

the good childhood

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a national inquiry



The  
Children's  
Society

## **The Good Childhood Inquiry**

**Family: a summary of themes emerging from the submissions  
of professionals**

Larissa Pople

## **Introduction**

The vast majority of the submissions that we received from professionals discussed the role of the family in bringing about a good childhood. A clear message from this evidence was that family relationships and resources play a central role in the way that childhood is experienced.

*“Parents, carers and family members have the greatest influence on a child's childhood.”*

Manny Lewis

## **Presentation of the evidence**

Professionals' evidence on this theme encompassed a wide range of topics concerning family life, and the relationships and resources that characterise children's experience of 'home'.

We look first at the evidence relating to how children should feel in the family environment e.g. loved, protected, valued, as well as the relationships between children and individual members of their families. This evidence takes in the quality of the parent-child relationship in particular, the family environment in general and parenting styles. It also considers networks of support that lie outside of the nuclear family, such as the extended family, community, state and society.

Next we present the evidence that looks at the other important family relationships that impact upon children, especially the parental relationship.

And finally, we turn to the resources that are at the family's disposal such as time together and material resources.

## **The parent-child relationship**

A large quantity of evidence from professionals relates to the quality of the relationship between children and their parents or carers, the particular way that children are brought up and how these things contribute to their well-being. Professionals emphasised the importance of children's relationships with their family, emphasising that from birth children are social beings and are heavily influenced by the people around them.

Their comments fell into a number of different categories:

- the importance of children feeling loved, cared for and wanted by their parents
- the need for support and affirmation to build children's self-esteem and character
- the family environment in general and the values that underpin it
- different parenting styles and approaches
- the need for education and support for parents

## **Warmth and love**

There was general agreement amongst the submissions that a parent should be loving, warm and affectionate. Love is the element that was held up above all others as being the most important. It was felt that to have a good childhood, a child should feel loved, valued, wanted and special.

*“An unconditional offering of love and acceptance given to the child of itself, not because of what it does.”*

Teens in Crisis

One submission discussed the role that love plays in the development of a young child's brain.

*“The child who is nurtured and loved develops the neural networks which mediate empathy, compassion and the capacity to form healthy*

*relationships... [If a child is not] loved he will be incapable of loving others.*

Graham Allen MP

The submissions described various features of a loving relationship, including care and nurture, commitment, concern and interest.

*“Having parents who, irrespective of their income or environment have a (united) desire to care for their children in the best way possible, seeing themselves as responsible for that care and demonstrating that commitment with a sense of love and respect for the child”*

### **Support and affirmation**

Much of the evidence emphasised a child’s need to be supported, encouraged and praised.

*“A good childhood means [...] being invited into a family and a community who delights in you and encourages you.”*

Professor Susie Orbach

Associated qualities that were held up as being vital in a parent include understanding, tolerance, acceptance and patience.

Resilience was another emotional resource felt to be invaluable in helping children through difficult times. Professionals underlined the importance of strong close relationships that build children’s sense of their own value and help them develop resilience.

*“A good childhood, for all children, may mean an entitlement to develop resilience in order to confront the risks we all face, although those living in poverty face more extensive and more pervasive risks.”*

Professor Pat Broadhead and Gary Walker, Centre for Research into Childhood

Respect and trust were other qualities highlighted by professionals as contributing to the child feeling significant, equal and listened to.

Closely linked to these ideas was the question of children's participation in decisions about their upbringing. A number of professionals emphasised the importance of parents engaging and communicating with their children and listening to what they have to say. It was argued that children need to feel competent and autonomous, and able to choose their own behaviour within reasonable limits.

*"There is an African proverb which says: 'It takes a whole village to raise a child' [...] I would add that it should also include the child him or herself as a key member of that 'village'."*

Philip Waters, the Eden project

*"A cultural shift is needed, which will facilitate a move towards much greater awareness and understanding of the potential, and right, of children to be active agents in their own upbringing, and in legislation and policy that determines or flavours their experiences of growing up."*

Professor Pat Broadhead and Gary Walker, Centre for Research into Childhood

### **Safety and security**

A large number of submissions stressed the importance of children living in an environment that is safe and secure in both the physical and emotional sense.

*"A good childhood requires a degree of safety and security. Worries about whether one will eat tomorrow, have a roof over one's head or be assaulted clearly interfere with optimal well-being."*

Dr Sam Thompson, the new economics foundation

*"Freedom to be in secure and continuous emotional relationships"*

Professor Kevin Brehony, Roehampton University

Linked to the idea of security was the need for consistency and stability, both of care and of the physical environment so that children can be comfortable and confident in their surroundings.

*“There needs to be stability – of the main carer, but also by staying in one place long enough so that children can learn and grow and not be distracted by uncertainty and inconsistency. Children need to have a consistent adult who can be trusted and give love.”*

The Fostering Network

### **The values of the family**

Professionals talked much about the values held by parents in comments that cut across the themes of ‘Family’ and ‘Values’.

One theme was that parents should take a more active role in instilling moral values in their children.

