

Review: Kate Standley and Paula Davies, *Family Law*

Family law is a popular subject on many undergraduate law programmes and can also form part of other related areas of study such as social work, education and even psychology. Whether or not we are planning a career which requires knowledge of this subject, most of us would define ourselves in part by our family relationships. It is a subject with which we are all, therefore, at least superficially familiar and on which we have a view. This is demonstrated noisily every year when the students on my Child Law module discuss whether or not parents should be allowed to physically discipline their children, or why a *Gillick*-competent child can consent to but not refuse medical treatment. So, family law is a varied, controversial subject which is of interest to a wide range of students. As such, it is useful to have a “clear and comprehensive” text, as Standley and Davies’ book is described on the sleeve note of the current edition.

The authors note in their preface that “Two decades have passed since the publication of the first edition of *Family Law*” (p. x) and that this period of time has been marked by significant and ongoing social and legal changes in relation to family law. This is reflected in the contents of the book which, again as noted in the preface, “includ[e] current debates and proposals for reform” (p. x) such as whether or not there should be a presumption of shared parenting, the 2012 Action Plan for Adoption (with proposals for reducing delay in adoption), and the proposals for same-sex marriage.

The text covers core areas of law in relation to the formation, existence, and breakdown of family relationships. It is split into five parts: an introduction to family law; marriage, civil partnerships and cohabitation; family property and finance; divorce and its consequences; and children and parents. This is a useful division as it provides coverage of key issues commonly included in family law modules, while also having sufficient detail to allow the text to be used for modules with a specific focus on child law. An analysis of family law through reference to human rights standards, including the Human Rights Act 1998 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, provides a thread running through the text. In relation to the 1998 Act, this appropriately reflects the most significant development in domestic law over the last 15 years.

In the preface the aim of the book is identified as being “to provide a clear and detailed account of family law” (p. x). The structure and layout of the book break up the text with sub-headings and bullet points to identify key legal issues, and issues of debate and reform. Textboxes highlight extracts from primary and secondary sources, and the summary at the end of each chapter is a useful *aide memoir*. The style of layout, with the sub-headings, bullet points and textboxes, is quite cluttered but this works better than lengthy blocks of text in terms of engaging interest. The overall level of detail is appropriate for a textbook of this length covering the core family law syllabus. The format allows students to read selectively, but there are extensive references in the text supplemented by additional sources indicated at the end of each chapter so further reading is encouraged.

This is an area of law that is well covered by a number of good quality textbooks of a similar style, approach and level. The main competitors in this group are Hayes and William’s *Family Law* (Oxford University Press, 2012, 3rd edition), Herring, *Family Law* (Pearson, 2013, 6th edition), and Welstead and Edwards, *Family Law* (Oxford University Press, 2013, 4th edition). They are similar in explaining and analysing family law in its broader social context, and also stylistically in terms of layout. The use of companion websites to further maintain the currency of textbooks is now standard. The distinction lies

mainly in length and price, with the costlier texts (Herring, and Hayes and Williams, at £36.99) being also lengthier.

Standley and Davies provide the most concise text and theirs is also the least expensive, both factors which are, of course, attractive to students. As noted above though, the coverage of key issues in this book is comprehensive. Sections at the end of each chapter set out further reading, references and websites and provide encouragement to the reader to follow up a wide range of primary and secondary sources. While the size of the text limits the amount of detail and analysis, it provides a springboard for following up areas of interest through independent research.

Overall, this is a concise but comprehensive text, providing a good starting point for study of this area. A range of contemporary family law issues are explained in a clear and engaging manner. This is a well-established and deservedly popular textbook.

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