

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

A humanist approach

Humanists try to use **evidence**, **empathy**, a respect for personal **autonomy**, and a concern for human **happiness** when thinking about how human beings should live. They believe that this is the **one life** we have and that everyone should have the freedom and opportunity to find happiness in the here and now, and to live their lives as they choose (as long as they do not cause harm to others).

Humanists have often been at the forefront of campaigning for **equality** and **human rights** and recognise the centrality of **love**, happiness, and reducing harm when considering how we relate to other people.



What is a 'family' and what is it for?

For many humanists, a family is any group of people that defines itself as a family. Ideally it would be committed to mutual love and support, respecting the autonomy and happiness of its members.

There are an enormous variety of family types. Families can involve single parents, unmarried parents, divorced parents, more than two parents, stepparents, parents of the same sex, biological children, adopted children, fostered children, children born from IVF, and adults without children. Some live together; others live apart. Some children live with grandparents, uncles, aunts, or cousins. There is huge **diversity** in family life and humanists often **celebrate** this rich variety.



Should we put our families first?

Families can be an immensely valuable source of support – there is often great value in forming and sustaining close bonds, and recognising our responsibilities to care for each other. However, privileging our own family might not always be the right choice. Many humanists feel loyalty towards their family, but also recognise that **all human beings are part of an extended family**. They therefore often say we need to consider the consequences of our actions on the wider human community, and on the natural world.

The phrase 'charity begins at home' means taking care of your family first. In the past, it was often only at home, or in one's immediate community, that charity could make a difference. But today we live in a complex and interconnected world, where our actions can affect the lives of people and other animals all over the planet.

Perhaps, then, the phrase, 'charity begins at home', can be redefined. Families are often where we learn how to be charitable to others, but that should be only the beginning of our journey as we learn to consider our wider responsibilities.

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Marriage, civil partnership, and cohabitation

Many humanists are supportive of marriage and civil partnership. For humanists, the most important things are that the two people **love** each other, have made the choice **freely**, have agreed to offer their **support** to each other, and know and understand the **commitment** they are undertaking. They should also be **equal partners** in their marriage.

Humanists believe that everyone should make their own **choice** about whether they want to get married and whom they are going to marry. Marriages arranged by someone other than the couple, as is traditional in some cultures, can sometimes work, if that is what the couple wants. However, humanists believe that no-one should be forced to marry somebody that they do not wish to. We should have the freedom to choose how we live our lives.



Humanist wedding celebrants conduct weddings for couples who express a desire to commit to each other in a formal ceremony. They will happily conduct weddings for opposite-sex couples, same-sex couples, couples from different religions or beliefs, and couples who have previously been married to other people.

Many humanists are supportive of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR), which, in article 16, states:

(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

The UDHR does not, however, say anything about what a family should look like. Humanists embrace this openness – there is a natural **diversity** of forms that families and relationships will take and, provided they are **free** and **equal**, humanists will celebrate them as sources of love, support, and fulfilment.



Many couples today choose to cohabit (unmarried couples living together). Humanists generally see no problems with cohabiting relationships. Marriage should not be an obligation for couples. Many humanists also believe the state shouldn't make life more difficult for unmarried couples – getting married brings various financial benefits relating to tax, pensions, and inheritance. The humanist campaigner Peter Tatchell argues that individuals should be able to nominate any other person they care about to receive such benefits, rather than requiring the two people to be married.

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Gender equality



Humanists support **equality** and individual **freedoms**. Commitment to equality means they support equal opportunities in education, employment, and the home. Humanists therefore advocate for **equal partnership** in relationships. Some traditional notions of the 'family' have been, and still are, used to strictly define roles and, in particular, to control women, forcing them to take on most of the housework and childcare, and make it harder for them to build a life and career outside the home. Humanists believe that women should not have restrictive roles imposed on them. Both men and women should be free to take on childcare responsibilities and to pursue their own interests and careers. Decisions about the division of labour in any couple should be the result of discussion between both people.

"We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.'

Betty Friedan (1921-2006),
feminist and activist

Many humanists today play an active role in championing women's rights. Humanists often support bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission to promote greater gender equality and to combat the oppression of women and girls both nationally and internationally.

A history of campaigning

Many nineteenth and early twentieth century humanists – some of them members of what were then called 'ethical societies' – pioneered the concept of the 'ethical wedding' service. In such weddings, the duty of a wife to 'obey' was omitted, thereby establishing an equality between the partners committing to each other.

Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy's campaigning helped to usher in significant pieces of legislation, including The Married Women's Property Act of 1882. She fought to abolish 'coverture', a legal doctrine which made a married woman's property that of her husband. She also contributed to the passing of the Guardianship of Infants Act of 1886, which extended women's custodial rights over their children.

Zona Vallance (1860-1904) was a founding figure of the Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK). She argued that men and women should be partners in the home and that women should receive wages for housework.

'Can our world be so re-modelled that women, no less than men, shall have free scope for the satisfaction of many-sided human nature and aspiration?'



Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships



Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill: A marriage of equals

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was an agnostic philosopher, politician and activist who devised a utilitarian system of ethics based on reason and empathy. In 1869 he wrote *The Subjugation of Women* on the challenges women faced inside a Victorian marriage. He critiqued how girls were indoctrinated by the claim that 'marriage was the true profession of women':

'If this be all that human life has for women, it has little enough, and any woman who feels herself capable of great happiness and whose aspirations have not been artificially checked will claim to be set free from this to seek more.'

In 1851, in opposition to the existing marriage contract that meant a husband controlled all his wife's financial assets, Mill and his wife Harriet Taylor (1807-1858) agreed that they were equal partners, sharing their financial assets and respecting each other's rights.

'That an institution or a practice is customary is no presumption of its goodness.'

Harriet Taylor Mill

'Being about, if I am so happy to obtain her consent, to enter into the marriage relation with the only woman with whom I would have entered into that state, and the whole character of the marriage relation as constituted by law being such as both she and I entirely & conscientiously disapprove, for... it confers upon one of the parties to the contract, legal power and control over the person, property, and freedom of action of the other party, independent of her own wishes and will; I, having no means of legally divesting myself of these odious powers (as I most assuredly would do if an engagement to that effect could be made legally binding on me) feel it my duty to put on record a formal protest against the existing law of marriage; and a solemn promise never in any case or under any circumstances to use them. And in the event of marriage between Mrs. Taylor and me I declare it to be my will and intention..., that she retains in all respects whatever the same absolute freedom of action, and freedom of disposal of herself and of all that does, or may at any time, belong to her, as if no such marriage had taken place. And I absolutely disclaim and repudiate all pretension to have acquired any rights whatever by virtue of such marriage.'

John Stuart Mill

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Bringing up children

Humanists believe that people should think about the **consequences** of their actions and make responsible choices, taking the potential **happiness** of everyone affected into account. The decision whether or not to have children is therefore one which needs to be considered carefully.

For many humanists, when caring for children, there should be a balance between the parents' or carers' authority and the freedom of the child. Humanists have long campaigned for **children's rights** (for example the right to 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion' as identified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹).

Humanists believe that parents and carers should try to act in their children's best interests, protect them from harm, and support their moral education, but they also need to make sure that they do not deny children the **freedom** to seek answers to life's bigger questions for themselves and to develop a sense of responsibility for their own lives.

'Children must be free to think in all directions irrespective of the peculiar ideas of parents who often seal their children's minds with preconceived prejudices and false concepts of past generations. Unless we are very careful, very careful indeed, and very conscientious, there is still great danger that our children may turn out to be the same kind of people we are.'



Brock Chisholm, first Director-General of the World Health Organisation



Many humanists believe that children should not be labelled with a religion or belief until they are old enough to decide for themselves. They believe we should try to bring up children as rational and thoughtful people who can choose for themselves what they believe. These sentiments will often be on display at a humanist **naming ceremony**.

'A humanist naming ceremony is a joyous occasion. It's very important within a naming ceremony to acknowledge that we're not labelling the child in any way. We make it very clear that it is for the child to choose their path guided by those who are important to them.'

Isabel Russo, humanist celebrant

Humanists UK has campaigned to encourage parents not to label their children. Just as we might think it strange to give a child a political label (like a 'socialist child' or a 'conservative child'), they argued we should also avoid using religious or non-religious labels for young children.



¹ www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Same-sex marriage and parenthood

In 2014, same-sex marriage was introduced in England, Scotland, and Wales, and in 2020 it was introduced in Northern Ireland. Humanists UK was a founding member of the Coalition for Equal Marriage, the coalition of groups that worked to secure this legislation, and was thanked for its work during the final debate when the Bill was passed. For decades, humanists had seen the denial of this equal right as a form of discrimination, believing all people should be treated **equally**, we should be **free** to make our own choices in life, and society should recognise that what is most important in a relationship is whether the people **love** each other and commit to supporting each other.