*“Parents need to take more responsibility for the nurture, education and morality of their children. It is too easy to abdicate this to schools and other agencies.”*

Baptist Union of Great Britain

Another theme was individualism, and the impact of a selfish society on children. Individualism and selfishness, which were contrasted with the desirable values of sacrifice and selflessness, were felt to be influential modern-day values shaping the family environment.

*“The contemporary process of what is known as ‘individualization’ [...] it is a process marked by the pursuit of ‘the self’, often in ways that damage others – and children are the main casualties of, for example, rising divorce rates, cohabitation, lone parenthood, dual income households where one partner commutes long distances, ever longer working hours for parents, and so on.”*

Professor Harry Hendrick, University of Southern Denmark

*“If individual self-realisation is the goal of life, relationships are seen as enabling this, rather than as of value in themselves. Expectations of others, even the closest others, are of self-affirmation, not mutuality. Hence partners are too readily seen as disappointing, and children have unrealistic expectations of themselves, each other and their parents.*

Professor Bill Jordan, Plymouth, Huddersfield and London Metropolitan Universities

Materialism, consumerism and the consequences of an increasingly individualised society were seen as placing particular stresses on parents.

*“A major issue in recent years is that as British society has become more individualised, there has also been a greater emphasis upon autonomy, competition and, more recently, ‘consumerism’. These put a particular stress and responsibility upon adults and parents in particular, both in relation to themselves but also in relation to their hopes, fears and expectations for their children.”*

Professor Nigel Parton, Centre for Applied Childhood Studies

The pressures on families with lower incomes to be on a par with others, was of particular concern.

*“Pressures to attain social status and provide possessions such as designer clothes makes heavy demands on families in terms of work and earning. Single parents may struggle to work and care for children and provide expensive consumer goods”*

Professor Leon Polnay

## **A harmful family environment**

The environment that children grow up in was felt to have a lasting impact on their capacities, expectations and relationships. As shown in the comments so far, the ideal family environment was seen as being warm, supportive and

enabling. However, professionals pointed out that for some children the family environment is violent, abusive or neglectful. Various submissions discussed the effects of abuse, neglect and violence on a child, including the impact on the development of the brain and the increased likelihood of the child experiencing mental health problems.

*“Over the years work has demonstrated the devastating impact of early childhood neglect. Neglect in early childhood literally alters the physical (and functional) development of the brain.”*

Graham Allen MP

*“High levels of conflict, volatile and hostile family relationships and inconsistent and erratic discipline, including violent punishment, pose particular risks. Physical and sexual abuse, and a lack of emotional warmth are all key risk factors for children developing mental health problems. Lack of parental care, neglect and failure to adapt to a child’s changing needs place children at higher risk of depression and/or conduct disorder.”*

Mental Health Foundation

Domestic violence, even when it is not directed at the child, can also produce a number of harmful effects on children’s development as well as their physical and mental health. Refuge pointed to research that shows that half of domestic violence occurs in homes where there are children.<sup>1</sup> In these homes, 90 per cent of incidents involving domestic violence occurs with children in the same or next room.<sup>2</sup> They also highlighted the overlap between men’s violence towards women and the physical abuse of children that is estimated to be in the range of 30-66 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Domestic violence is a feature in the lives of three quarters of children on the child protection register.<sup>4</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Mirrlees-Black, C (1999) ‘Domestic Violence: Findings from a new British Crime Survey self-completion questionnaire’

<sup>2</sup> Hughes (1992) cited in LGA (2006) ‘Vision for Children and Young People affected by Domestic Violence’

<sup>3</sup> Edleson (1999) cited in LGA (2006) ‘Vision for Children and Young People affected by Domestic Violence’

<sup>4</sup> Department of Health (2002) ‘Into the Mainstream’

*“A code of practice is needed to bridge the policy gap between the domestic violence and the child policy agendas.”*

Refuge

A number of submissions were concerned with the particular issue of corporal punishment and the legal and societal tolerance of assault when it is directed from parent to child. Professionals observed that in this regard children and young people are perceived to be the private property of their parents. Professor Pat Broadhead and Gary Walker of the Centre for Research into Childhood asked:

*“Why are children allowed to be hit by a parent, while the same level of aggression by that same parent against any adult could invoke police intervention?”*

### **Parental health**

The physical and mental health of parents - and the related issue of parental misuse of alcohol and drugs - were felt to exert an important influence on children’s well-being. One submission pointed out that it is not possible to separate the needs of adults and the needs of children since parental and child well-being are so closely linked.

*“to put it simply, as they used to say, and perhaps sometimes still do: ‘a happy mother [or parent/carer] makes for a happy baby’”.*

Dr Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, Centre for International Research on Childhood: Literature, Culture and Media

Parental ill-health may lead to a stressful family environment, and also to the child taking on caring responsibilities, which were both seen as significant obstacles to a good childhood.

*“Children whose parents have a history of mental health problems, substance misuse or contact with the criminal justice system for*

*example, or who are violent and abusive are at greater risk of developing mental health problems themselves.”*

Mental Health Foundation

## **Parenting**

The basic argument about parenting that threads through professionals' submissions is that the parental role and influence is of huge significance to children, that parents face great challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities, and that support and education is needed to help them. This is particularly the case when good parenting skills have not been passed on from one generation to the next.

