

# SIR NORMAN CHESTER CENTRE FOR FOOTBALL RESEARCH

## FACT SHEET 14

# FOOTBALL AND FAMILIES

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Until quite recently, attendances at football matches had been in steady decline since the heady 'mass society' days of the huge, largely orderly, football crowds which crammed into British football grounds just after the Second World War. The size of football crowds fell, fairly consistently, after the Second World War and accelerated in the early 1960's. There was a brief rise in attendances in England following the 1966 World Cup win, but the downward trend in attendances resumed up to the season of 1985/1986, following the Bradford City disaster and the Heysel Stadium tragedy in May 1985. By 1985/1986, English football was in the doldrums. Slow signs of the game's revival had begun to take hold before a third football disaster, at Hillsborough, happened in 1989.
- 1.2 Since 1986, football crowds in England have risen again, year-on-year, and especially since the modernising programme of the later Taylor report and the ambitions of the new FA Premier League took hold from the early 1990s. Today, football seems almost ubiquitous in its reach, a globalised commercial and cultural giant, and the fashion accessory of the new age of sport. There are many reasons why football stadium crowds declined in England during the 40 years following the Second World War. Social habits changed and there were many more leisure options available to people following the austerity of the 1950s. Some equalisation of power relations between males and females also meant that the family slowly became more of a focus for home-based and outdoor leisure.
- 1.3 In addition to these social developments other things changed. Until recently, the standard of facilities at some football grounds in Britain has failed to keep pace with general improvements in social standards of leisure provision elsewhere. Poor facilities at football grounds were one reason why some

potential football fans in the 1970s and 1980s chose an alternative family day out elsewhere, into DIY and on to other sports and leisure.

- 1.4 But one factor probably helps account, more than almost any other, for declining football crowds in England during the period of the 1970s and 1980s: the general perception outside the game and the experience among its watching fans of football **hooliganism**. Hooliganism certainly made some parents think twice about taking their children to the match and it ruled football ‘off limits’ to many female fans – and some male fans, too. Many football-watching parents today have suggested that they recently returned to the sport because hooliganism had previously discouraged them from watching.
- 1.5 Football is now seen as a much more accessible sport for adults with children, if one which, at the highest levels, is now also in danger of pricing itself out of pockets of some potential spectators including parents. The sport is no longer dominated by images of machismo, tribalism and violent rivalries as it tended to be in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, football in Britain is more widely identified with broader forms of community *inclusion* – accessible to women and girls, attracting more minority ethnic fans, child and family friendly and a central focus for specific forms of consumption and community solidarity and identity. But it also excludes some families because of cost and restricted access.
- 1.6 In addition to these changes, parents and other relatives who now take kids to football matches in England and Scotland, suggest that football is, at least in some households, an important cultural and social location where family and parenting relationships can be cemented and explored. In the sections which follow below we draw on interviews with adults who take children to football matches today. They span supporters of larger clubs to followers of very small Football League clubs. See Williams and Neatrour (2001) for a more detailed version of this research. We try to summarise the sorts of themes which seem important to today’s ‘family’ fans at football.

## **2. Memories of Early Football Watching**

- 2.1 Most people, generally, have memories of their introduction to football; for many adult fans they were first introduced in the 1960s, 70s or 80s to what is now seen as ‘old’ football – atmospheric, passionate, often exciting and frequently troubled by hooliganism and occasionally racism. Some adult supporters regret aspects of it’s passing.

*“I liked it because it was intimidating, exciting. Some people might say it was frightening...you don’t get the same atmosphere here today”*  
(Male Millwall fan in his 50s)

However most of fans in our study also agree that they would have to think hard about attending football with their own children if the same sorts of conditions existed today:

*“The potential was always there[for trouble] – you could feel it in the air and that’s before you got in the ground” (Male, Manchester United fan in his 40s)*

The general feeling gathered from the research undertaken by Williams and Neatrou (2001) is that even for fans like these times have moved on, football has generally improved, and adult supporters and their children demand and expect a rather different kind of football experience today.

### **3. The ‘New Age’ of Football**

- 3.1 A number of families in the study had recently been drawn back into watching football by their own children’s enthusiasm and pestering to attend matches. Many adults were, however, pleasantly surprised by how family-friendly football has actually become and by the general changes which have occurred to the condition of the sport.

