

# Friends disunited: rise in divorce blamed on internet and texting

THE GROWTH of text messaging and popularity of internet reunion sites were blamed yesterday for a rise in the divorce rate, which is at a seven-year high.

There were 153,490 divorces in England and Wales last year, a rise of 5,755 over the previous year and the third successive annual increase, according to the Office of National Statistics. It is the highest total since 1996 and suggests that about four in 10 marriages end in divorce. The figures do not include cohabiting couples, where the separation rate is slightly higher, experts say. Relate, the marriage guidance body, said that about 10 per cent of all its cases were now influenced

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by the internet. It claims people find it easier to have affairs than before, by using text messages and e-mails for discreet communication.

The internet and huge growth of Friends Reunited, which now allows people to search for individuals whether or not they were at school or work with them, has helped people to regain contact with former friends and lovers, often leading to the breakdown of their existing relationship.

Internet dating services and chatrooms can also incite extramarital activity. Christine Northam, a senior counsellor for Relate, said: "The internet has had

a big impact and is influencing a number of affairs. People sit in front of their computers all day and use their spare time to find out what happened to old flames or embark on something new; it makes it all very easy." People having difficulties in current relationships were more likely to look on the past through rose-tinted glasses, she said.

David Allison, a solicitor and mediator with Family Law in Partnership, said: "Modern methods of communication are a factor in divorce cases: it's so easy to keep track of people by the internet. But people also leave a trail of evidence in texts and e-mails that can lead to break-ups."

Recent high-profile cases of couples affected by

Friends Reunited include David James, the England goalkeeper, who left Tanya - his wife of 13 years and mother of their four children - when he had an affair with his childhood sweetheart Amanda Salmon, whom he met on the website. She left her partner, but is now said to be no longer with James.

The culture of long working hours and lack of stigma about divorce have also increased the rate. The average age of divorcees has risen to between 30 and 34 for men and 25 to 29 for women, possibly due to the tendency to marry later. About 154,000 children were affected by divorces last year, with 34,000 under five.



David James and wife Tanya, who he left after meeting an old flame on the internet Richard Chamberj/Alpha