

# Supporting Families in Changing Times:

## Parents and Parenting in Public Policy

### CIRCLE SEMINAR, HELD AT 11 DOWNING STREET - 25 FEBRUARY 2008

We are in the middle of a revolution in government and in public debate on the family. It holds a place in policy that would have been unthinkable even ten years ago. All parties believe that here is a connection between social wellbeing and family wellbeing. All are now following New Labour's example and developing policies on supporting families.

So, despite continuing nanny state jibes, we take for granted the explicit involvement of the State not only in the traditional areas of family support but in family matters, in parenting.

The curtain has been raised on family interiors. From Treasury to media to teachers' conferences to faith settings, people are talking about 'parenting'. The tone is generally negative: about the 'wrong kinds of family' or selfish mothers who 'want it all', feral children making people's lives a misery in school and on the streets, and fathers either denied their rights by malevolent mothers or 'deadbeat' fathers who take no responsibility - always exaggeration. Parents are either sentimentalised or demonised.

There is a powerful narrative abroad that family is breaking down and that children are ungoverned and ungovernable - that parents have lost the art of raising children well. Alongside this, a conviction that services must be driven not only by needs or entitlements but for outcomes - children as the foot soldiers of the new economy. 100 years ago there was consternation that British young men were so malnourished they could not fight in the Boer war - now a new malnutrition is imagined.

And there is the new emphasis on the importance of parents in children's development. A big bit of me wants to say please - this is so obvious. Surely we don't need to assert it as an amazing new insight. But it does seem to be seen as a revelation. Fuelled by often alarmist readings of the state of childhood and constant research headlines about this or that involvement of parents in children's woes, anxiety about parenting has got into the cultural bloodstream in a profound way so that something that was taken for granted - being a parent - has become an enterprise, almost a profession. The quality of parenting is seen as a cause of social disorder rather than a consequence of it.

But parenting is not a profession, it's a relationship. People don't partner, marry or not, have children or not for the State but for themselves. That society benefits is a by-product. So when developing policy, we need to remember what relationships are really like - banal, ordinary, messy, complicated; that imagination, competition as well as desires and feelings are involved in them; and that they are nourished or destroyed by circumstance - poverty, poor housing, ill health as well as violence and addiction. We need to be able to grasp distinctions between cause, correlation and consequence.

We can do the 'Gradgrind' thing and see families as functional and deploy techniques to make them function better - but they will defy us by being unpredictable and resisting attempts to manage them. I have to admit to a sneaking admiration for those Mums who snuck their 'MacDonald's' through the school fences. A feeling of being controlled and

managed can call up rebellion – even of the ‘cutting off your nose to spite your face’ variety, perhaps most especially when you feel you have no agency. The ‘blame the parents’ position has consequences.

So what are we to make of all the noise about parents and parenting?

I have been intrigued by two apparently contradictory messages in recent analysis of parenting. From the EPPE study:

‘It is not who you are as a parent but what you do that matters’

And from Freakonomics:

‘But it isn’t so much a matter of what you do as a parent; it’s who you are.’

You’d think if we can’t agree on that, what are we about? Of course both are true. Who you are and what you do are not separate domains – and there’s the rub. That is why the mantra ‘It’s the parenting, stupid’ which has underlain a raft of initiatives and programmes on anti-social behaviour, sets up a bit of a false god for family policy and services.

Parents don’t raise children in a family vacuum. The whole environment is involved, and the environment over generations. It is a deep challenge to identify casual pathways and processes when effects are multi-directional, and emerge from both the intimate sphere of values, aspirations, relationships, conversation and play, as well as from outside circumstances - like poverty, inequality, mental health.

And just to complicate things further, parenting quality in any one person is not stable. It fluctuates, affected by circumstance and, of course, by the children with their particular inheritances and their developing personalities, aptitudes and aspirations. Children are not blank slates – as any parent of two knows.

