

Exercise 2

- 1 It probably goes without saying that this is the first time a study has produced such controversial conclusions.
- 2 it's looked at approximately 40,000 British households – that's a huge number, the largest survey of its kind ever carried out in Britain – over the past eighteen months.
- 3 31% of those interviewed said they are hit, kicked or pushed by a brother or sister
- 4 Many of them, more than a quarter in fact, also weren't happy about their things being taken, borrowed or even stolen by their siblings, and almost fifty per cent hated being called hurtful names by their siblings.
- 5 with more than 60% of children interviewed saying they thought they could rely on a sibling

Exercise 3

A new study published this week raises some startling and interesting questions about the family life of young British children, so I decided to visit a primary school in London to see if I could make sense of what the study suggests.

I'm here in the playground of Greenlane Primary School in East London. It's an award-winning school, producing great results under often difficult circumstances, and is highly prized by its parents and teachers. As you'll probably have guessed with all the kids running around behind me, it's mid-morning break time here. Greenlane has children from a wide variety of ethnic and language backgrounds and the children all seem to be playing happily enough together. It certainly seems a comfortable, friendly and inviting place, despite the cold weather.

But I've come here because this area has some of the largest families in the UK, and according to new research, family size can have a radical effect on children's happiness.

I'll be talking later to the headteacher, Anne Barley, and to some of the children too, but first, let's look at that research in a bit more detail. The results are intriguing. To put it bluntly, the main finding seems to be that the more siblings children have, the unhappier they become. It probably goes without saying that this is the first time a study has produced such controversial conclusions. The researchers claim that it's due in part to the strain involved in trying to get a fair share of mum and dad's attention, and partly to bullying and teasing by brothers and sisters. The survey seems to suggest that an only child is generally more content than a child with brothers and sisters. Can that really be true? And it also tells us that children from ethnic minorities are likely to be happier than white children. Can that really be true too? And if it is, why is that?

The study's called *Let's Understand Society* and it's looked at approximately 40,000 British households – that's a huge number, the largest survey of its kind ever carried out in Britain – over the past eighteen months. And the first set of results have recently been published in a journal by the Institute for

Social And Economic Research, who funded the research. The study was actually carried out by researchers at the University of Wilminster, and one of the things the researchers did was to conduct interviews with thousands of children of primary and secondary school age around the country. The findings suggest – and I imagine you'll find this as surprising as I did – that 31% of those interviewed said they are hit, kicked or pushed by a brother or sister in their words 'quite a lot' or 'a lot'. Many of them, more than a quarter in fact, also weren't happy about their things being taken, borrowed or even stolen by their siblings, and almost fifty per cent hated being called hurtful names by their siblings. The researchers certainly believe this is more than just mild, innocent and affectionate teasing that you'd expect between brothers and sisters. They see it much more as dangerous and destructive 'sibling bullying' that appears to be prevalent and widespread throughout society. It's because of this, they say, that a large number of young boys and girls actually wish they didn't have brothers and sisters at all, and look enviously and jealously at their friends without siblings.

However, and this is equally noteworthy, sibling bullying seems to be much less common in ethnic minority households, though of course it's possible that children from ethnic minorities are more reticent than their white counterparts. Another interesting result is that there doesn't seem to be much difference in terms of whether the children are boys or girls, although, perhaps not surprisingly, children with older brothers and sisters report the most sibling bullying.

The research also suggests that there are other factors affecting the happiness of our children, such as those with siblings having to compete for parental attention. The more children they have to care for, the harder parents will obviously find it to give as much time to each child. And it seems that this is having a profound effect on our children's well-being. It's fairly obvious too that children in larger families, particularly those that are less well-off, have less privacy and space. It seems that although some children may love sharing a bedroom and toys, others may well find the situation unpleasant and far from ideal.

So, there are going to be tensions and arguments – there are in all families – but the researchers from Wilmington University say that almost three quarters of all younger siblings stated that they wished their relationship with their siblings was different in some respect. However, it's not all doom and gloom. You'll be pleased to know that they also found that brothers and sisters can also be supportive and helpful towards their siblings, with more than 60% of children interviewed saying they thought they could rely on a sibling if they were in trouble.

I suppose that parents of a single child might feel relieved by the contents of this report, as it seems that many parents in this situation can feel guilt – wondering if they should have provided a brother or sister for their child.

Right, now I'm off to meet the head to see what she makes of all this. I'm wondering what she sees as the main factors affecting the happiness of the over two hundred children in her care.