*“Parents should not under-estimate the influence they have on their children [...] Consistently young people say that parents have the most influence on them, although parents tend to believe that it is peer pressure.”*

Hope UK

*“parents and carers want to do the best they can for their children but tell us about often overwhelming problems and feelings of isolation and helplessness as they struggle to carry this out. Bringing up children is the most challenging and rewarding thing parents do.”*

Family Policy Alliance

## **Parenting styles**

There was a degree of consensus about the style of parenting that provides a safe, enabling environment for children. Key components include a parent's authority and confidence, clear boundaries, expectations and guidelines for behaviour, and a good dose of freedom and independence.

Many submissions addressed the role of parental authority and confidence in providing a safe environment for children. A lack of parental authority was felt to have an unsettling impact on children.

*“Children receive the message that they are uncontrollable and the bully of the family. That is a miserable place for a child to be, and many teenagers today will openly agree.”*

*“Find a way to give parents the confidence to raise their own children without having to be monitored and/or punished.”*

Gina Langlely, St Joseph's Hospice

However, it was observed that the exercise of parental authority has changed over time with traditional methods of disciplining children, such as physical punishment, no longer being acceptable. This was felt to leave some parents uncertain about how to manage their children's behaviour.

*“Now many parents find it difficult to manage discipline when their own experience was discipline by physical punishment. Current methods advocated including time out principles have not been taught to today's parent either by direct teaching or by example.*

Professor Leon Polnay

However, a number of academics questioned whether there has been a shift in the balance of power between parents and their children.

*“I disagree with the view which is occasionally found in the new social studies of childhood writings that post modern families are witnessing the emergence of more democratically negotiated relationships. I know of no empirical evidence that supports this thesis.*

Professor Harry Hendrick, University of Southern Denmark

There was a great deal of agreement about the importance of setting expectations for behaviour and talking to children about the rewards and consequences linked with observing these.

*“cause and effect emphasis by parents, i.e. using consequences so that children have to learn a responsibility to receive a reward etc.”*

Dr Greta Sykes, Institute of Education, University of London

It was also felt that children should be involved in setting those boundaries.

*“Set boundaries are vital, but they need to be fair, to allow children to express their feelings.”*

Ann Lilly, Relateen

Although expectations for behaviour were seen as important, there was a note of caution about overly high expectations for learning and achievement.

*“The adult world has increasingly placed ever and ever higher expectations on children [including the speed of learning to walk and read, of kicking balls, playing musical instruments etc] implicit in these too often high expectations is a sense that if these high expectations have not been reached then the child has failed. This is an enormous pressure - failing or rather feeling that you have failed your parents or significant adults is a burden.”*

National Pyramid Trust (now within ContinYou)

There was also general agreement that a positive style of parenting enables children to experience freedom and independence within a protective environment. The question of risk, freedom and protection is a cross-cutting theme that was articulated strongly in the evidence, which we look at in more detail in relation to the Lifestyle theme.

A number of submissions pointed to the value of children being brought up in a stimulating environment, where talking and reading and doing things as a family are encouraged. Communication was seen as particularly important when children are very young.

*“The quality and experience of childhood is profoundly affected by having parents and carers who communicate well with their babies from birth [...] Learning to use language is a complex process, and the*

*more adults communicate with infants, the more they enable them to develop their talking, listening and concentration skills. Speaking, listening, sharing books, singing songs, and playing with children all need to be encouraged.”*

National Literacy Trust

*“The child who is spoken to will develop speech and language neural systems.”*

Graham Allen MP

The cognitive and emotional benefits of reading to young children were also emphasised:

*“Reading to pre-school children also has considerable cognitive and emotional benefits, as well as promoting literacy. Books for babies (launched by the charity Bookstart ) and similar pre-school initiatives to support parental reading to very young children should be strongly supported by health and social care.”*

Mental Health Foundation

### **Obstacles to good parenting**

Professionals felt that one of the key obstacles to a good childhood was when parents passed on their poor experiences of parenting to their own children. A number of submissions pointed to the particular challenges facing young parents who have had an unsupported childhood.

*“Support from adults who have themselves had a good childhood is essential. Though this creates a circular definition, it is a truth that good experiences in this generation's childhood will be repeated in the next, just as surely as will bad experiences.”*

Graham Bullivant

Respondents discussed a variety of bad experiences of parenting that might be transmitted from one generation to the next, including abuse and neglect, poor examples for behaviour, and negative parenting styles.

*“In my 20+ years as a midwife and health visitor I have seen too many parents without the “tools” in their tool box for meeting hardship and coping or in some cases for basic parenting, as they have never experienced being parented themselves and had to learn to fend for themselves at too early an age.”*

One view about how to counteract the transmission of poor parenting is to provide therapeutic support to parents to address their own psychological difficulties, perhaps at the point of ante-natal care. Parents in need of this sort of support could be identified through routine checks on mental health, in the way that physical health is checked.

