

A photograph of a man and two children playing in a snowy field. The man is on the left, wearing a dark jacket and trousers, smiling. The children are in the foreground, wearing winter coats and scarves, playing with a ball. The background shows trees and a bright sky.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Policy Briefing and Recommendations
of The Family Policy Alliance

October 2005

Introduction

This policy paper is written by the Family Policy Alliance, which comprises Family Rights Group, Family Welfare Association and Parentline Plus. It is informed by the views of parents and carers who use the services provided by our three organisations and by our consultations with other service providers.

The following recommendations are underpinned by a wide body of research which consistently concludes that a positive partnership with families is a core requirement for effective interventions to promote the well-being of vulnerable children. We believe that these recommendations are key to the government's objective of tackling child poverty and of delivering the five outcomes for children outlined in Every Child Matters.

Working with Families – Why it is Essential for Children's Well-being

How we bring up children shapes the future of our society. Parents, families, the community and the state have a shared responsibility to work in partnership in order to build secure foundations for this future. These foundations rest on the core evidence-based principle that children's welfare is best promoted in their family environment unless this would place the child at risk of significant harm.¹ Parents and families are therefore central to achieving positive outcomes for children. This applies not just where children are living safely at home with their families, but also where there are child protection issues:

- 88% of children on the child protection register live at home with their families. Thus to ignore the family is to overlook the key people who are responsible for the child's day to day care including implementation of the child protection plan.²
- Moreover there is a widespread body of research which shows that the key to the successful protection of children at risk of harm is a positive working partnership between the family and the local authority.³ As the official summary of a number of research studies on child protection carried out in

the 1990's stated: "A failure to achieve this level of co-operation helps to explain why some children remain safe at home when others do not".⁴

Drawing upon this research evidence, the principle and practice of partnership must be a central feature of any family support and child protection interventions. As the guidance on child protection states: "Parents know more about their family than any professional could possibly know, and well-founded decisions about a child should draw upon this knowledge and understanding."⁵



The Reality Gap

Despite the best endeavours of parents and families and the personal rewards of raising a child, parenting is not easy. As the Rt. Hon Margaret Hodge MP commented, when launching the Parenting Fund, in her role as the then Minister for Children, Young People and Families: "Everything we know confirms that the quality of parenting in the home is the key to enabling a child to fulfil their potential. Yet parenting is one of the most difficult jobs and there are times when any family may need extra support."⁶

Research by Ghate et al⁷ confirms that where practical and appropriate support services are delivered, and parents have some control of when and how they receive such support, then parenting skills are improved, benefiting both the parent and child.

Yet despite the laudable intent of much of current legislation, including the Children Acts 1989 and 2004, and the evidence that family support does benefit children, the reality is that many children and families in need do not receive even minimal support

and many have difficulties in accessing such services that are available. This is not just borne out by research,⁸ but is also evidenced through our respective advice and support work.

Every year, we collectively advise tens of thousands of parents, carers and family members who are desperately in need of assistance to help them raise their children. Their recurrent story is that they have to battle for months, if not years, trying to highlight to service providers that something is wrong or that they need help for their child, often to no avail.

Examples from our work include parents who have:

- Diagnosed mental illness and receive psychiatric support but are unable to access any help with their parenting in spite of their children having behavioural difficulties at school.
- Children who have been excluded from school and have an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) banning them from being on the streets of their neighbourhood but the only parenting support offered means the parent would have to leave the house and so leave their children unsupervised. No support is available for the children.
- Been given anti-depressants to help them cope with their own unhappiness about the level of family conflict at home but no services have been offered to them or to their children to help them with family difficulties that resulted from domestic violence and subsequent family breakdown.

- Had to flee domestic violence with their children in the clothes they had on and nothing else, unable to access funds for essentials, such as basic furniture.
- To wait nine months for their children, who are affected by witnessing domestic violence, to see child mental health services.

The frequent experience of families in need is that:

- They are not even able to get an accurate assessment of their children's needs, such is the high threshold.
- There simply are not the resources or services available to provide that support the child needs, until the family situation has reached such a crisis that there is a child protection investigation. This practice was specifically disapproved of by the government in 1995⁹, yet has persisted.

Thus, whilst government policy constantly reiterates the importance of supporting families, the reality is that services are frequently not available until the family circumstances have reached crisis point or the child's behaviour is so extreme that it has led to punitive interventions through the criminal justice system.

