

## **Speech to 'Happy Families?' conference: Monday 13<sup>th</sup> November**

### **Introduction**

Thank you very much Mary for inviting me to speak at your conference. NFPI, parenting UK and many other organisations play an enormously important role in speaking up for parents and have done a great deal to help us put parents and families right at the top of the agenda. I'm grateful, Mary for all the work that you and your colleagues are doing.

I would like to begin by saying something that may seem obvious but that I believe to be crucial, and it is that parents bring up children, not governments. And governments, sadly, cannot guarantee happy families. However as a Government we are clear that it is our job is to help parents carry out their responsibilities, not to seek to supplant them or to intervene inappropriately . And, as far as we can, to enable parents and children to have the wherewithal for happy family life.

How we can best do this is what I want to address today.

### **The changing context of family life**

My starting point is that the context for families is highly dynamic. Rapid social, demographic and economic change mean that demands and pressures on families are also changing. Let me give just *three* examples to illustrate what I mean.

In terms of social trends, think how the role of fathers has changed over the last few years. A generation ago it was unusual to see a Dad out on his own, pushing his small son or daughter in a buggy; but now it is routine.

I don't want to exaggerate the extent of this change, but there is no doubt that many more couples now want to share the care of their children, and their numbers are rising. I think this is a cultural shift we should welcome and promote, because it offers the prospect of a better life for children, Mums and Dads – for families generally.

The demographic changes we are seeing are also profound. It is terrific that life expectancy has risen but also important to recognise the impact on family life. Not only are we living longer, the age at which women are bearing children has also risen, so more families are now trying to care for dependent children and for frail elderly parents at the same time.

We used to think the big policy challenge was 'simply' to help parents balance caring for children alongside managing work - hard enough on its own, you may think – but it is even harder now because the additional needs of elderly relatives also have to be taken into account.

And in the economic sphere the shifts are equally great. Take, for example, our changing labour market and the increased emphasis on the acquisition of skills and qualifications by young people.

Two or three generations ago you could leave school at 16 for a 'starter job', with the expectation of progressing up the ladder to a reasonable standard of living by your mid-twenties. Now those 'starter jobs' have mostly disappeared, and in our knowledge economy young people with few or no qualifications run the risk of low pay and insecure employment as adults.

A social consequence of this is what academics term an 'extended transition' to adulthood, by which they mean that young people are now living at home for longer, because they are staying on in education and often delaying moving into employment until well into their twenties. *And as I know personally – as many of you will too – you go through the pangs of your last baby leaving home – only to find he comes back – a towering 22 year old with more gear than Topman and HMV put together. And it's – what can I say? – very challenging!*

These kinds of changes – and many others too, such as the ICT revolution - are not just impacting on the UK but right across the world. Governments can rarely control these trends but we need to anticipate them as far as we can - certainly monitor them and factor them in when developing policies and services.

I have touched on a few of the big forces affecting families today to emphasise the fact that however good an individual policy for families may be, it now almost certainly has only a limited 'shelf life'. Even a policy that was fit for purpose in 1997 is likely to need adjustment now, such is the pace of change.

So the big task facing us is to review and revise our policies and provision for families, taking into account the shifting circumstances in which we live, and our diverse population.

### **Building on firm foundations – Labour’s achievements**

At this point it is easy to feel daunted, but I believe this is much more of an opportunity than a risk, and I also believe we should approach the task with some confidence.

I don’t by any means underestimate the challenges we face in delivering the policies to which we are already committed and in developing new ones that meet people’s needs and aspirations.

But there are firm foundations for us to build on in moving forward; and first and foremost, these foundations are the result of the very real progress we have made over the last nine years in developing support for children, parents and families.

It is easy to forget that when we came into power in 1997 the number of children living in poverty had more than tripled over twenty years. More than a third of all children – incredible isn’t it – we living in poverty, and the gap between rich and poor families had grown faster in the UK than any other industrialised country. The legacy of those changes, although diminishing, remains with us today.

