ITEM B: THE FAMILY AS A BENEFICIAL INSTITUTION

Conflict theories take a negative view of the family arguing that it plays an integral part in perpetuating social inequality. Feminist sociologists are highly critical of the family as they claim it reinforces patriarchy by confining women to a subservient role within the home as a housewife and mother which is learnt during primary socialisation and reinforced during marriage. Marxists conversely would argue that the family simply exists to protect private property and prevent the proletariat revolution by creating a false class consciousness.

Consensus theories however would point to the advantages of the family as an agent of socialisation which helps maintain social order by teaching norms and values.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the family is a beneficial institution in society. (20 marks)

Some sociologists would argue that the family is a beneficial social institution; however, others would disagree arguing that it has a negative impact on both the individual and society. By institution, sociologists mean an organisation or formal social structure.

According to Item B, the family acts “as an agent of socialisation which helps maintain social order by teaching norms and values”. Therefore, the family has some key advantages in helping maintain social order and teaching us the basic norms and values needed for our role in wider society. Parsons (a Functionalist) viewed primary socialisation as an essential part of becoming a functioning member of society as not only do we learn about acceptable social behaviours, we also learn the basic skills that make us human, e.g. how to walk/talk, etc. This suggests that the family is a beneficial institution in society as without it people would not be able to respond appropriately in social situations and there would be a state of anomie where clear boundaries were not present and understood by all.

However, Feminist sociologists such as Ann Oakley would argue that although the family does indeed teach us norms and values they are patriarchal in the sense that their aim is to oppress women. From a young age gender stereotypes are perpetuated within the family in response to gendered toys and activities. Girls, for example, are encouraged to play with dolls and become nurturing whereas boys are given toys that foster their aggression and risk-taking behaviour. This reinforces the notion that a woman’s place is in the home and as such ensures male privilege is able to continue. Feminists would also argue that there is a clear...
inequality within families regarding the amount of power held by women as they are often expected to assume the majority share of housework and childcare, even when they are in paid employment themselves (they experience a dual burden). It could even be argued that they experience a triple shift as they also take care of the emotional wellbeing of family members (Duncombe and Marsden). This suggests that the family is not a beneficial institution as it simply exists to create gender inequalities.

However, Functionalist sociologists would point to the importance of looking after the emotional wellbeing of family members. Murdock saw it as one of the key functions of a family (alongside more practical issues such as economic support, socialisation and reproduction) whereas Parsons referred to the need to ensure the “stabilisation of adult personalities”. He argued that the family acted as a warm bath which aimed to reduce stress and pressure experienced by its members outside of the home by offering a warm and loving environment. This allowed them to return to the wider world as fully functioning members of society. This suggests that the family is a beneficial institution as it supports its members, enables the social order to be maintained and supports a productive economy/society.

Marxist Zaretsky, however, would take issue with the idea that the family is a positive institution as he argues the “warm bath” theory offered by Functionalists was simply a method for ensuring the continuation of the capitalist system, as rather than taking out frustrations about social inequality upon their employers, individuals do so within the family. This reduces the chance of a proletariat revolution and as such allows the family to remain a major agent of the ideological state apparatus. Similarly, Engels argues that families simply exist to protect private property as it is passed on to a son and heir. This suggests that the family is not a beneficial institution as it is an integral part of capitalist exploitation.

Feminists would also point to the negative impact of the family as because it is seen as a private institution, its members (particularly women and children) are often subjected to emotional or physical abuse and it can be difficult for the state and legal system to intervene. This suggests that the family is a negative institution as its privatised nature means it is difficult to police within the legal framework of society.
Based on the evidence, sociologists would agree that there are indeed some hugely beneficial aspects to families; however, it is difficult to claim that they are a beneficial institution because they also create significant social problems. Postmodernists would also argue that it is difficult to generalise about “families” as our experiences/family structures are so diverse in our individualistic society that it does not make sense to talk about “the family” as a single institution.

[753 words]

Examiner style comments: *Mark band 17–20*

This is a top mark band essay. It demonstrates a strong evaluative argument in response to the question and uses supporting sociological evidence well. It raises wider questions about family diversity and makes direct reference to Item B (although there is more from Item B that could have been quoted directly in the answer).

Sociological theory is clearly communicated and understood and there is a good range of knowledge which has been analysed in response to the demands of the question. A good range of sociological studies and key terminology is used.