*“Small group therapy [to iron out some of the deep and difficult conflicts that people find so debilitating]. The main beneficiary being the family and then society at large. The parents would no longer feel compelled to re-enact the conflicts of their own childhood with the children in their family.*

Tracy Joynes, Hope Alive Counselling Association

The Association for Family Therapy advocated using a family therapy approach that uses children’s close relationships within and beyond the family as a resource, building family understandings and strengths, rather than working with a child in isolation and then returning them to a relational environment that may fuel the problem.

One example of good practice cited by the Association for Family Therapy is REFRAME, a Conduct Disorder Outreach Team in Newham, which works with 5-11 year old children and their families at risk of social & educational exclusion. The team is staffed mainly by systemic family therapists with the

additional input of clinical & educational psychology.

*“The team has found that parenting programmes alone will not impact children from families where there are severe/persistent/complex problems and that these children/families need systemic multi-disciplinary input (ie parenting and family therapy and educational approaches) with intensive work involving the complex social and professional networks in which they are embedded.”*

Association for Family Therapy

### **Parenting education and support**

Professionals highlighted the importance of providing support and education for parents, and pointed out that people need to learn how to be a good parent, particularly when they haven't acquired the skills from their own family. It was felt that parenting education should provide an understanding how children develop and what they need emotionally and psychologically.

Many were of the opinion that attitudes need to shift in the way that parenting is valued and supported, and that parenting education and support should be available to all.

*“The fact that poor quality relationships within the home during childhood are predictive of poor mental and physical health suggests a strong case for universal provision to support parenting. This is cost effective and should be made available to parents for children of all ages.”*

Mental Health Foundation

*“Teach parenting at universities and create a general attitude towards understanding that parenting is Not a private affair, but of enormous public concern. Pay parents for parenting, according to the learning they have completed.”*

Dr Greta Sykes, Institute of Education, University of London

There were different suggestions about when and where parenting education might be delivered, including at school, university, within the community and through antenatal care.

*“We believe that a range of approaches delivered via primary care, the community and voluntary sector and childcare services would be the most useful ways of providing this kind of [parenting] support to parents. This might include group-based parenting programmes, community based day care combined with home visits for first time mothers.”*

Mental Health Foundation

*“Parenting education classes, with an emphasis on the importance of children's emotional / relationship needs, made freely available to both parents, particularly during the pre and post natal periods.”*

What about the Children?

A number of submissions proposed that a financial incentive could be provided to those that attend parenting education.

*“Parents being given additional child benefit as a reward for attending parenting groups.”*

Family Links

Others suggested that parenting education should not just be freely available but compulsory.

*“Compulsory parenting courses, maybe as part of antenatal care.”*

There was a shared belief that parenting education works.

*“There is very good evidence that targeted intervention [preparation for the role of parenthood], preferably starting in the antenatal period and*

*covering the first two years of life, provided by trained staff and fairly intensively improves long term outcomes.”*

Professor Leon Polnay

However, caution was expressed about the difficulties of providing parenting education programmes on a large scale, and the level of time, resources and commitment that this would entail.

*“There are no programs which can be 'rolled out' within a politician's or media-person's attention-span. So the same is going to be true, multiplied, to create a 'good parenting' programme nationwide, which could be the basis of the recovery of good childhood, at least for the 20% who are significantly disturbed and the 10% who need treatment.”*

Stephen Blunden, Childhood First

### **Support services**

In addition to the provision of parenting support and education for all, many of the submissions discussed the complex and diverse challenges that face some families. For these families, support services that are tailored to their individual needs were felt to be key.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance pointed out that policy-makers and professionals often take a one-dimensional view of parents.

*“a narrow definition fails to take into account that parents reflect a huge diversity of classes, ethnic backgrounds, family scenarios and levels of achievement. If they are to be truly universal, services for parents need to stop being 'one size fits all' and diversify to better meet the needs of all kinds of families across the country.”*

Education and support services could be provided to families, whatever their situation. One submission stressed the importance of providing parenting education to parents in prison.

Professionals emphasised the value of early support and pointed out that interventions often come after crisis point has been reached.

*“Too often now, such services only become available when matters have reached a crisis point with the consequence that any intervention is costly and the problems sometimes intractable. [...] Families also tell us that time and again when they were looking for advice, support and assistance they were turned away until the challenges overwhelmed them to the point of placing their children at risk. In the vast majority of cases, such risks are avoidable if supportive services are provided much earlier when they are requested.”*

Family Policy Alliance

The Association for Family Therapy stressed that when a child experiencing problems is viewed in the context of his or her family, the importance of working with the significant people in the child's life, as well as the child, becomes clear. Family therapy takes such an approach, in contrast to some interventions that may see family members as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

*“Evidence for the effectiveness of interventions that acknowledge and work with children's relationships is compelling and growing fast.<sup>5</sup> Working with families encountering serious difficulties, rather than solely with the child or young person deemed to have ‘the problem’, is proving effective across an extraordinarily wide range of problems”*

Association for Family Therapy

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<sup>5</sup> Stratton (2009, in press). Report on the Evidence Base for Family Therapy, 2nd edition. Academic and Research Committee of the Association for Family Therapy. [www.aft.org.uk](http://www.aft.org.uk)  
Also see NICE guidance on Schizophrenia (2002), Depression in children and young people (2005), Eating disorders (2004), Bipolar disorder (2006) and Obsessive-compulsive disorder (2006)

## **Attitudes to parenting**

One of the barriers that prevents parents from accessing support services was felt to lie in cultural attitudes that perceive seeking such services as failure. There was a feeling that society displays an ambivalence to parental competence, that is not dissimilar to its view of children.

