.23 to date, currently the lowest in the EU28. In recent years, household sizes in Malta have decreased at the most rapid rate in the EU, from an average of 3 household members in 2008 to 2.5 in 2018 as a growing number of households only have one child.

Table 1. Number of children, 2005 - 2019

	One child		Two children		3 or more children	
	No.	% of total households	No.	% of total households	No.	% of total households
2005	24,600	19.10	24,400	18.94	7,900	6.13
2010	24,600	17.93	21,900	15.96	7,400	5.39
2015	31,400	18.18	23,600	13.67	6,300	3.65
2019	31,800	15.80	25,200	12.52	7,900	3.92

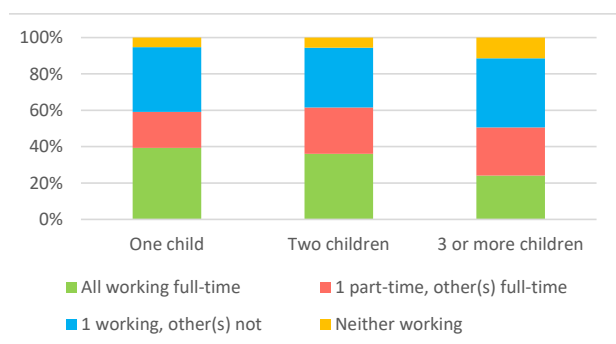
Source: Eurostat, 2020

According to the NSO News Release 080/2020, the employment rate of mothers rose from 57.5% in 2015 to 67.9% by 2019; however, the employment gap between fathers and mothers remains at 30 percentage points. Over the same period, the number of children aged 0 to 3 who attend childcare almost trebled, from 4,263 children in 2015 to 11,111 by

2019, following the introduction of free childcare for families where the mother works and also for children who live in vulnerable families. The coverage rate of childcare for those under 3 has reached 31%, only slightly lower than the 33% Barcelona target set by the EU (Chzen, Gromada and Rees, 2019). Less than ten percent of parents are willing to send their children to childcare in their first year of life and often turn to the grandparents for support. In fact, 51 per cent of grandparents in Malta provide childcare (Eurofound, 2018). Malta ranks among the bottom third of the world's richest countries for paid maternity and paternity leave (29th for paid maternity leave and 32nd for paid paternity leave) which may explain, in part, the low fertility rate in Malta.

While many mothers used to leave employment after the birth of their first child, this is less the case today as it seems to be the number of children (rather than becoming a parent) that makes a difference to the employment status in households. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, the share of parents who work full-time decreases with the number of dependent children in the household, while the share of those where one partner works part-time increases. According to Eurostat, in over one in ten of households with three or more children, neither parent is in employment.

Figure 2. Employment status by number of children, Malta 2019



Source: Eurostat, 2020

As would be expected, parenting has an impact on household income, with equalised incomes declining inversely to the number of children. In 2018, the median equalised net income was €14,781. This varied by household. In the case of two adults, the annual median income with one child was €17,417; with two children was €14,757; with three children was €11,636. The median income for lone parent families was €9,503. Lone parent poverty in Malta remains the highest in Europe. That said, income poverty for lone parents has come down from its

peak of 57.1% of all lone parents in 2008 to 48.5% in 2018. Recent measures including free childcare, the tapering of benefits and in-work benefits have surely contributed to its decrease. Notwithstanding, the high risk of poverty among lone parents remains a cause for concern.

In the Flash Eurobarometer 470 of 2018, 77% of Maltese respondents were satisfied with their work-life balance, while 20% were not. Satisfaction was 5% higher among men. Flexitime (45%) and telework (29%) were the most popular flexible arrangements in Malta. 42% of respondents were aware of, and utilised, flexible work arrangements – a proportion identical to the EU average. Figures were similar for men (40%) and women (43%). 30% of both women and men believe that using such arrangements has had, or may have, a negative effect on their career, and 26% believe that such use is perceived negatively by one's colleagues. Maltese respondents were the second least likely, after Italy, to state that they have used, or intend to use, parental leave. When asked what would encourage men to take more paternal leave, most Maltese respondents stated: having support from superiors and colleagues (36%); having guarantees in respect of career prospects after their leave (35%); and receiving more financial compensation during their leave (33%).

Table 2: Intended or actual use of parental leave, Malta 2018

	Total %	Men %	Women %
Malta	24	18	30
EU 28	45	32	57
Italy (lowest)	23	13	31
Sweden (highest)	75	73	78

Source: Eurobarometer 470

## Challenges

For many people, parenting is a joyful experience yet also brings with it a number of challenges.

