

Staying Safe

A response from the Family and Parenting Institute

31 October 2007

1. General

The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) is the UK's leading centre of expertise in families and the upbringing of children. We welcome this consultation, which draws together the different elements of policies to keep children safe: enabling parents to feel confident that they are doing the best they can for their child; promoting children's awareness of how to keep themselves safe; and creating a wider environment where unacceptable risks are avoided and where adults know what to do if they think a child is at risk.

Clearly it is impossible, and arguably undesirable, to keep childhood risk-free. It is difficult for parents who feel torn between a desire to protect their children and a recognition that children need some freedom to learn how to manage risk and gain independence.

While parents wish to be responsible, for some decisions there is a lack of guidance about what is appropriate. For example the age at which a child can be left alone is undetermined and subject to parental discretion. Similarly there is no guidance as to when children can play or go out on their own, or indeed as to when a child is old enough to baby-sit. However, parents can be prosecuted for neglect for leaving their children unattended, should they come to harm or be injured, or if the child is deemed to have been left in danger.

As recommended by the 2005 Family Commission,¹ guidance should be issued by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and made available to parents, in relation to: the age of a child below which it would not be appropriate for him/her to be left without adult supervision; and the minimum age at which it would be appropriate for a child to baby-sit. Of course such guidance should recognise the flexibility needed, for example in certain emergencies.

Children's personal development is highly dependent on having space and time for free play and there is also evidence that there are particular benefits from being able to explore the natural environment.² This is not just about parents giving their children freedom, but also about their local environment. A recent Family and

¹ Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children (2005) Families and the state: Two-way support and responsibilities. Bristol: The Policy Press.

² Huby, M. and Bradshaw, J. (2006) Review of the environmental dimension of children and young people's well-being. York: University of York

Parenting Institute survey carried out by YouGov demonstrated a strong relationship between a family's income and their access to any green space that they could describe as 'well maintained and pleasant'.³

2. Helping all children and young people to be safe

Bullying

We welcome the recent revised government guidance for schools on dealing with bullying, including cyberbullying and homophobic bullying. It is essential that strategies to reduce unauthorised absence from school are closely linked to those to tackle bullying, since bullying is a major cause of truancy.⁴

Young people, sex and relationships

As young people grow up and assert their independence, they need the skills to keep themselves safe from new risks that they will face. Young people want advice and support from their parents, backed up by schools and easily available confidential services. Young people aged 13–21 report that they are as likely to turn to their mothers (52 per cent) as their friends (53 per cent) for information about sex and relationships while lessons at school are an important source of information for 77 per cent.⁵

Fathers as well as mothers may want advice on how to talk to their teenagers about sex and relationships. There is good evidence that including teenagers' parents in information and prevention programmes is effective, while young people whose parents discuss sexual matters with them are also more likely to use contraception at first intercourse.⁶

In school, Ofsted has reported that PSHE provision is patchy, with poorer quality teaching from non-specialist teachers.⁷ It is important that, as well as basic information provision, teaching focuses on skills development and an understanding of emotions, relationships and consent issues, and how to deal with these.

An indication of the possible consequences where young people lack these skills and understanding is provided by Childline summary reports. These cite calls from young girls under peer pressure to have sex, who have used alcohol as a way of coping with this experience that they do not feel ready for, but which they do not believe they can avoid.⁸ It also appears that girls aged 16-18 are as likely to be physically abused by their boyfriends as they are by their mother or father (a quarter of the calls to Childline by this group about physical abuse).⁹

³ James, C. and Gimson, S. (2007) Families and Neighbourhoods. London: Family and Parenting Institute.

⁴ Beatbullying (2006) Bullying and truancy report 2006

⁵ BMRB International (2003). Evaluation of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. Tracking survey. Report of results of nine waves of research. October 2003. London: BMRB International.

⁶ Health Development Agency (2004) Teenage pregnancy: an overview of the research evidence. Evidence briefing. Health Development Agency

⁷ Ofsted (2007) Time for change? Personal, social and health education. London: Ofsted

⁸ Childline (2006) Casenotes: Alcohol and teenage sexual activity.