The sad irony of course is that this systematic neglect by the state to identify and address children's needs when problems first become apparent, sometimes results in the child's unnecessary removal from their family into state care at a much greater financial and social cost to the children concerned, their families and ultimately to society.

Preventive services are a real investment offering savings - of human misery as well as a saving on the high costs of putting children into the state system.

Inhibitors and Tensions

Whilst official policy on family support and child protection clearly requires statutory services to strengthen the family's capacity to promote the well-being of their children, the reality for families can be very different.

There are four key reasons for this disjunction between policy intent and practice:

- competition for resources
- social and economic inhibitors
- philosophical tensions within government and
- scarcity of trained, skilled, and experienced social care practitioners

i Competition for resources

Resourcing a wide range of both formal and informal family support is the key to the successful implementation of the government's aim to promote the well-being of children.

Aldgate and Statham's overview of studies considering the aims of the Children Act 1989 concluded that although the principles of the Act were sound, its implementation had been significantly affected by 'a climate of intense competition for resources for public welfare services'. This has inevitably resulted in the threshold for receiving support from the statutory sector being set high. At the same time, the voluntary sector had also experienced the constraints and impact of changes in government policies for funding.¹⁰

The local Sure Start initiative stands out because it is the first time a government has invested in a major programme focused upon supporting families in order to improve outcomes for vulnerable children. Yet this initiative is limited to small geographic localities, and even with this injection of investment, in the

main family support services remain the Cinderella service.

The recent Children's Centre programme undoubtedly brings with it significant opportunities. However, it also raises serious questions about future funding for family support. The most immediate concern is that if responsibility for local children's centres rests clearly with local authorities, it will be very tempting for cash-strapped statutory providers to shift the resources that have been invested away from local voluntary-run community-based preventive and early interventionist services, to meet the needs of that smaller group of children for whom they already have a statutory responsibility.

ii Socio-economic inhibitors

The issue of what impacts on outcomes for children are complex and many families struggle with economic and social factors beyond their control such as poor health, lack of adequate housing, economic constraints, discrimination and isolation.¹¹

"We live in a damp house and it is too small for our family but we can't get moved. Our three kids have to share a bedroom and the baby has to sleep with us. The kids all get constant colds and coughs and all need inhalers for their asthma. We can't afford school trips and school uniforms are always a problem. There's nowhere quiet for them to do their homework so the older ones have to go to the homework club after school – I'm glad it's there, but I'd rather help them with their homework at home."

The Family Welfare Association's grants scheme shows that charities are having to fund essential items such as beds

and carpets because of such poor material standards and the impact that parents know this has on their children's achievements at school and in life.

The government's expressed objective to halve child poverty by 2010 and to abolish it within a generation therefore forms both a very welcome and necessary dimension to addressing the key inhibitor of effective parenting. In the meantime however, such factors will at times lessen and even undermine the impact of individual policy initiatives aimed at promoting effective parenting.¹²

iii Tensions

a) Rights, Responsibilities and Respect

Parents want the state to assist them to make a success of the complex role of parenting, without being prescriptive, intrusive or unfairly punitive. Yet the state's supportive role at times sits uncomfortably with the desire by the state to regulate the behaviour of parents and children.

Within government there is a philosophical tension as to what constitutes effective regulation and intervention. On one hand policy announcements are made and initiatives launched that recognise the complexities and support required to raise children, particularly those in need. On the other hand statements are simultaneously made criticising families for their inadequacy or unwillingness to address children's inappropriate behaviour. This use of pejorative rhetoric and the threat of sanctions makes no allowance for human frailties, can be counterproductive in deterring

parents from asking for help and moreover ignores the frustrating reality for many parents that as their children grow older, their influence wanes whilst that of their children's peers and external influences significantly increases. Most importantly of all, it fails to acknowledge the negative contribution that the state's own failings may have had upon the family and the parents' capacity to address the child's behaviour.

Parents and families do have responsibilities to their children to:

- Provide love, care, attention and encouragement for their children to enable them to thrive, including physically and emotionally.
- Teach the children a sense of values and enable the child to have a clear sense of their own identity, race and culture.
- Listen to their children and make informed decisions to promote each child's health and education and overall well-being.
- Provide materially and financially for their children, accessing state support if necessary.
- Enable and support their children to take appropriate

responsibility for their lives and individual decisions as they grow older.