'This Bill rightly allows gay couples to make the powerful public statement of love and commitment that marriage proclaims. If gay couples want that option – that unequivocal equality with heterosexual partnerships – then they should have it. This brave Bill brings us one historic step closer to a better world and I wholeheartedly support it.'

Lord Birt, humanist and peer,
on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill

By applying **empathy** and considering what can promote **happiness**, humanists see nothing to condemn and everything to celebrate in people living out their lives in a consensual and fulfilling way based on their sexuality or gender identity.



Humanist celebrants provided same-sex couples with love and commitment ceremonies long before equal marriage was recognised in law. Several of the first same-sex couples to marry in England were humanists, including Peter McGraith and David Cabreza who married just after midnight on 29 March 2014 at Islington Town Hall, and the first same-sex marriage in Scotland was a humanist marriage carried out by humanist celebrant Ross Wright.

'What I personally like so much about the humanist approach is that there is no discrimination in who shall choose to marry, who shall choose to make those vows – it's the fact that they have chosen each other. That's what matters.'

Simon Dinwiddy, humanist celebrant



For many humanists, the question of whether same-sex couples should be allowed to have children should simply be a question about their ability to be good parents. There is no reason to suspect that a same-sex couple would be any different in their capacities from two parents of the opposite sex. Some critics highlight the potential challenges that children from non-'traditional' families may face in a society where prejudice still exists. However, for many humanists, the way to deal with such problems is not to deny same-sex parenting but to work towards a world where greater justice, kindness, and rational thinking prevail.

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Humanist marriages

A humanist wedding is a non-religious ceremony that is conducted by a **humanist celebrant**. It differs from a civil wedding in that it is entirely hand-crafted and reflective of the humanist beliefs and values of the couple, conducted by a celebrant who shares their beliefs and values.

Humanist marriages are legal in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where they have become increasingly popular. In Scotland, the number of humanist marriages every year is now higher than all religious marriages put together. Several other countries, from Norway to Australia, legally recognise humanist marriage.

Humanist marriages are, however, not legally recognised in England and Wales. Unlike a church wedding, a humanist wedding ceremony must be preceded or followed by a civil marriage in a register office for the marriage to be legal. This involves extra expense and administrative burden. Many humanists feel this unfairly discriminates against the non-religious and violates their **freedom** and **equality** with other citizens. If the law changed, then this would give non-religious people the same choice that religious people have of a marriage ceremony that is personal and meaningful to them.

Many humanists hope that the law in England and Wales will soon recognise humanist marriage, and are actively involved in campaigning for such change.

Humanists have been conducting humanist ceremonies to celebrate love and commitment since Humanists UK's foundation at the end of the nineteenth century.

Success!

Laura Lacole and Eunan O'Kain successfully campaigned for humanist marriage to be legally recognised in Northern Ireland.

'We are humanists... It was the only type of ceremony that would do our day justice; it was the only ceremony that would allow us to be who we are, to express ourselves and our love for one another... So when we found out that it wasn't legally recognised, we knew that we wanted to change that.'

Laura Lacole,
Patron of Humanists UK



Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Divorce

Many humanists believe that couples should **think carefully** before making the decision to get married or enter a civil partnership. Family breakdown and divorce can be hard on people, especially when there are children involved. In many cases, couples experiencing difficulties in their marriage or partnership can seek guidance to help them try to resolve problems, and friends and family should do their best to **support** them where they can. A marriage often requires patience and work.

However, many humanists accept that sometimes separation can be the best solution and can eventually lead to greater **happiness** overall for the couple and other members of the family. An unhappy marriage can be a source of great misery for all involved. Humanists do not believe that marriage is sacred and recognise that some relationships don't work out. They accept that people can make mistakes or circumstances can change. They therefore support liberal divorce laws and a society that makes it possible for both men and women to support themselves independently. They also believe that divorcees should not be denied the right to marry or enter a civil partnership again, should they wish to do so.