There is a convincing body of evidence on what works in raising children ready to learn, to play, to behave well and to get on well with others:

- At home good parenting not individual practices/techniques but a style that is warm, loving, authoritative
- Parental involvement in learning through conversation, reading and play
- Parents values, beliefs, aspirations for their children
- An environment that promotes well being

When parents have aspirations for their children, believe in their ability to succeed and show it, children tend to do well. Yet parents and children are not homogeneous, children can be crushed by and can resist high and low parental expectations; and they develop their own. On the whole, though, when parents convey their hopes and aspirations for their children – it makes a big difference.

I know I was the first of my family to stay at school beyond 15 because of two things: my father’s ambition for me to do what his impoverished West Highland family could not afford for him and the 1944 Education Act. But there are other indefinable things at work – my sister, the elder by 5 years, intelligent, did not take this path. She bore the brunt of family strains and stresses in the war and its immediate aftermath. I was luckier.

“It is through chance that, from among the various individuals of which each of us is composed, one emerges rather than another”, according to one novelist. Well maybe not quite, but knowing how to subvert chance and interject predictability when relationships are so complicated is not easy. This is abundantly clear from the stubborn continuation of inequality despite the considerable efforts of Government in recent years to do something about it. And in one family’s story that stays with me yet.

I am glad I can still remember the sleepless nights as I wondered night after night whether Lexy’s new baby was safe. It is good to be reminded how easily one can get it wrong, how limited the choices are, and how very influential are ‘events’.

Lexy had been brought up in a children’s home, almost from birth; she never knew her family. As soon as she could she left and made for London, where she got into drugs and probably sold sex for money. Anyway, she contracted an ovarian infection and was told that she was very unlikely ever to conceive a baby. She returned to Scotland and met and married Roy. He

loved Lexy very much but made money out of thieving and had a number of convictions. Shortly after they married, Roy was imprisoned for burglary and did a year.

Lexy was furious with Roy for getting into trouble and abandoning her. When he was in prison, she had a brief affair and, to her consternation, got pregnant.

It was impossible for her even to consider a termination. Roy wanted her to place the baby for adoption. And visits to prison and letters were dominated by this. She did eventually say she would do this 'for Roy'; but she remained very conflicted. She came to the Social Work Department for help.

As fate would have it, Lexy went into labour and gave birth to Mandy the very day that Roy got out of prison and he was with her at the birth and supported her through it. Then came a terrible time for them - Lexy admitted that Roy had threatened the baby and even held her upside down; she was terrified that Mandy's crying would drive him to violence; she found herself thinking of holding a pillow over the baby's head to keep her quiet. She decided with me that Mandy should stay with foster parents. She thought she did want to go ahead with adoption for her baby's sake. Mandy was placed with local foster parents on a voluntary basis and Lexy visited daily.

Within three weeks, Lexy was in hospital with another infection and the gynaecologist said a second pregnancy was exceedingly unlikely. It was this that tipped Lexy into saying she wanted to take her baby home. As you can imagine, I was terrified for Mandy's safety, and very reluctant to accept this.

Roy began to see that in pushing Lexy to give up her baby he was breaking her heart. We agreed that he would go to stay with his family to give Lexy and her baby time together. There were some very frightening weeks. I began to suspect that Roy was staying with Lexy and agonised about whether to push for a compulsory order to protect Mandy.

Then fate (or Roy's unconscious!) intervened again and it was his arrest and imprisonment for two years that enabled Lexy to mother her daughter for those first 18 months of her baby's life and for the three to work out over time a way of being a family together, which they did. My last meeting with them was Sunday lunch cooked by Lexy with all three living together, determined to be a family. They had told themselves their story and it was a story of being together.

Family life is in many ways a narrative - the story of who we are is vital to our well-being. And events play a great part in producing the narrative.

### **Parenting interventions**

So, knowing that parents are the biggest influences is not the same as knowing how; and knowing how is not the same as knowing 'how to' - mosquitoes and malaria are connected but we need to know about all the processes of transmission to know how to do something about infectivity and impact.