At that time there were also few services for families with children under five, no national childcare strategy, only limited early

education and childcare opportunities, little additional support for families in disadvantaged areas, and chronically low levels of Maternity Leave and Pay. It is no surprise that the support for children and families here compared poorly with what was available in most other developed countries.

It is important to recognise that this situation – bad as it was for families - did not come about by accident. It wasn't the consequence of thoughtlessness or neglect. No it was rather the direct result of a Government that believed it had no role in what it regarded as the entirely private arrangements families make. No role in stimulating the provision of early childhood education and care. No role in reducing child poverty by helping parents into work. No role in ensuring there are options to help parents balance work and family life. No role in making available information, advice and support to parents who want it.

I don't want simply to recite a long list of this Government's achievements, but I think it is also important to recognise how much positive change there has been in this area since the mid-1990s.

We not only have stronger policies and better, more integrated services. The local structures which lead and support them are also more robust, as a result of the Every Child Matters reforms.

And just as the changes in the 1980s and 90s were not a accident, so the improvements since 1997 haven't happened by chance. 700,000 children haven't been lifted out of poverty by accident. A

thousand children's centres haven't materialised 'out of the ether'. And when in April 2007 the flat rate of Statutory Maternity Pay plus other financial support for families exceeds £8,000 in the first year of a child's life, compared to just £2, 610 in 1997, this won't be due to an aberration.

No - these things have happened for two key reasons: because we were determined as a Government that they should, and because we have spent what was needed to bring improvements about.

After the serious under-funding of support for children and families - particularly the most vulnerable - in the years up to 1997, we have invested much more public money in this area than ever before: £20 billion over 10 years in Sure Start, Children's Centres and early years education alone.

We are already seeing benefits but the best is yet to come, because the dividends will emerge only gradually over the next ten or even twenty years, as these young children grow up and have families of their own.

Over the past 10 years what I have just described is, I believe, an example of the enabling 21<sup>st</sup> century State in action. We have led and steered these improvements from the centre but in a way that has depended upon partnerships and great ideas from statutory and voluntary organisations, from insights from practitioners and researchers, and above all informed by what parents and children say they want.

So while I am proud of the advances we have made I want to acknowledge that these are not the Government's achievements alone, but also the achievements of many individuals and organisations who have worked with us to develop new ideas and to make a success of them in practice, some of whom, of course, are here with us today.

### **The economic case**

You would expect one of our prime motivations as Government to be a more equal, fairer society in which all families, whatever their background can be happy and fulfilled. And it is hugely encouraging that our increased investment in supporting children and families is establishing the conditions for a stronger, more socially just and fairer society in future.

But it is also increasingly clear that this investment in children and parents makes good economic sense too.

There are several reasons why this is so. First, in a highly competitive global economy we need every child to achieve their potential because it is not only good for them, it is good for us all.

Second, analysis suggests a dividend as high as perhaps 12% a year for every £1 spent on good early years education – a payback of three or four times the original investment by the time a young person reaches their early twenties.

And third, there is emerging evidence about the importance of good parenting and good education in helping children to develop the resilience and other qualities they need to thrive as adults.

Educational qualifications will always be the bedrock of children's achievement, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they aren't enough on their own.

As Britain leads the development of the knowledge economy, it is the interplay between formal accreditation and so-called 'soft skills' that is becoming increasingly important and in demand.

Against the dynamic context that I have described, we all also need emotional intelligence and flexibility, and to have good problem-solving and interpersonal skills too. Until now, we tended to think that some people were just 'born lucky' with these attributes. But both here and abroad, there is growing interest in asking what more we can do to foster these skills – which I should add, I refuse to call 'soft', because they're critically important. And the evidence is that developing these attitudes starts with good family experiences, in the home, with strong, loving, aspirational parents. So supporting parents and providing good early years education can pay dividends here as well.