A strong conclusion which explicitly addresses the question and which also raises new questions.
Nowadays, the number of children in families is significantly lower than in the past, with the average British family only having one or two children. This is because children have become an economic liability and it is now much more costly to raise a family than in the past. Children are also unable to make financial contributions to the family themselves as they are prohibited from paid employment. Similarly, women are investing more in their careers and less in their families due to changes in their social status which has seen them become more equal to men in the world of work. Women also have more control over their fertility through the introduction of free contraception and so are more likely to delay childbirth and as a consequence have fewer children. The way in which children are raised has therefore changed as the family has become more child-centred and children have greater rights than ever before.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the view that changing patterns of childbearing and childrearing have had a positive impact on society. (20 marks)

Some sociologists would argue that there have been significant changes in patterns of childbearing and childrearing which have had a positive impact on society. However, others would argue that the trends may in fact be negative. By childbearing sociologists are referring to the number of children being born into a family and the time at which they are born, whereas childrearing refers to the way in which the children are raised by their families and the norms and values they are taught.

According to Item B, “the number of children in families is significantly lower than in the past, with the average British family only having one or two children. This is because children have become an economic liability”. This suggests that families have become child-centred (Aries) as children are regarded as the focal point of the family and are treated differently as they are seen as more vulnerable. This means they are more likely to be tightly controlled in terms of their movement, bodies, routines, etc. but the benefits of this are that they are more likely to be protected by their parents who invest huge amounts of time and money into their children. This results in greater opportunities and a greater chance of social mobility (Functionalism). This shows that patterns of childbearing/rearing have had a positive impact upon society as children go on to become well adjusted, healthy and emotionally stable members of society who are able to make valuable contributions to the economy and social life.

However, it could be argued that there have been negative
aspects as more women than ever work either full-time or part-time. This can result in children receiving a lack of adequate socialisation (Murray) or emotional support (Murdock) at an early age and the result of this can be that they are drawn towards criminal behaviour as they feel a lack of attachment to their mothers (Bowlby).

Feminists, however, would be critical as they argue that women are not solely responsible for housework and childcare and those who work are positive role models for their children. Ann Oakley also argues that women are actually undertaking a greater share of responsibility for childcare than ever before as they are still seen as the primary carers, so in fact their presence in the economic workforce just means they are actually doing more for their children. This shows that current patterns of childrearing have had a positive impact upon society to some extent.

An alternative perspective which is also critical is the view that childhood is disappearing with the advent of new technologies and the constant exposure to an adult world. Postman argues that parents are increasingly reliant on technology to "babysit" their children and to provide them with information. This means that children are often prematurely exposed to sex, violence, death and other aspects of adulthood. This blurs the boundaries and can leave children vulnerable to abuse or exploitation, or have a damaging effect on their mental health. This suggests that patterns of childrearing are detrimental to society.

According to Item B, “women also have more control over their fertility through the introduction of free contraception and so are more likely to delay childbirth and as a consequence have fewer children”. This suggests that patterns of childbearing have a positive impact upon society as the fact that many women are now delaying motherhood until they have progressed in their career (made possible by new reproductive technologies, contraception and a change in social attitudes) means that children are being born into a more stable environment where they have greater financial support and where parents have greater life experience to allow them to parent more effectively. This shows that there are benefits to the current trends in childbearing.

Similarly, Item B states that “children have greater rights than ever before” and these rights have been protected by again uses supporting sociological studies accurately and which also makes reference to content from the crime and deviance module, demonstrating synopticity.
changes in the law. This shows that there are clear benefits to current trends in childrearing as children are less vulnerable to the power of adults and they have more equal rights to protection. Children are also protected by laws that state they cannot work until the age of 16 and so they have a chance to enjoy their childhood and develop emotionally and socially, as well as academically, before being thrust into an adult world.

Based on the evidence, sociologists would agree to some extent that changing patterns of childbearing/rearing have had a positive impact upon society.

[739 words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark band 17–20**

This essay sits towards the bottom end of the top mark band. It has made regular and explicit reference to the question and has formed an evaluative argument which is supported by sociological theories and studies. Item B has been used and directly quoted to support introductory points. The candidate has made reference to both childbearing and childrearing.

To improve further the candidate could have spent longer addressing the impact of childbearing and could have introduced more sociological theory to support points.