*“On the one hand the culture is fiercely protective of parental autonomy in the upbringing of children and seeks to minimize the role of the state. Yet parents are also too often castigated by the media and professionals for not doing enough to help their children flourish.”*

The Pre-school Learning Alliance

Many called for a change in attitudes about the nature of parenting and an acceptance that asking for help is a positive and a right.

*“There needs to be cultural change where parenting support services are universal, easily accessible and socially acceptable.”*

The Pre-school Learning Alliance

*“Families tell us time and again that constructive rather than punitive responses to support parents, which do not blame and stigmatise, are much more effective.”*

Family Policy Alliance

Such a culture change would need to promote the status and importance of parenting.

## **Wider support for families**

Traditionally families have found support in the extended family, neighbourhood and community, and professionals emphasised that these can provide a valuable source of support in collectively looking out for, and watching over, children and young people.

However, increasingly this source of support is disappearing leaving individual families more and more isolated, as described by the Pre-School Learning Alliance:

*“In the past an extended family or close friendships might have filled gaps, but, increasingly, social factors such as geographical mobility/migration and a breakdown in local communities are creating increasingly isolated groups of parents who feel like they have nowhere to go to seek help. This isolation and anxiety is particularly problematic for parents that are socially marginalized (lone-parents, asylum-seeking parents, low-income parents), parents of children with special and/or additional needs and impairments and for parents that are from black and minority ethnic groups or with limited English language skills.”*

Many saw the strengthening of “communities of care” and networks of support as an important change that could be made. These might include “*extended family, neighbours, friends, school staff, youth workers, faith groups and, occasionally, family support professionals.*” (Association for Family Therapy)

### **State support for families**

A number of submissions discussed the different financial and legislative ways in which the State could provide support for parents, including tax allowances and benefits.

*“Tax measures which [...] give flexibility to families with young children where one parent wants to take some time out from work, such as transferable tax allowances. [...] Realistic financial support to be paid to all families for at least three years after each birth in place of all subsidies for childcare.”*

What About the Children?

## **Parental relationships**

A number of submissions focused on the quality of relationships around the child, and particularly but not exclusively the relationships between parents or carers. Generally, these argued for healthy and committed adult relationships, which provide emotional stability to the family environment and a good example to the children.

Amongst these submissions, there was some consensus that in an ideal situation, the child would be cared for by both parents. There was much discussion of how a child is affected by the loss of one or both of parents through bereavement, divorce and separation.

Family stability was also discussed, with emphasis placed on the importance of receiving consistent love and care from parents and carers.

*“Family instability is perhaps the biggest obstacle for a good childhood. The actual make-up of the family unit is less important than the stability of that unit. “*

Jayne Kirkham, Youth Activity Worker and Writer

*“Many more children now group up in families where there is separation of parents. This is not, per se, a negative but children benefit from security and emotional stability and, ideally, ongoing love of parents. Others grow up with a range of adult males entering and leaving their lives.”*

CfBT Education Trust

Many stressed that losing a parent through divorce and separation can cause children to feel confused, sad or abandoned.

*“With the advent of the single parent family, children have to witness a constant succession of new mums and dads, to their utter bewilderment, and in some cases, experiencing grief akin to*

*bereavement when a beloved parent, whether mother or father, has had to leave due to mum/dad finding another partner.”*

Frances Delaney, former councillor, North Lincolnshire Council

*“A never existed parent, abandoning parent encourages the child to feel she or he is not good enough for a parent to choose to stay with him or her.”*

Yonca Jewitt, WHCM Counselling

One view was that the child has a right to know his or her family.

*“Children have the right to be brought up by and to know their parents; where parents are separated children should be able to have contact with both parents unless it is not safe to do so; where this is contrary to their best interest, then family and friends should be the first option of choice”*

Family Policy Alliance

The Mental Health Foundation pointed to research showing that parental separation and divorce are risk factors for children’s mental health, and that the prevalence of mental health problems is twice as great amongst children in lone parent families (16%) compared with two parent families (8%). In reconstituted families 15% of children experience mental health problems, compared with 9% of those in families with no step-children.

The particular role of fathers, and the potential benefits of their greater involvement in family life, was considered in a number of submissions.

*“Approaches that acknowledge fathers as a relational resource, and which support and nurture healthy family relationships, are an important element of preventative services in the early years.”*

Association for Family Therapy

*“Although there is evidence that some fathers are able to spend more quality time with their children, work demands and the hours worked by many adults, means that that there is less direct access to, and oversight from, parents, especially the male.”*

CfBT Education Trust

Although there was agreement in the submissions that ideally both parents would be involved in the care of the child, there were different views about how to mediate the difference between this ideal and reality.

One view supported traditional values such as marriage, and argued for the State, society and religious institutions to provide incentives and support for marriage. This perspective called for more investment of care and resources into marriage and family life.