### **The importance of parenting and of high quality provision**

Overall, the evidence base in our area remains incomplete but it is a lot more developed today than even a decade ago, particularly on the subject of being a good parent.

As a result, it is now clear that what parents actually do has a huge impact on children's well-being and capacity to succeed, both at the time and in future.

Some parents already know that reading and singing nursery rhymes with their young children will get them off to a flying start – often because this is how they themselves were brought up.

For other parents without this inheritance these simple techniques are a mystery and are likely to remain so - unless we act and draw them to their attention.

Leon Feinstein has famously and depressingly found that class is still more important than intellect in how well children achieve, and that these differences begin to show up as early as 22 months of age.

But the EPPE project shows that if friendly and skilful early years practitioners work in partnership with disadvantaged parents, as co-educators of their children, these gaps in children's development and achievement can be narrowed.

So the EPPE research holds out the hope of severing the link between disadvantage and underachievement, but only if early years provision is of high quality, and if parents are engaged in a way that empowers them and develops their confidence – something many of today's parents feel they lack

Research and practice experience also show that the right parenting programmes can improve children's outcomes, and not just in the early years – but again, only if they are delivered well by confident and skilful practitioners.

So the messages are clear: early years education and parenting programmes can make a difference for children, but only if their quality is high; and this, in turn, depends a lot on the quality of the people delivering them.

### **Parenting Academy announcements**

Developing the skills of all those who work with parents is therefore crucial, if we are to extract the full benefits for children from our policies and services.

We want practitioners to have access to high quality training whether they work in the statutory, voluntary or private sectors.

We also want to build the capacity of professionals who may not see working with parents as their 'core business', yet who are in a great position to make a difference – teachers and health professionals among them.

This is why we are establishing the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners. We anticipate that the Academy will be fully operational from autumn 2007 we have been working out the next steps in its development.

The NAPP will have three main activities:

- training, development and support for the parenting workforce, especially the trainers of practitioners and those who train trainers.
- acting as a national centre and source of advice on high quality academic research evidence on parenting and parenting support, combined with practical knowledge of what works and has worked in different situations and with different client groups.
- And continuing to support the government's parenting agenda, as it develops.

I have asked my officials to work with key stakeholders including, of course, NFPI to develop a specification for the Academy that will meet the needs of the parenting workforce. We will issue this shortly. And we will ensure, through a series of media announcements, that all relevant stakeholders (including parents) are kept informed of details particularly about the bidding process and the time scales for this.

## **Conclusion**

Over the next few months I want to broaden and deepen the debate about the changing needs and aspirations of families, and about how we can best meet them.

I am also clear that there are *three* big lessons from what we have achieved so far that we must remember in moving forward.

The first is that Government must lead but we can't do it all on our own: to make a sustained difference to families we need to work

with our partners across all the sectors, nationally and locally, and above all listen to parents themselves.

The second lesson is that ‘quality really matters’: within the inevitable constraints we must ensure that children and parents get high quality provision, delivered by people with the requisite skills. Only if this happens will we unlock children’s full potential and offer empowering, practical support to parents.

And the third lesson is that our collective memory is short, and it is easy to forget how poor our provision for children and families was until recently, and how much hard work it has taken to get even to where we are now. We will need much more of the same to get to where we want to be – where parents may well demand we get to – in three or four years time.

So let no one be beguiled by those in some other parts of the ‘political wood’ into believing that we can continue to make progress in our policies and provision for families ‘on the cheap’, or just on the basis of warm words, without serious and sustained Government leadership and investment. All the evidence is that therein lies the road to ruin – or rather back to where we were in the mid 1990s.

All the evidence is that without real Government leadership and commitment, without specific, practical policies and serious money, we would be on the road to ruin, that is, back to where we were 10 years ago. And certainly if we were to go back to those dark days, families would find it much much harder to be happy.