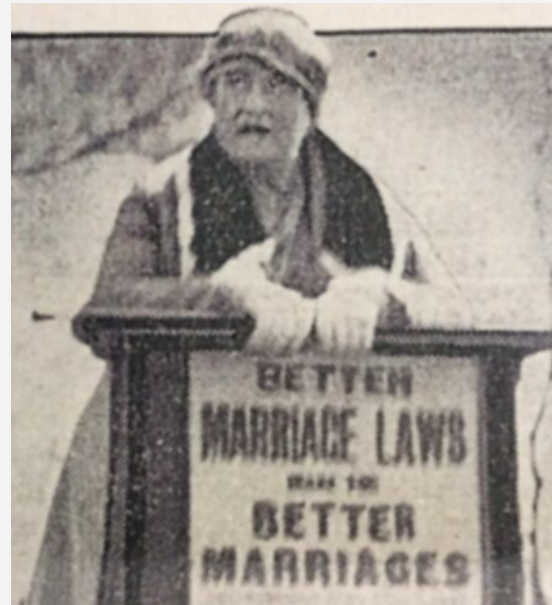
Infidelity and adultery

Infidelity or adultery is when a married or partnered person has a sexual relationship with someone other than their partner. Many humanists disapprove of extramarital romance or sex (unless both partners in a marriage are comfortable with this) because it can cause great harm. Humanists believe, however, that we should always look at the situation before we rush to judgement, and they strongly oppose severe and violent punishments for such acts.

Divorce law reform

Humanists and non-religious people have long campaigned for divorce law reform. May Seaton-Tiedeman (1862-1948), was a lifelong activist with the Divorce Law Reform Union, arguing for 'better marriage laws for better marriages'. She campaigned for a rational, reasoned approach to marriage and divorce, rooted in compassion not tradition.

Her work was pivotal in changes to the law in 1937 that extended the grounds for divorce, from adultery only, to include cruelty, desertion, and incurable insanity. She, however, continued to campaign for further changes to the law to allow other grounds for divorce.



'If the basic cause of an unsuccessful marriage is removable, conciliation is the proper procedure. If it is not removable, elementary justice and common sense demands that the pair should be divorced.'

May Seaton-Tiedeman

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Sex and contraception

Humanists think that we should look at the **evidence** and consider the **consequences** of our actions when deciding whether something is morally acceptable. They believe we have only one life and so we should make the most of it, trying to lead **happy** and fulfilling lives, and helping others to do the same. We should exercise our **freedom** to make choices without harming the rights and freedoms of others.

Many humanists believe that sex is a pleasure that can be enjoyed responsibly. As long as we are physically and mentally mature enough to make the decision, and are fully aware of the consequences and risks, then it can be a positive ingredient of a happy life. We are **responsible** for our own decisions and their consequences, and so we should make sure we always consider our choices carefully. We shouldn't harm others, and we must always ensure we act with honesty, and that we respect the **consent** of anyone else involved.

Many humanists believe there is no particular moral virtue in preserving one's virginity until one is married, although they recognise that we should not rush into sex until we feel ready. Many also see nothing wrong with having sex with more than one person over the course of our lives. Of course, some people may choose not to have sex at all, and some people are asexual and may not feel strong sexual desires.



Humanists have always been strong advocates of **contraception**. Humanists see nothing intrinsically wrong with 'interfering with nature', particularly if the consequences are good. Human beings interfere with nature all the time, for example by farming land, wearing clothes, or creating medicines.

Many humanists would argue that if contraception results in happier and healthier lives, and in all pregnancies being desired, it is a good thing. No one should have a child until they are ready to take on the responsibility. Looking at the **evidence**, humanists acknowledge that if contraception weren't available, it would lead to an increased number of unwanted pregnancies and a heightened risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Humanist organisations around the world campaign for easy access to contraception, particularly in parts of the world where religious opposition exists.

Relationships and sex education

Most humanists believe high-quality, age-appropriate, and LGBT inclusive relationships and sex education (RSE) in schools is essential. Humanists UK has a proud history of supporting RSE provision in schools, and has been consulted by the government on effective RSE.

As supporters of **children's rights**, many humanists believe that schools should make up for what might not be covered, or might be covered inaccurately, at home. RSE should be objective and evidence based. All young people should have the opportunity to learn how to be happy, healthy, and safe.

Question: How might humanists balance their beliefs in seeking happiness, looking at the evidence, and thinking about consequences, when approaching questions about when it is OK to have sex?