*“I started coming again quite recently, and I was surprised at how it had changed. It’s much safer now” (Male Leicester City fan in his 40s)*

- 3.2 The parents’ new experiences of the sport today are often not how they remembered football at all. This is not to say that hooliganism and problems of racism do not exist within the sport - it has just become a rather more family-friendly sport. There is no doubt that the reductions in hooliganism and racism have attracted new people to football. But the more general comforts now offered by most modernised football grounds in Britain have also been influential. Better facilities are now available to parents and children; they might seem basic at some smaller clubs but even venues outside the FA Premier League are beginning to offer something rather more in tune with the times. These include: family stands, crèche facilities, clean adequate toilets, etc.

### **4. Females and Football**

- 4.1 Top football has also become a rather safer and more accessible sport to women post-Hillsborough. As gender distinctions have become more relaxed in terms of childcare, especially following the increasing tendency for women to work outside the home, so football is also emerging as a venue where some male supporters happily do some of their parenting of *female* offspring. A fan told us about his teenage daughters:

*“I’ve learnt the rules of netball and watched them play; we take them swimming. But football’s something we all like. We do it as equals. At the start it was my thing, now it’s our thing. When you go to football it’s something else – you’re doing it together” (Male Everton fan in his 40s)*

- 4.2 There is also a greater freedom for girls to play most sports today and to shape satisfying identities around a commitment and involvement in sport as both

players and spectators. Everton Football Club for example, now has a successful women's football team and, according to Football and Premier League Football Surveys conducted at the Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research 2000, a growing number of younger female spectators.

## **5. Family Support and Clubs**

- 5.1 Smaller Football clubs can offer a friendly atmosphere for fans that want to attend matches with their kids. Many of the larger clubs now offer a more friendly experience. Nevertheless, for some of the families interviewed by the Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research 2001, the attractions of a smaller club still outweigh those offered by the larger clubs. As a Leyton Orient fan told us:

*“It's for the family Orient. I think the Premiership is impersonal. When we go over to Orient, it's the same security blokes. They know you. It's more personal. It's not us and them. We've got to know the people who sit around us and we have names for everyone like the fat bloke and his mate or the grand-dad and his grand-daughter”* (Female Leyton Orient fan, in her 40s)

- 5.2 The impersonal relationship, the cost of supporting a 'super club', and basic lack of access to tickets, have put many families off following FA Premier League teams. Support for a smaller club can be like being part of a family, something which some parents feel is much more important for their children than what football's major stars can offer. Small clubs also offer a strong sense of 'community' to family groups, and a real feeling that their support actually matters and is valued by the club.

## **6. Bonding the Family Through Football**

- 6.1 In an era when time seems to be at a premium – often both parents work long hours and young people are off doing their own things during their leisure time with friends from their own age group – football offers an opportunity for adults and young people to spend some 'quality', shared time together doing something which both parties enjoy and find valuable. This is obviously not a case of adults 'supporting' their kids in an activity which is 'for' the youngsters. Or youngsters humouring their parents and allowing themselves to be dragged along to games. Football can be a shared activity and one that many parents and grandparents have highlighted as one of the few things that the family manages to do together.

*“You share the emotion of the goal. The jubilation. It's something you can do together. It's a common interest. All week the kids go off doing different things. Whereas on Saturday you can say this is our day for going down the football”* (Male, Leicester City fan in his 40s)

- 6.2 For many families football is also a place where some of the parenting pressure is off and it provides a valuable respite against other intruding

pressures. For some young people, especially as they approach their teenage years, football is also perhaps one of those domains or activities where it is still legitimate or acceptable to be seen spending leisure time with one's parents.

- 6.3 For *grandparents*, opportunities for football watching with grandchildren offers a chance to stay in touch across the generations; for 'divided' families and step-families football attendance can also be an important way of connecting with children who are seen only infrequently, or of making strong family bonds in circumstances which might otherwise prove unsuccessful.

