

Broken homes fuel childhood worries

Children from broken families are nearly five times more likely to suffer damaging mental troubles than those whose parents stay together; Government research has found.

It also showed that two parents are much better than one if children are to avoid slipping into emotional distress and anti-social behaviour.

The findings say that children's family backgrounds are as important - if not more so than whether their home is poor, workless, has bad health, or has no one with any educational qualifications.

The research adds to a wealth of data that shows children suffer badly from divorce or parental break-up, and that those brought up by a single parent are more likely to do badly

at school, suffer poor health, and fall into crime, addiction and poverty as adults.

The report, funded by the Department of Health and published by the Office for National Statistics, investigated emotional disorders - ranked as those which cause considerable distress and interference with the way in which children perform at school and during play.

It also looked at conduct disorders which result in aggressive, violent or anti-social behaviour. The researchers studied nearly 8,000 children aged between five and 16 in 2004 and found almost one in ten had disorders. The children were checked again last year.

The report said that a child whose parents had split during this time was more than four and a half times more likely to have developed an emotional disorder than one whose parents stayed together. They were nearly three times more likely to exhibit a conduct disorder.

Eleven per cent of those children whose families broke up had emotional disorders, against 3 per cent among those whose families were still together.

Nearly a third of children found to have mental disorders in 2004 still suffered from them three years later.

The Department of Health said: "The Government is committed to helping children and young people experiencing mental health problems."

But academic Patricia Morgan, author of several studies on family break-up, said: "This does not come as a surprise, and things are going to get worse.

Broken families and serial fathers produce homes full of conflict and chaos and they are terrible for children."