Possibly the main challenge facing parents today is that of time. As both parents go out to work, it has become more difficult for them to maintain a balance between parenting duties and work, and to balance these duties between partners. Research in different cultures highlights the importance of fathers' active involvement in the care of their children, yet parenting tasks are still largely assumed by mothers.

The parental relationship itself tends to be affected by the age and gender of the couple's children, which

may in turn affect the parenting relationship. Local research has indicated that parents of male or female adolescents had lower partner relationship satisfaction, while those having daughters aged nine or younger were more satisfied than parents of boys in the same age range (PFWS, 2016).

An income that does not meet a family's needs can also have a negative effect on parenting. Being poor does not necessarily make for poor parenting, and many families with inadequate incomes provide a safe and loving environment for their children. However, financial distress does cause anxiety for some, which may detract from the attention required to meet a child's needs in an optimal way, or may require very long working hours which has the same effect. Lone parents may experience particular challenges in terms of adequate time and money. While rates of in-work poverty in Malta are low, it is important to ensure that parents receive a living wage that can meet the basic needs of a family.

Parents play a critical role in helping children to regulate their emotions and behaviour. Challenging behaviour, as it is sometimes known, can interfere with children's learning and development and may cause harm to themselves or others, and certainly much distress to the parents. It is sometimes the case that children may exhibit challenging behaviour due to disrupted attachments in their earlier years. A significant body of research suggests that parental conflict takes its toll not only on the parents but also on the emotional wellbeing of the children involved. Children who witness violent and emotionally abusive behaviour are traumatised. In those cases where separation occurs, the adjustments required of parents and children may also cause significant stress for all

parties involved. That said, in the case of violence and abuse, the decision to separate may also provide relief for the children and the abused parent. However, even when separations are less traumatic, parents may suffer anxiety due to their concerns around shared parenting and financial stress. Sometimes, the persistence of conflict continues to affect the children negatively, especially when they become triangulated between the two parents. Some parents go on to form new 'blended' families that require a further adjustment - on their part as well as that of their partner and their children. If these adjustments are managed carefully, keeping the children's wellbeing in central focus, the children involved may grow up with greater empathy and the ability to manage relationships of different complexities.

There are a number of other situations which pose significant challenges to the parenting role. In cases where either the parent or the child is disabled, or has mental health difficulties, many of these families are likely to require considerable support which cannot always be sourced from family and friends. 'Support may also be needed by those embarking on new forms of parenting under the recent Embryo Protection Act. In the medium term, too, their children may require support when, on reaching the age of 18, they gain the right to learn about the donor Parents who are refugees or asylum seekers also require help in supporting their children to integrate in social, cultural and educational life in Malta. Unaccompanied minors should be ensured a warm and stable substitute for parental affection and belonging. This is also true for children living in out-of-home care, where no effort should be spared to support the amelioration of the parent-child relationship wherever possible, in order to bring about a safe reunification as early as possible.

## WHAT CAN HELP?

Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on positive parenting. In 2006, the Council of Europe issued a Recommendation on Positive Parenting, which it defined as "parental behaviour based on the best interests of the child that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child." Parenting, the Council contended, should be designated a 'domain of public policy' and states were obliged to support parents through various policies and services, especially for parents at risk of social exclusion. Malta has a Positive Parenting Strategy for the years 2016 to 2024, and may be accessed as indicated in the last section of this document.

Supporting work-life balance is critical for working parents and their children. Family-friendly measures are to be encouraged and supported across the public and private sectors. In 2019, the EU issued a Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers which replaced and extended earlier directives in this area. The Directive sets out minimum requirements related to paternity leave, parental leave and carers' leave, and to flexible working arrangements for workers who are parents or carers.

Parenting well can be complex and demanding, yet rewarding. The parenting role is not instinctual for everyone, especially for those whose early years were challenging. However, parenting well can be learned, and there is a strong body of research to help parents in their role. The National Academy of Sciences in the US outlines four responsibilities of parents: keeping their children healthy and safe, and supporting their emotional, social and intellectual wellbeing and development. Perron (2018) outlines the 'Four Cs' of parenting: Care (in respect of acceptance and affection); consistency (in respect of parenting style and age-appropriate parenting); choices (giving positive options while maintaining limits); and consequences (linking consequences to choices in a warm and firm manner).

Children need a calm and attentive presence, even if this is not always easy. When children exhibit challenging behaviour, it is important to reassure them that they are loved, and to understand and respond to their needs and anxieties. Giving children choices in an age-appropriate manner can help them feel empowered in the right way. While important to validate their emotions, it is also important to set out clear behavioural expectations, such as encouraging appropriate behaviour, setting routines and clarifying children's limits. Parents' undivided attention during a time dedicated to having fun together is also important. A positive approach to parenting emphasises the importance of playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy as parents communicate with their children.