## **7. Football: A Role Model for Youngsters...and Parents?**

- 7.1 Parents often emphasise 'working hard and playing fair' as the sort of lessons they want their children to take away from football attendance. Playing to win is fine, but it is important for many that things are done properly on the field. Our research suggests how a number of parents – usually males- talked about how going to games offered opportunities for their sons to learn more about playing the sport. One told us about his own teenage son:

*"He can pick up lots of positional play. I'll tell him to watch where Johnno is and that's what you should be doing when you are defending, staying in line, then dropping back when the ball is kicked"*  
(Male Manchester United fan, in his 40s)

- 7.2 For other parents, taking their children to the match offered the opportunity of providing a grounding in the wider world – some knowledge of the little social cues, the dos and don'ts, and the highs and lows of real public life. Parents and grandparents also emphasised that their kids might pick up important aspects of *teamwork* and generally working together; the collective cause over individual success. A Leicester City fan argued you don't always focus on the stars but on the workers and triers:

*"You can use football for lessons in life. You can say 'Don't give up and look what he achieved'"* (Male Leicester City fan)

- 7.3 In the wake of various panics about lack of safety on public streets, football stadiums are also actually rather safer spaces for children these days; spaces, indeed, in which young people might be able to develop their confidence and a feeling of real importance.

## **8. The Special Saturday Ritual**

- 8.1 Family fans also feel that attending together at football had noticeably changed relations inside the family, especially relations between those family members who attended matches together:

*“If we hadn’t got the football on a Saturday, we probably wouldn’t be spending that time together. There is a common bond between us: not just mother and daughter, but, yes, the football. We are going through the same emotions together: if we’ve lost, if we’ve won, if something’s been totally unfair. You do share it” (Female Leicester City fan in her 40s)*

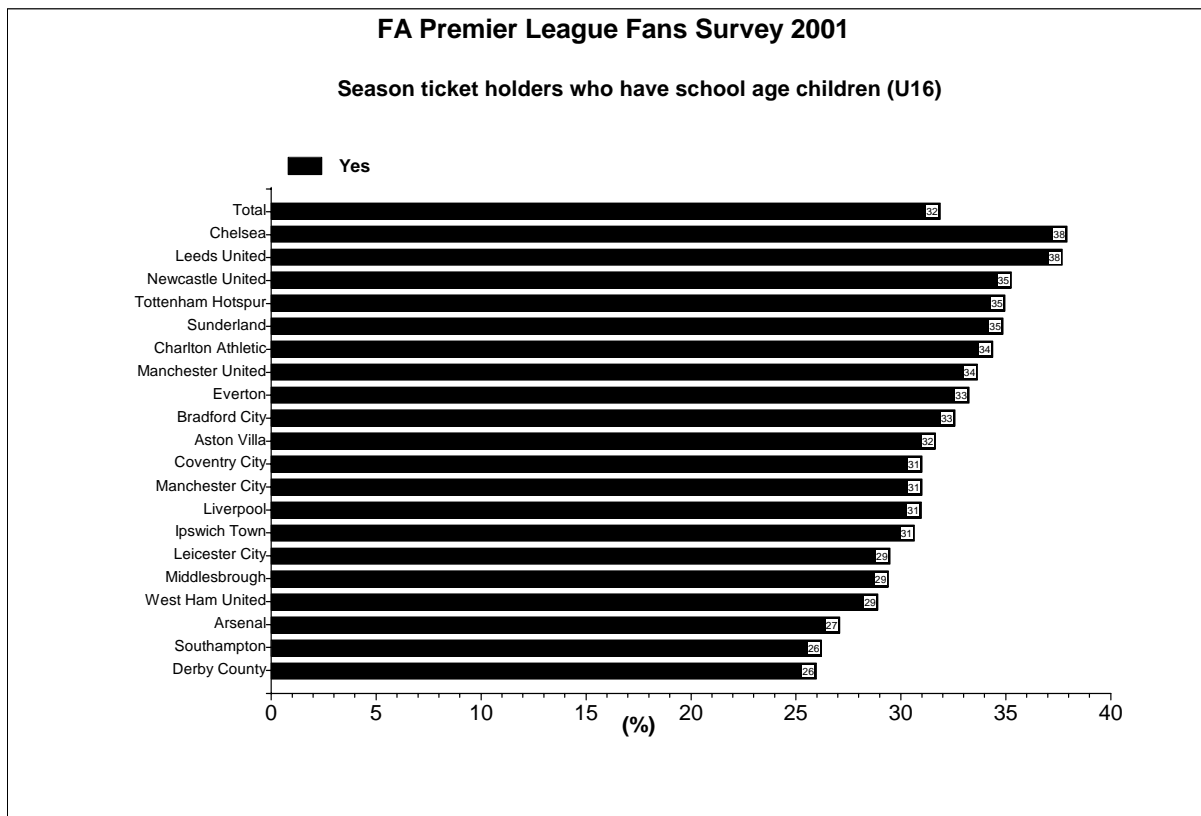
- 8.2 The notion, of sharing unique memories with a child or parent at football is one that is common and important among football families. Particular moments in football can be some of the most emotive and memorable times in people’s lives. The Saturday routine is something that many parents miss when their children stop attending matches with them, although this disconnection is inevitable many parents feel that they lose those special moments with their children that football provided.