*“Opportunities for couples to learn about relationship development before marriage, parenting courses, and care for couples when they are facing strains and difficulties, these would all help enhance marriage and family life and therefore a good childhood as well.”*

Anthony Priddis, Bishop of Hereford

*“Support for marriage through the provision of state funded variable value vouchers for marriage preparation, couple relationship growth, and family conferencing”*

Nick Gulliford, talk2me.org.uk

An alternative view took a more pragmatic perspective, arguing that while having both parents is important, other things, such as a loving family and positive parenting, are more important

*“Two parents ARE the ideal and always will be the ideal, but I work with a good many two parent families where the quality of parenting is appalling and the child's experience of life extremely grim. Likewise I work with single parents of both sexes who's parenting is excellent and*

*they are raising happy, well balanced children. The magic is not simply in pushing two parents into a house.”*

*“Marriage breakdown is at best unsettling and at worst traumatic for children. However, in the past children will have suffered in other ways when their parents felt trapped by marriage, and when the family home may have been a hostile and argumentative environment throughout their childhood. So the fact that marriage breakdown is difficult for children [...] is an argument for more humane and less adversarial systems to surround divorce – all such systems should place the interests of any children ahead of those of either parent.”*

Association of School and College Leaders

Some respondents found the tendency to idealise the two-parent family unhelpful.

*“The reality is that children do not really have a choice about who their caretakers are [...] Given the complexity of family life and the various permutations that children live in, it would be more useful if institutions, the media and wider society could be 'educated' to be more sensitive to children's circumstances and therefore help them to feel that their situation is unique to them rather than stigmatising children who do not appear to conform to some illusionary 'norm'.”*

British Association of Social Workers

These submissions argued for a more inclusive approach to the concept of family so that is taken to mean any group of people who define themselves as such, who care about and care for each other.

A few professionals discussed the question of same-sex parenting and its impact on the well-being of the child. Here, as with the question of single-parent and two-parent families, opinions varied.

*“Good male-female pairings are crucial, around which other configurations may be understood and positively used by a child in forming his/her capacity to relate. Having said that, good same-sex pairings may be better than bad male-female pairings, or indeed than no parental pairing at all.”*

Stephen Blunden, *Childhood First*

*“gay and lesbian rights appear to be privileged above those of children when it comes to adoption - bearing in mind the controversial nature of such adoptions, to what extent are the children consulted and do they give their consent?”*

Professor Harry Hendrick, University of Southern Denmark

## **Family resources**

Professionals discussed the resources that are at the heart of family life, and the decisions that families make about these. Broadly speaking it was felt that there are two primary and often conflicting aims of family life: 1) to secure a level of material comfort and 2) to spend time together as a family.

In a circular relationship, it was pointed out that poverty, inequality, housing and social disadvantage provide obstacles to families enjoying material comfort, while the pursuit of material resources can compromise the amount of time that families spend together.

There was much discussion of the question of parental employment. The general message emerging from this evidence was that children need to spend more and better quality time as a family.

*“Yes children need ‘quality time’ but in huge quantities.”*

Jayne Kirkham, Youth Activity Worker and Writer

Professionals also emphasised that an important condition of a good childhood is an acceptable level of material comfort, such that a family’s basic needs for shelter, food and clothing are met. In addition, material comfort was felt to include being able to participate in a normal social life.

*“A prime condition [for a good childhood] is freedom from material want; the want that is concomitant with poverty and material deprivation.”*

Professor Kevin Brehony, Roehampton University

The issue of housing was raised by a number of professionals, in particular the need for provision and investment in good quality social housing.

*“Families need safe, secure housing in which they can live and children can develop into adults without being forced to occupy cramped, overcrowded conditions. Adequate housing means that children are*

*able to have their own private space where they can study and entertain friends. The housing also needs to have communal areas where the family can sit down and interact as a family for meals, leisure activities etc.”*

Housing Justice

### **Poverty and inequality**

Poverty, inequality and deprivation were felt to present a major obstacle to a good childhood. There was agreement that many of the most serious problems faced by children result from poverty and relative deprivation.

*“Poverty is the elephant in the sitting room of childhood, and too many children in this country are living a childhood constrained by this poverty. It is here that government policy should concentrate its efforts, because poverty is the biggest obstacle that our children face.”*

Professor David Wilson, Centre for Criminal Justice Policy and Research

*“Issues around inequality and poverty cannot be underestimated. While the incidence of childhood poverty has reduced somewhat over the last eight years, this is in the context of the tripling of child poverty between 1979 and 1997 [...] Increased equality and an increased ‘sense’ of equality are important for both life chances and also peer relationships.”*

Professor Nigel Parton, Centre for Applied Childhood Studies

Other aspects of a good childhood were felt to be contingent on the family not living in poverty.

*“It is possible to have stability and consistency, but if you have these things in conditions of poverty (whether absolute or relative), then surely the impact of this is serious and persistent.”*

Professor Pat Broadhead and Gary Walker, Centre for Research into Childhood

The relationship between poverty and a range of different outcomes for children were discussed including quality of life, educational achievement, life chances, mental health. “Cultures of poverty and disadvantage” were also associated with domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and teenage pregnancy.