Leon Feinstein's research has shown that the biggest determinant of poor adult outcomes is 'acting out' behaviour at age ten – not reading or maths scores. The case for attending to children's behaviour and emotional difficulties is unanswerable.

And the evidence on family and parenting interventions is promising. We have good evidence on the effectiveness of some programmes for some parents and children and inconclusive evidence about others. Much more research is needed so we know how to customise programmes.

Though parenting programmes have been shown to improve parents' behaviour and children's behaviour, the one does not automatically connect with the other. Some programmes have shown that parents are doing things differently but without a run through into children's outcomes. The techniques of responsiveness and child management which programmes focus on are but one part of a family ecology. That is why work focused on the adult couple relationship can produce a better run through into children's wellbeing than parenting programmes.

Thus parenting programmes are not a panacea and they have to be set within a service context that offers much, much more. Families that struggle the most with hardship, poor

health and mental health and troubled relationships, need interventions that deal with practical living problems, deep-seated relationship and family problems, and with the big issues – drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems, domestic violence, poverty. Many families will only ever be reached at home. And some only through compulsion.

The other side of this coin is that interventions to support adults with problems in their lives that affect children will not necessarily produce a better outcome for children without direct attention to the parent child relationship. Post-natal depression impacts on children's – particularly boys' – cognitive development. Treating the depression is an important thing to do for the wellbeing of the mother but improvements for the children require specific attention to the mother-child relationship.

So we do know that help can help. Yet the landscape of family and parenting support is difficult for families to find their way around. The huge variety of providers and provision, lack of coordination, professional silos, service boundaries, gaps and lacks in provision, differing thresholds for services, complicated assessment processes, contradictory policy directions, new initiatives, short-term-ism in funding arrangements, churn in the systems – all these contribute to a moving network of support that is hard to navigate and also to responsibility-shifting. If you are on the receiving end, you lose heart trying to find the right place, unless you are very determined or very desperate, or you do something very desperate.

So it is a terrific step forward in England to have from the Social Exclusion Unit the explicit policy direction that adult social care and health and children's services must be connected so services are thinking about whole families and not bits of families and that there should be no wrong doors.

### **What helps the most vulnerable families?**

Family services are not a compensation for the structural defects in the social environment, like poverty and poor housing. If we have an environment that is more difficult for children not necessarily because poverty is worse but possibly because poverty in a climate of 'in your face affluence' is worse; and if, as many suggest, that leads to the losses of aspiration, hope and resilience and the behaviours of despair – drugs, alcohol, violence; then transforming vulnerable families is not the work of a moment. It is not cheap. It is not fast. And it may be that mitigating harm and misery is the more likely outcome than transformation – an outcome that may not show up on the improvement charts but is as vital to do as offering pain relief to those who can't be cured.

In the same way as the Health Service has to think about managing chronic illness to give people the best life they can have, so social care has to consider how to give the best life they can have to vulnerable families, some of whom will only ever be able to manage with a network of support – and all this while not giving up hope that things can be made different and better. A tricky number to pull off.

We know a lot about how to do this, though we could do with knowing more. Some excellent studies – David Quinton's review of a series of research studies on parenting support, for example – alongside knowledge from the frontline, like we have heard today - reveal the most important factors in helping – not rocket science, just difficult to do well. Difficult, to quote a colleague of mine, to keep on keeping on. Not only for workers but hard for politicians, too, not to give up on things.

Studies of interventions show that whether it is parenting programmes, one-to-one services like the family nurse partnerships, or multi-systemic therapies, the quality of the relationship between helper and helped and their level of expertise are key.

Services that do well are to be found within both the VCS and statutory sectors. But there is a body of evidence that suggests that voluntary sector services have an edge in the trust domain. Trust without expertise, though, is as dead as faith without works. So, building and sustaining knowledge is as vitally important in family work as it is in medicine or law.

Some parts of the mixed economy of family support are very fragile at present. The new localism is a direct response to the need for local solutions to local conditions. Difficult to argue with.