Similarly the state has a responsibility to parents, to sufficiently respect the importance of their role, that when parents need assistance or help, they are listened to and supported, rather than vilified. Where should blame, after all, be apportioned when a child's criminal behaviour escalates: if the parents have been asking for help for years to no avail; if there is a six month waiting list for the child to attend a drug treatment programme and there aren't adequate mental health services for the mother; or is blame not helpful in this instance?

In our experience, parents do accept their responsibilities – and sometimes they want help to achieve some of these.

b) Short term pressures vis a vis long term fixes

There are continual pressures on government, at local and national level, to demonstrate the immediate beneficial impact of investment in new services for children and families. This

is particularly true if the service is perceived as innovative or risk taking. Yet attempting to judge preventive and early interventionist services in this manner, may well be counter-productive, since the very changes that such services are trying to affect, are often longer-term outcomes, such as employment and offending rates in adulthood, which by their nature cannot be measured in the short-term.

c) Local solutions versus national commitments

The initial local Sure Start programmes reflected an understanding by Ministers that voluntary and community organisations could reach families who were traditionally unable to access statutory services, not least because they involve local people in service design and delivery, and are sensitive to local requirements, needs and circumstances. Although some work better than others, the best offer well used, tailored, non-stigmatising family support services.

In some Sure Start areas, the FWA provides home based family support for very troubled and vulnerable families who do not access services for a variety of reason – including culture, language, mental health problems, or a chaotic home situation. This support is long term and empowering, providing both support, friendship, skills building and confidence growth.

FWA Well Family Service works alongside Health Visitors and GPs to provide family support to people who have difficulties and find it easier to seek help via the universal provision of the health service.

However, given the inevitable limitation on resources, this approach does not necessarily fit comfortably with the desire by the state to ensure

that all children, wherever they live have access to certain entitlements, such that no child gets left behind. An optimistic view of the potential mainstreaming of the Sure Start and Children's Fund agenda, is that public bodies will employ joint commissioning strategies, which focus on developing preventive services in partnership with parents, children and young people, to build upon existing best practice, replicating effective service models nationally. For this to happen will require effective commissioning models, that enable parent participation, and the full involvement of children, young people and the wider community. It is in everyone's interest for children to achieve the outcomes of Every Child Matters, and this means that considerable energy and enthusiasm can be harnessed at local level.

What Works in Terms of Effective Delivery of Family Support Services?

i What parents want

Family support is only effective if it is delivered in a way which is welcomed, rather than resented or avoided, by families. The parents and professionals whom we have consulted give us the same messages time and again. Effective family support depends on two factors:

- Parents need to be able to say what they need to support them to care for their children, and to be heard and respected.
- There needs to be clarity as to the respective roles of the parent and the professional to provide the basis for a mutually trusting working relationship between the parents and the agency which delivers support services.

Parents that we consulted, and those calling our helplines, also highlighted the current hoops they have to go through to find out what family support services are available to meet their child's needs and the lack of any published eligibility criteria locally. They also emphasised the importance of being able to access independent information, support and advice, particularly if the issues with which they needed help were sensitive or distressing or if they wished to challenge decisions being made by statutory bodies about themselves or their child.

Our findings are consistent with the general population studies on what works in family support services summarised by Quinton as:

'Parents wanted services

- *to treat them like adults*
- *as partners in problem solving*
- *to be practical and professional*
- *to take their needs seriously*
- *to be fast and responsive*'¹³

ii Requirements of the workforce

In order to achieve these aspirations, service providers told us that frontline practitioners need to:

- Be valued.
- Be trained - specifically to work with parents, families and children, and to work holistically with whole families in partnership.
- Have a sound knowledge of local resources.
- Be supported – by peers and through good quality, skilled supervision and consultation.
- Be properly remunerated to retain skills and expertise.

iii The community and voluntary sector

Our planning and review of services with parents tells us that families like the flexibility and 'lack of stigma' that voluntary sector services provide. Parents have welcomed group activities which have enabled them to meet with other parents and share solution finding in a less socially isolated way.

However, for the voluntary sector, a continuing barrier to developing a range of services is the uncertainty about access to funding. The Children's Fund and Sure Start enabled work to take place over at least three years. However, in the current climate, there is considerable uncertainty about new arrangements, and the need for commissioning and tendering – processes which are expensive, unfunded and uncertain.