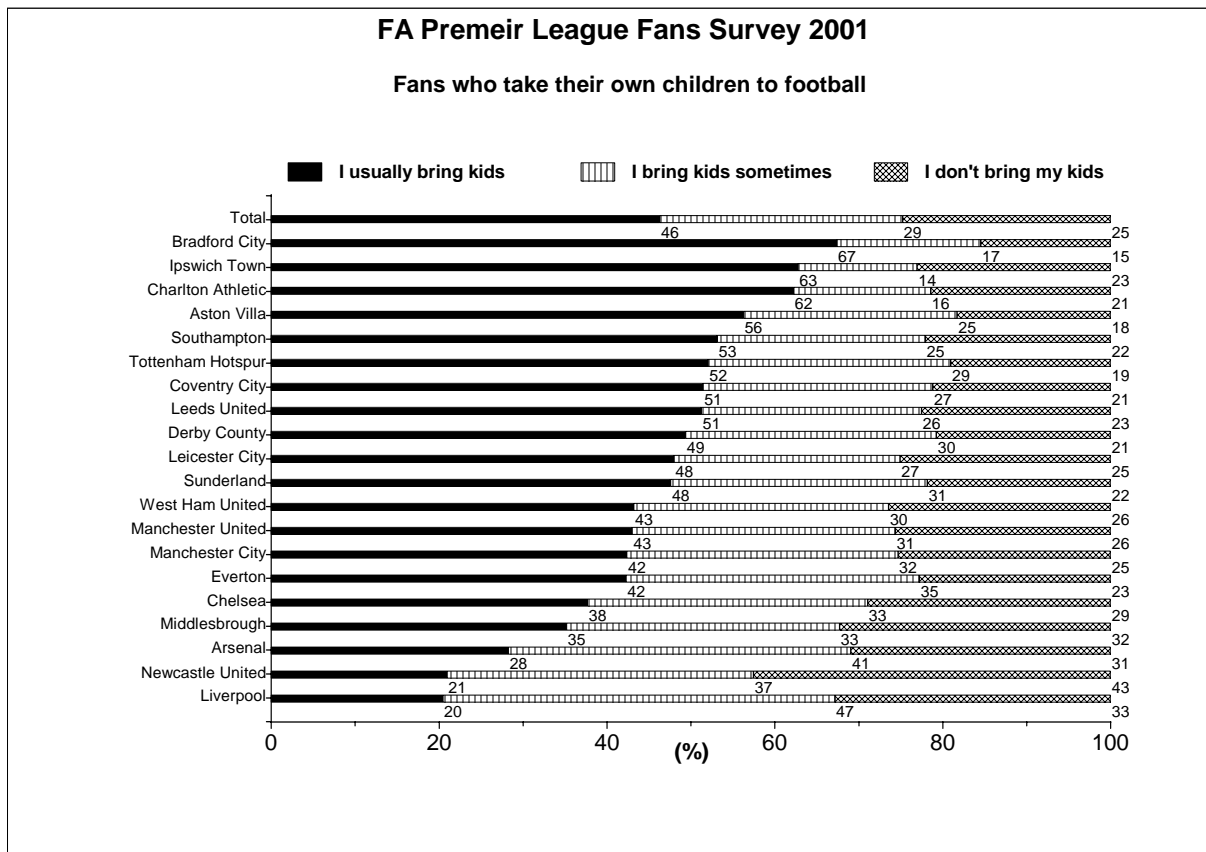
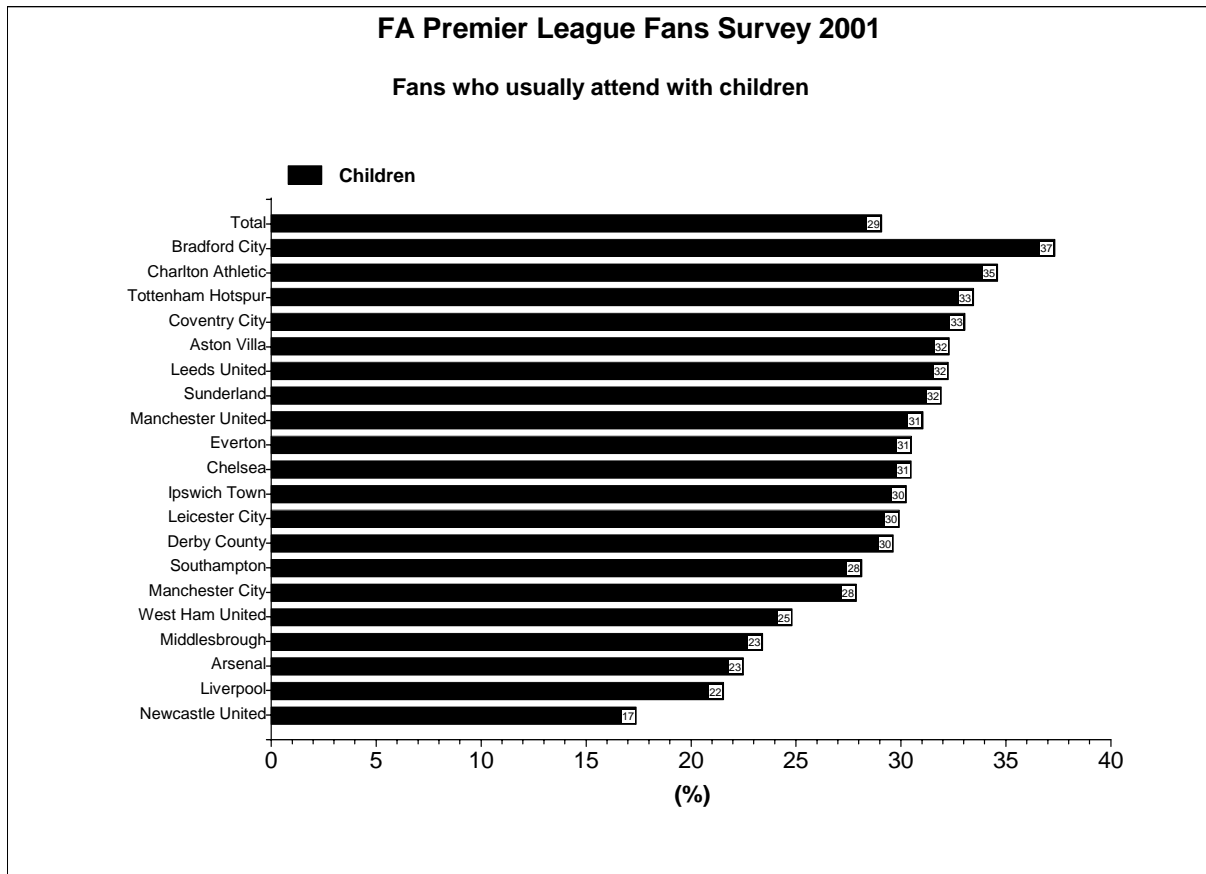
## **9. Key Aspects of the Football & Families Relationship**