But voluntary organisations fear that they will struggle to keep services going when funding is not targeted at them or ring-fenced. If national funding streams, like the Strengthening Families stream or the Parenting Fund, set up by the Treasury to support VCS organisations offering parenting support, are devolved to localities, then VCS organisations believe they will not be able to sustain services and fear that local authorities will bring services in-house that previously had been run by them. Or they won't have the slick edge in tendering processes that the private sector has. We need to consider whether the value they provide means a different regime of tendering.

Sure Start was berated for allegedly not reaching the families most in need – many families in great need were reached, many lessons were learned about how to help, yet so intense is the political pressure to score and to produce new policy ideas out of a hat, that we don't keep initiatives going.

Churn in the service landscape and a political culture of giving up on things is unbelievably wasteful of knowledge and know-how. We must stop allowing ourselves to forget things we know in the search for new solutions to new and old problems.

### **The State and the Family: The deal**

I want now to turn to the politics of the relationship between state and family.

Public debate and government policy offer a confusing narrative on parents and children - confused about whether to tell the story of parents as the primary cause of society's ills, or as grown-up consumers, a market force using choice and voice to transform schooling and services. As a parent it can feel like you have choice as long as you make the 'right' choice, or have money or don't ask for anything. It can feel like lip-service.

Perhaps we are forgetting that there is an unwritten contract – like our unwritten constitution – between the State and people. A deal, if you like, about what you give to the State and what the State gives to you. This has been most explicit in education – all children entitled to education - and in the area of ante-natal and post natal care.

In Scotland and England we are moving through a process of redefinition of the service landscape on services for babies and new mothers and fathers. Baby and bath water are the words that come to mind. I have yet to read a report on parental mental health, safeguarding children, or on early identification of child development issues, that has not cited the health visitor as the professional with both the key role in identifying difficulties early, when parents are not able to, and with the greatest access to people's homes.

Parents' polls show health visitors as the most likely source of information and advice on parenting and on services. Yet the service is in decline and it is not easy to discover exactly what entitlement will replace it. Maybe like the youth service, once it is gone, it will need to be reinvented.

This looks like a process of outsourcing public health provision. If we outsource the administration and management of care to parents or patients, then the people who are most likely to lose out are those most in need.

Similarly, if the central plank of a policy to support children's learning is to increase parental involvement, the children who benefit most are likely to have parents who do all these things 'naturally' or have access to resources to support their children's learning or do not feel excluded through lack of confidence or knowledge.

This is a real policy conundrum. It would be pernicious to deny opportunities for all children because some children cannot benefit; yet policies that increase the marginalisation of children whose parents can't or don't fulfil these new expectations entrench inequality and waste promise.

But more than that, people who can pay for the advice and help, will pay and the deal between state and people is transformed – universal provision is not universal any more and the deal is off. Provision gets balkanised. We need to be alive to the possible long term consequences of changing the deal, changing the relationship between state and parent.

It is to relationships I want to turn now. Whether it is between citizen and state, between helper and helped or between parent and child, we keep coming back to the quality of relationships.

**In conclusion:**

Challenging as it is – services for families have to be entitlement, needs and outcomes-led. Getting the balance right when resources are tight is difficult. The influences producing inter-generational transmission of achievement are not easy to transform. It is a challenge to find policy routes that do not entrench or at least continue the class and income distinctions, further advantaging the already advantaged and further disadvantaging the already disadvantaged.

Specific interventions with parents must be part of a policy ecology alongside those directed at teaching and schools, at income levels, employment regulation, housing, neighbourhoods and communities, adult social care, health and mental health services. Part of that service network must be services that focus on family relationships –not as an add-on benefit if you are lucky. Building.....sustaining...repairing...holding... frail and fractured relationships is what this work is about - being midwives to people's relationships with each other. Relationships that are not only 'social contracts' but about that most contradictory thing: the completely prosaic everyday business of living together and about our deepest feelings of love and commitment. Love, though, is a word you don't often hear in policy discussions and that I find a pity.

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