Recommendations

Drawing on this range of evidence, we conclude that achieving the desired outcomes for children's well-being depends on effective support and preventive services for families in their child rearing tasks. In our view the following recommendations are therefore key to the government's objective of tackling child poverty and of delivering the five outcomes for children outlined in Every Child Matters.

i Policy

- Government and policy makers need to rationalise and clarify the cross-departmental commitment and value base for the development of family support services and policies, so as to achieve optimal outcomes for children, in partnership with families.
- Mothers, fathers and other relative carers need to have access to informal and formal services that reflect the differing requirements of

parents, children and young people. Critically, these need to be shaped and reviewed by parents, families, children and young people and be:

- useful and accessible
- non-stigmatising
- not dependent on a post-code lottery

ii Resources

Realistic and adequate resources must be made available for accessible and sustainable family support services, so that families can get appropriate support when they need it, addressing problems when they first emerge. Public services need to utilise the advantages of the community and voluntary sector through long term funding agreements to commission services. In addition to funding services that children and families need, resources must also be earmarked to train and support professionals and volunteers with the requisite skills to make a real difference to children and families' lives.

iii Assessment services for children in need.

There needs to be a statutory duty to assess a child's need for support services if their parent/ carer or another agency with which they are involved believes they are 'in need', as defined in Section 17 Children Act 1989.

The assessment process for services needs to be clear, and informed by the views of the child and their family. This may best be achieved by self assessment forms being developed for families to complete.

Families should be involved in all stages of the assessment, should have the opportunity to consider the result of the assessment and proposed plan for services for a child in need whilst it is in draft form – as they do in relation to special educational needs' statements.



One agency must have clear responsibility for completing and following through an assessment for services for a child in need, and the delivery of any services which are necessary to meet identified needs. A key worker should be allocated in the lead agency in order to ensure accountability, effective co-ordination and the efficient delivery of services. This is particularly important given the plethora of agencies which may be involved in the proposed *Common Assessment Framework*.

iv Advice support and information

That parents have access to independent accurate advice and to support which helps them in their parenting and in making representations about service entitlement and delivery. That to achieve this, government funds the further expansion of existing independent parenting support and advice helplines to provide an integrated national helpline, support, information, advice, signposting and referrals system for parents and carers. This will include making use of web based databases of local and specialist information.

There needs to be local, well publicised information and access points for families wishing to get an assessment or make a referral about their child.

Good quality information must be published by statutory services and made easily available to parents about entitlements and availability of local services, including the eligibility criteria for accessing specialist services.

Families need to have access to specialist advocacy support when their children are subject to child protection enquiries so that they are assisted and able to work in partnership with statutory bodies from a more informed position, in the interests of finding safe solutions for the child.

v Building on strengths and resources of the wider family

Before a local authority takes over decision making or care of a child because of child protection concerns, families should be given the opportunity to have a family group conference to enable the family to agree a plan which will promote and safeguard the child's welfare, and they should be supported through the implementation of the plan.

Relatives, such as grandparents, who are caring for children who cannot live with their parents are not only more impoverished than other carers, but lack of money and inappropriate accommodation prevents some loving and trusted kin from being able to bring up a child, who instead ends up in the care system. To redress this, they should be entitled to a new 'unsupported child' tax credit that reflects the cost of bringing up a child, so that poverty is not a factor that gets in the way of a child growing up with a relative who they know loves them, rather than ending up in the care system.

vi Organisational changes

Workforce reform of front-line staff, whilst essential, is not sufficient on its own. Senior managers must also be accountable for the quality of the service provided, and must take seriously their responsibility to train and supervise staff and volunteers, and when errors of judgement are made and systems fail they must be held accountable.

What is the Family Policy Alliance?

The Family Policy Alliance was formed in February 2004 by three leading family support organisations: Family Rights Group, Family Welfare Association and Parentline Plus. The purpose of the Alliance is to influence current policy debate about the role of the state to support families to care for their children safely.

The Alliance is supported by a wider group of voluntary organisations who have joined us in pressing for a refocusing of family support services to achieve the outcomes for children identified in the government's Green Paper 'Every Child Matters'.¹⁴

The Alliance aims to:

- Highlight the central connection between the well-being of children and the need for sustained support and investment in parents and family members.

- Promote the involvement of parents and families, as well as children, in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services.

- Focus attention on the benefits for children, their families and society of taking effective action to tackle discrimination and social exclusion.

This is an unprecedented opportunity to improve outcomes for children. There are five clear targets from Every Child Matters with a focus on prevention and structural changes to improve local planning. If we put parents centre stage for their children, enable them to participate in planning and delivering services, and provide them with support when they need it, we can make the difference for future generations of children and young people.

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