- Radical changes in football’s image and family facilities provided by clubs have persuaded some parents to return to the game with their children
- A new generation of knowledgeable and confident young female football fans is emerging
- Parents believe football bridges the generation and gender gap between themselves and their children
- Parents generally believe football grounds are now safe and trusted places for their children
- Parents use football as ‘time-out’ from family issues and as quality time to catch-up with their children
- Some parents and youngsters see football as neutral ground
- Parents use football to address moral, ethical and even practical issues.
- Parents see football as an important part of their relationship with their children
- Cost and the issue of access at football are becoming key issues for some parents

**'Fact box'**

- 52% of parents in the Football League 'usually' took children, 30% 'sometimes' took them, and only 18% do not take their children to football matches. (Football League Fan Surveys, 2000)
- 59% of Football League fans who take children to matches take boys only. 19% take just girls, and 22% take a mix of boys and girls. (Football League Fan Surveys, 2000)
- 61% of FA Premier League fans with children take only boys to football matches. 17% took just girls, and 22% take a mix of boys and girls. (FA Premier League Fan Surveys, 2000)
- 80% of all supporters with school age children take them to games at least *sometimes*. (FA Premier League Fan Surveys, 2000)
- 62% of fathers who take their children attend only with lads. (FA Premier League Fan Surveys, 2000)
- 47% of women who attend matches with children take girls to football. (FA Premier League Fan Surveys, 2000)





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