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

A history of humanist campaigning on sex and birth control

There is a rich history of non-religious and humanist voices campaigning for reproductive rights and for honest and informed conversations about relationships and sex.

In 1828 **Richard Carlisle** published the *Every Woman's Book*, which advocated **contraception** and gave practical advice on sex - the first book in English to do so - arguing that sex was a healthy, pleasurable activity for both men and women.



In 1921 **Edith How Martyn** assisted the opening of one of Britain's first **birth control clinics**. She also worked at an international level, opening the Birth

Control International Information Centre, established in Geneva in 1927.

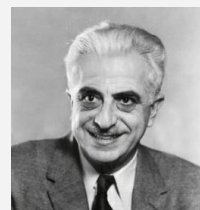


Founder of the National Secular Society, **Charles Bradlaugh**, was sentenced to six months in prison in 1877 for publishing with his friend, Annie Besant, a pamphlet about **family planning** and birth control.

In 1924, the Workers' Birth Control Group was founded by humanists **Dora Russell** and **Frida Laski**. They wanted to empower working class and poorer women to access **safe birth control information and treatment**, motivated by humanist values of fairness, freedom to control one's own life, and the importance of education.



In 1895 the suffragist **Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy** published (under the pseudonym Ellis Ethelmer) *Baby Buds*, a short book on botany for children that doubled as a **sex-education** handbook.



The humanist doctor **Gregory Pincus** developed the first effective **contraceptive pill** in the 1950s. Available since 1961 on the NHS, this has emancipated millions of

women from restrictive biological cycles and enabled couples and families to enjoy sex and relationships healthily without having to take on the burden of unwanted children.

Humanist Perspective

Families and relationships

Relationships and sex education: a personal humanist perspective

Lisa Hallgarten is a humanist who works at Brook, a charity that supports, educates and empowers young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health and wellbeing.



Sex is what unites us all. Most of us are here because two people had sex. Most of us will have sex often in our lives - if not with another person then at least with ourselves. Our sexuality, who we love, what turns us on (and doesn't) are fundamental to who we are as humans.

The proverbial Martian visiting Earth might well be perplexed by the sometimes opaque and often contradictory rules, and messages surrounding sex. Far from being considered normal, sex is exceptionalised and often problematised.

Regardless of our views on sex, we all aspire to good health. We need to understand how our bodies work and how to ensure that what we do with our bodies doesn't damage ourselves or others. The failed experiment with abstinence education in the United States demonstrates that denying access to Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) does not stop people having sex. There is good evidence that RSE helps young people to delay first sex and increases condom or contraceptive use.

For many years pregnancy and STI prevention were the primary concerns underpinning sex education policy in the UK. More recently the impact of unhealthy relationships on young

people's emotional health and wellbeing has become the prime concern. Sexual bullying, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse have taken centre stage. Technological developments including easy access to pornography, dating apps, online grooming, and bullying have generated concern about young people's safety. These were the drivers for the new mandatory RSE legislation.

Whether teenage pregnancy prevention or safeguarding, RSE policy has been driven forward almost entirely by a focus on risk and harm, with little aspiration around pleasure or happiness. The kind of positive (Dutch and Swedish) attitudes to human sexuality, a more humanist approach, are absent. Secondary school RSE should develop a sense of the body as something that has evolved (rather brilliantly) for pleasure as well as for procreation. We should aim to generate a sense of awe about the diversity of bodies and body types, and a sense of joy, not shame, in our own unique bodies.

RSE must be relevant to and inclusive of all students by acknowledging LGBT people's lives and relationships in relation to different family types; and as people with the same aspirations and rights to romantic and sexual relationships as heterosexual people. Excluding LGBT people from RSE can lead to disengagement with lessons and reinforce feelings of isolation.

Throughout school life, RSE should aim to develop children's critical thinking skills, vocabulary and confidence. This can help young people to challenge misinformation, be sceptical of messages about bodies, gender, and sexual behaviour in the media, advertising, and pornography; ask questions about cultural and religious views about sex and sexuality; and become better at identifying accurate information and seeking help.

Mandatory sex education has been a long time coming, but I've always thought it was worth fighting for. As a humanist, I support young people's right to scientifically accurate, inclusive, and comprehensive RSE - I believe RSE can make us healthier and happier. We know that our sexuality isn't just about making humans, but being human - something we can all enjoy and celebrate.