⁹ Childline (2006) Casenotes: What children and young people tell ChildLine about physical abuse

Safety on the roads

The Government must take action to tackle the current situation where cars are given priority on streets, which are therefore not seen as safe for children to negotiate independently, and so cars are used for even short journeys, exacerbating the situation further. Planning measures that have been successful in tackling this include Home Zones¹⁰ and 20 mph zones in residential areas. Safe cycle routes are also important for children to be able to cycle to school safely, gaining independence, as well as the health benefits of regular exercise. Stronger leadership from the Department for Transport is needed in raising the needs of children up the agenda.

3. Protecting vulnerable children and young people

Children of parents with problems

The Social Exclusion Task Force report, 'Reaching out: Think family', identified how problems can be exacerbated by services dealing with adults failing to address the needs of the children in a family. This report also gives examples of good practice in joined up working. We look forward to the detailed policy proposals arising from the findings of the review.

We have attached the Family and Parenting Institute response to the consultation 'Care Matters' which discusses what is needed to work with troubled families to protect children. Much depends on the skills of individual workers: a recent FPI publication, 'How to help families in trouble', sets out many practical steps workers from any setting can take if they are dealing with families with complex, entrenched problems.¹¹

Runaways

It is essential that a commitment is made by central government to dedicate financial resources towards increasing emergency refuge accommodation for young runaways in Britain. Specialist foster care also needs to be available to provide a safe space to resolve problems and avoid repeated episodes of running away.

Extended schools need to provide support services targeted at vulnerable children in primary school and early secondary schools. There is also a need for early intervention with mediation services and targeting younger siblings who may also be at risk.¹²

Disabled children

As recognised in the Green Paper, disabled children can be at greater risk of abuse and neglect. A report by the NSPCC¹³ highlights how a society which puts little emphasis on the rights of disabled children also puts them at higher risk of abuse:

¹⁰ Department for Transport (200 Home zones: Challenging the future of our streets.

¹¹ Rhodes, H. (2007) How to help families in trouble: a short guide. London: Family and Parenting Institute <http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications>

¹² Macaskill, C. (2006) Beyond refuge: supporting young runaways. London: NSPCC.

¹³ NSPCC (2003) "It doesn't happen to disabled children" Child protection and disabled children. Report of the National Working Group on Child Protection and Disability. London: NSPCC

- A lack of appropriate or poorly co-ordinated support services can leave disabled children and their families unsupported and physically and socially isolated. Isolation is widely recognised to be a risk factor for abuse.
- Negative attitudes mean that disabled children are often especially vulnerable to bullying and intimidation and can be more vulnerable than other children to abuse by their peers.
- There is often little effective sex education or safety and awareness work with disabled children.

For many children who are severely disabled, having a means of communication with the adults around them is one of the most important protections from abuse. However, disabled children often lack access to the assistance they need with communication. Communication systems also sometimes lack the language necessary to disclose abuse. Since the ending of the Communication Aids Project, which funded communication equipment, a scarcity of communication aids and the training and support needed to use them severely exacerbates the vulnerability of children and adults to abuse (as well as limiting their life chances).

All disabled children and young people placed away from home should also have access to an independent advocate. Advocates can help children to get across their views in whatever is the best way for them, to know their rights and to help them take part in decisions that affect their lives.

Children in custody

The Family and Parenting Institute was concerned at recent reports on the frequent use of 'distraction' techniques involving the deliberate infliction of pain. We hope that the current review into the use of restraint on young people in custody will improve protection for these young people.

Crime and anti-social behaviour

Children and young people are often victims of crime and anti-social behaviour, and it is important to them to feel safe in their neighbourhoods. It is essential, however, that interventions are evidence-based, actively supporting any young people involved to change their behaviour and not simply shifting the problem to a different area or penalising young people indiscriminately. One development we are particularly concerned about is the availability of a device that emits a high-pitched frequency sound to drive away teenagers from any area. The company's website claims that over 3,500 units have been sold across the UK¹⁴ with no apparent restriction on their use nor analysis of the impact on babies and young children in the vicinity.

4. Responding when children and young people have been harmed

There is a need for appropriate therapeutic services which are available in a timely way to address the needs of children recovering from traumatic experiences including maltreatment, neglect or the effects of dysfunctional family relationships.

Claire James, Policy Officer
Family and Parenting Institute

¹⁴ <http://www.mosquito-ni.com/news001.html>