*“Mental health problems are both a consequence and a cause of poverty and there are clear links between socio-economic inequalities and the erosion of emotional, spiritual and intellectual resources essential to well being: agency, trust, autonomy, self-acceptance, respect for others, hopefulness and resilience. Poverty and deprivation give rise to feelings of hopelessness, despair, frustration, anger and low self worth. This in turn affects relationships, the quality of care of children and how people care for themselves.”*

Mental Health Foundation

The Pre-school Learning Alliance cited research showing that children as young as 22 months and more clearly at 42 months have divergent developmental paths that are attributed to the family’s socio-economic status.<sup>6</sup> These differences are not entirely off-set by the schooling system.

Professor Richard Wilkinson’s work on the relationship between inequality and quality of life was also highlighted.

There was agreement that policies to eliminate the economic disparities between children are critical. One submission reflected on why the Government has been unsuccessful in eradicating child poverty.

*“One reason why this seemingly straightforward aim is difficult is that it would involve a huge change of mindset towards the welfare and*

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<sup>6</sup> Feinstein, L. (1998) ‘Pre-school Inequality? British Children in the 1970 Cohort’ in Centre for Economic Performance Discussion Papers No. 404 London, LSE: Centre for Economic Performance.

*benefits system regarding families. [...] The problem facing successive governments is how to raise the living standards of families [who, for whatever reason, are not in full-time paid employment] without provoking public outrage about perceived “layabouts” being “rewarded” for their inactivity and lack of contribution to society”*

Professor Pat Broadhead and Gary Walker, Centre for Research into Childhood

The links between child poverty and childcare policy also attracted a number of comments.

*“Improved childcare provision will be essential if the government is to meet its targets for child poverty and parent employment. The single most striking characteristic of the countries that have a low poverty rate and a high proportion of parents in paid work (such as Sweden) is the widespread availability of publicly funded childcare.”*

Daycare Trust

## **Employment**

Professionals talked about the various effects of parental employment on children’s lives, particularly when two parents work. Some were critical of the pressure that many parents feel to work as a result of financial necessity, cultural attitudes and Government policies.

*“A culture that values achievement in the workplace above achievement at home and a high cost of living that means parents nearly always need to work, often leaving children in substandard care arrangements.”*

Another pressure felt to be driving women’s decisions to go back to work after having children is that if they take time out from their careers *“they never get back on track”*.

Employers frequently came under fire, not least for the “long hours” and “atypical hours” working culture that was felt to set the UK apart from European neighbours and have a marked effect on the time that parents have available to spend with their children. According to data cited by the Relationships Foundation, average working hours in the UK are the longest in Europe after Austria (an average of 43 hours against a European average of just under 40 hours) . The UK Government was also described as the only one in Europe to allow every worker covered by the European Working Time Directive (that specifies a maximum working week of 48 hours) to opt-out of its provisions. Research into parents’ views showed that around 75% of workers do not work unsocial hours from choice and 47% of parents are unhappy with their work/home balance most of the time.

A number of changes to mitigate the negative impacts of parental employment were proposed, including best practice by employers, financial support from Government and family-friendly employment policies.

*“We think it is important that the Government seeks to create an environment and a culture, which helps and encourages [parents] to spend more time with their children. [...] This might be called ‘enlightened pragmatism’, as measures aimed at preventing social problems are of greater long-term benefit than the cost of picking up the pieces later on through the criminal justice system, crime and vandalism, abuse of drugs and alcohol and increase in mental health problems. [...] Parents should be given the right to ask not to work at certain unsocial hours, or, at least, if unsocial hours are required by the job, to request that they be limited.”*

The Relationships Foundation

A number of professionals also appealed for parental employment not to be framed as a women’s issue, and called for men to be given more flexibility to play a prominent role in their children’s lives.

*“Family-friendly employment policies are important in an era when most families feel the need for all adults to work. This should not be seen as a women’s issue – there is an urgent need to allow men more chance to contribute to family life (and to encourage and educate them to do so when necessary).”*

Association of School and College Leaders

## **Childcare**

Parental employment was linked closely to the question of childcare.

Professionals’ views on childcare were numerous and conflicting in their conclusions.

The critics argued that children are best cared for by their parents and that group childcare can harm the emotional development of children. These submissions tended to be critical of recent Government policies to promote the use of childcare, and proposed a rethink of policy.

*“leading authors and academics have [concerns] about the long term effects on babies of daily separation in the absence of an attachment figure, and how this experience affects the emotional, social and behavioural development of their brain and their future mental health”*

Sir Richard Bowlby, Centre for Child Mental Health

*“Separating children from their mothers too early, too frequently for long periods of time is a major cause of stress for the infants and this affects their developing brains and personalities in a number of negative ways unless the substitute care is of the very highest quality in terms of love and one to one attention.”*

What About the Children?

Sometimes a distinction was made between childcare for children under and over the age of three, and of the number of hours involved.