FSWS offers an evidence-based parenting programme for parents called *Positive Parenting* which is offered to anyone in the community wishing to follow it. Child minding is offered to those parents who require such a service whilst

attending the programme. Other initiatives at FSWS include a home-based service for families encountering multiple difficulties. In line with the Positive Parenting Strategy, this service also includes an *Incredible Years Parenting programme* which is offered either to families in their own homes or in a group context within the community.

In cases where the parents no longer form a couple, good co-parenting is still possible (except where abuse or violence render this unsafe for the partner or child). However, it does involve considerable effort, especially where the separation did not occur on an amicable basis. It is necessary for both parents to be child-centred and to make the child's wellbeing their main focus. It is also important to communicate with the child in a positive and age-appropriate way, and to avoid using the child as a confidante, messenger or leverage. Co-parents must be sensitive to the pain that the child might experience as a result of split loyalties. Recognising that the other parent is a significant influence in the child's life, communicating respectfully and being ready to compromise also help to maintain constructive co-parenting relationships. The literature suggests that co-parents should align their approaches to rules and routines, and try to arrive at joint decisions over matters of education, health, leisure and finance. It is also essential to seek support when necessary. An evidence based co-parenting programme entitled *Parenting and Separating* is run by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), with contact details below.

Parents entering into a new relationship after separating from their child's other parent can ensure that this is done in as sensitive a manner as possible for the child. Ideally, children would first have had time to adapt to the loss of the other parent and to the reality of the custodial parent as a single person. It may be advisable to only introduce the child to a new partner when the relationship has become a committed one. The first few meetings should be low-key rather than intense, and may involve an activity which is fun. It is important for children in this situation to be reassured that their parents will still give them the time and affection that they need.

# Useful resources

## FSWS

### FAMILY THERAPY SERVICE

The Family Therapy Services form part of the psychological services within Sedqa and offer family assessments, family therapy, couple therapy and support to families with psychological difficulties.

Tel. *Sedqa*: 2388 5110

### CO-PARENTING SERVICES

ADOPTION SERVICES

FOSTERING SERVICES

Tel. *Appoġġ*: 2295 9000

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES

Tel. *Appoġġ*: 2295 9000

### National Foster Care Association Malta

Tel. 7998 1795

## USEFUL WEBSITES

### FSWS –Trobija Pożittiva (Positive Parenting)

[https://fsws.gov.mt/en/appogg/Documents/Publication%20Leaflets/trobija\\_pozittiva.pdf](https://fsws.gov.mt/en/appogg/Documents/Publication%20Leaflets/trobija_pozittiva.pdf)

### Parenting news you can use

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/parenting-news-you-can-use>

### What is meant by PACE?

<https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>

### Parents

<https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/parents/>

### The Do's and Don'ts of co-parenting well

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/two-takes-depression/201203/the-dos-and-donts-co-parenting-well>

**Developing minds** <https://developingminds.net.au/articles-for-professionals/2018/9/1/supporting-parents-to-learn-about-the-challenging-behaviour-in-their-child-teen-how-much-why-and-what-to-consider>

### Introducing your children to a new partner

<https://www.betterrelationships.org.au/family-parenting/blended-families/introducing-your-new-partner/>

### Family education

<https://www.familyeducation.com/>

## USEFUL BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Abela, A. & Grech Lanfranco, I. (2016). *Positive Parenting. National Strategic Policy 2016 – 2024*. <https://family.gov.mt/en/Documents/National%20Parenting%20Policy%20English%208.02.17.pdf>

Gottman, J., Declaire, J. & Goleman, D. (1998). *Raising an emotionally intelligent child. The heart of parenting*. Simon & Schuster.

Stixrud, W. & Johnson, N. (2019). *The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives*. Penguin.

Golding, K. & Hughes, D. (2012). *Creating Loving Attachments: Parenting with PACE to Nurture Confidence and Security in the Troubled Child*. Jessica Kingsley.

Hughes, D. (2012). *Parenting a Child with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*. British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

Perron, N. (2018). The Four Cs of Parenting. *The Family Journal* 26(1): 48–55. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1066480717753014>

## INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

### COUNCIL OF EUROPE:

Positive parenting

<https://rm.coe.int/168046d340>

### Policy to support positive parenting

[https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805d6dda](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectID=09000016805d6dda)

### UNICEF:

Parenting

<https://www.unicef.org/parenting/>

### RELATE:

New partners

<https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-separation-and-divorce/living-arrangements/new-partners>

### Adoptive families

<https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/adoption-bonding-home/supporting-adoptive-parents/>

### The Fostering Network

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/policies/support>