*“Even the most sensitive non-parental daycare is usually more stressful to babies and toddlers between 6 and 30 months, than home care with their primary attachment figure. However, having age appropriate amounts of daycare with a secondary attachment figure does not seem to constitute a significant long-term risk factor for either secure or insecure children. Seriously disadvantaged babies and toddlers may benefit from daycare with a sensitive secondary attachment figure.”*

Sir Richard Bowlby, Centre for Child Mental Health

*“The synaptic links between the neurons in the brain are mainly, though not exclusively, formed in the first three years of life. [...] After the age of 3, there are of course many positive benefits for children in nursery care, because they are sufficiently developed to make the most of the opportunities. Too many Press articles confuse these two pre-school age groups (over 3 and under 3) when reporting on the benefits, or otherwise, of early child care[.]”*

What About the Children?

Others took a more positive view, emphasising the importance of quality and consistency of care.

*“[The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education] research showed significant links between high quality provision and improved child outcomes. High quality was achieved by qualified staff, particularly the manager of the centre. In addition, considerable evidence shows that higher ratios of practitioners to children and small group sizes are associated with positive child development. High quality centres lead to children having less behavioural problems, and making better academic progress.”*

Daycare Trust

*“[Provision should be] of the right kind of high quality daycare which is sufficiently attuned to children's emotional development, that does not rely on workers who come for only a short time, but recruits those who*

*have been trained in child development so that they are aware of what the children are expressing and needing and can communicate with the parents and the children.”*

Professor Susie Orbach

It was also pointed out that good quality pre-school education has been shown to have positive effects for children from disadvantaged homes.

*“[The EPPE project showed that pre-school education] can help to reduce the effects of social disadvantage and can lead to improved outcomes at school, particularly for children at risk of developing special educational needs. EPPE found that children who start pre-school under the age of 3 years leads to better cognitive development and peer relationships.”*

Daycare Trust

The Commission for Racial Equality made a similar point, asserting that:

*“The early years of life offer the most important opportunity to intervene to prevent inequalities developing later in life. Early years interventions have been shown to lead to improved health, early development and readiness for school, better relationships between parents and children and improved social and emotional development<sup>7</sup>”*

However, the Commission for Racial Equality drew attention to the fact that some ethnic minority families are less likely to use formal childcare, particularly Pakistani and Black African families. They concluded that the barriers preventing some minority ethnic families from using these services need to be addressed if their children are to accrue the benefits that good quality early learning offers.

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<sup>7</sup> HM Government (2004) Department for Education and Skills: Five year strategy for children and learners. TSO

## **Cultural differences**

There was some discussion of the role that cultural differences play in differentiating children's experiences.

It was observed that many aspects of a good childhood are culturally specific and that one must be careful in making universal assumptions without considering different cultural contexts.

*"Definitions of supposedly 'key' terms (like 'stability' and 'supportive') may also have cultural nuances that aren't necessarily shared across cultural groups. One person's 'supportive' is another person's 'over-protective'."*

Professor Pat Broadhead and Gary Walker, Centre for Research into Childhood

One submission cautioned against displaying tolerance for cultural practices such as corporal punishment, authoritarianism and circumcision at the expense of children's welfare and happiness.

*"In none of these contexts are children asked for their views, nor are they given the right to refuse adult demands."*

Professor Harry Hendrick, University of Southern Denmark

## **Disability**

The particular experiences of disabled children and their families were discussed in detail. The charity Kids cited evidence showing that families with a disabled child are more likely to have experienced family breakdown than other families, placing more pressure on the caring parent. Families with a disabled child are also more likely to experience poverty and social exclusion.

*"Extended access to family support, to childcare payments which could also cover parents or other family members caring for their own children, workforce training opportunities, and more flexible working*

*conditions, could all be ways of supporting families with disabled children out of poverty.”*

Kids

*“Greater family support such as short breaks would enable disabled children to remain in the family home for longer, giving them chance to develop bonds with both their siblings and parents and giving them more stability.”*

The Children's Trust, Tadworth

Professionals also talked about the siblings of disabled children, and the importance giving them an equal amount of time and attention. Research cited by the Association for Family Therapy suggested that the siblings of disabled children who report the most behaviour difficulties are not those whose siblings' disability is most severe, but those whose brothers or sisters display aggressive, challenging behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Some have also been found to shield parents from further worry by keeping concerns to themselves or otherwise minimising or disguising their own distress.<sup>9</sup>

### **Looked after children**

A number of submissions underlined the importance of attending to the special needs of children who are not in the care of a family.

*“We know that children do not thrive in public care and need to experience family life.”*

Family Policy Alliance

*“Looked-after children have a higher incidence of mental health problems than other young people, including severe and enduring mental illness. 45% of children and young people aged 5-17 in the care system will have a mental health problem. However their mental health needs frequently go unnoticed.”*

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<sup>8</sup> Connors & Stalker, 2003

<sup>9</sup> Altschuler, 1997, Connors & Stalker, 2003; Sloper, 2000; Tozer, 1996

## Mental Health Foundation

Fostering was felt to be a crucial element of any strategy to improve looked after children's lives.

*“Foster carers are key players in improving the experience of childhood of many children and young people who become looked after. They can provide stability, consistency, boundaries, safety, and a loving home. They need to be recognised as professionals and be rewarded accordingly.”*

The Fostering Network