

SUBMISSION BY FAMILY POLICY ALLIANCE TO THE COMMISSION ON FAMILIES AND WELLBEING OF CHILDREN

It benefits all of society, its economy and its future to create a family friendly culture across all sectors of State involvement in family life to ensure that children can grow up able to achieve the five outcomes identified by the Government in its Green Paper and now incorporated into the Children Bill.

These are now familiar and are summarised as:

- being healthy
- staying safe
- enjoying can achieving
- making a positive contribution
- economic well- being

The Commission therefore provides a welcome opportunity to consider the shared role of the State, parents and families and service providers to achieve these outcomes for children and young people.

What is the Family Policy Alliance?

Family Policy Alliance was formed in February 2004, supported with funding from Nuffield, by three leading family support organisations which represent a wide range of parents and families using universal and targeted family support services. The three organisations are Family Rights Group, Family Welfare Association and Parentline Plus.

Through the Alliance the three partners want to influence the current policy debate and action on family support services and the role of the State to support families.

Our aims are:

- To highlight the central connection between the well being of children and the need for sustained support and investment in parents and family members;
- To promote the involvement of parents and families in the planning and delivery of services;
- To focus attention on the benefits for children, their families and society of taking effective action to tackle discrimination and social exclusion.

The three partner organisations of the Alliance have extensive expertise in providing information, advice and support services to families about the care and protection of their children. Our submission is informed by our experience of consulting with and supporting families whose children are “in need”, which we believe brings a practical perspective to the Commission’s information gathering and recommendations.

We believe that policies and principles underpinning the delivery of services designed to promote the safety and well-being of children, should be child focussed and family centred. This is not just a case of children's rights, it is also pragmatic: the great majority of children, even where there is a formal concern by protection agencies about their welfare, live within their family network¹. 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 authority². Therefore services provided directly by the State or agencies on their behalf need to strengthen the family's capacity to promote the well being of their children rather than undermining their aspirations for their children.

Parenting and family relationships are for most families a rewarding, if at times, challenging experience. Our work and research tells us that most parents want to do the best for their children. But the reality of parenting is, in our shared experience, complicated. The adverse challenges are not intrinsic to the child or family alone: many challenges such as poverty and discrimination are challenges which the State can do much to alleviate for the benefit of the community as a whole. 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. Families also tell us that time and again when they were looking for advice, support and assistance they were turned away until the challenges overwhelm 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.

A child's right to well being

A useful starting point is the principles and requirements of the Children Act 1989 which remains a sound foundation for developing and extending support services. The Act is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and sets out responsibilities on parents and the State to ensure that an individual child's welfare is paramount when decisions are made about the child's upbringing³. Children are the society's future and parents, families, the community and the State have a shared responsibility to contribute to the building secure foundations for this future.

All children should have a right to:

- be loved and well cared for
- be safe and secure
- have a clear sense of their own identity, race and culture
- 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
- be able to play and learn
- have their views listened to and taken into account

¹ Recent figures show that 85% of children whose names are registered on the child protection register live at home or in their family network

² DoH, Child Protection: Messages from Research 1995

³ Article 18 UN Convention

- live free from poverty in adequate housing with access to responsive health and social support services which respects their ethnicity and culture
- live free from racism, religious oppression and be protected from all forms of violence
- to achieve their potential, through education, leisure and social opportunities.

Parents and families

Parents want to do what is best for their children. Many parents who contact the three partner organisations report that they often feel isolated, undervalued and struggle to find support for problems they experience in bringing up their children. Material poverty, racism and other forms of discrimination, poor housing, disability and mental ill health, substance misuse, domestic violence, separation and divorce are key factors impacting on a parent's capacity to meet their children's needs. Recent research by Ghate et al⁴ show that parenting skills improve, benefiting both the child and family, if useful and practical support services are available. However, too often 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.

We also know that children do not thrive in public care and need to experience family life. Policy statements on behalf of the State which mix a message of support with a message of blame or a label of failure do not increase parents' or families' confidence in seeking help or in getting a useful response.

Parents and families have responsibilities to

- provide love, care, attention and encouragement for their children to enable them to thrive, including physically and emotionally
- teach their children moral values and enable their 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 wellbeing
- provide materially and financially for their children accessing State support if necessary
- enable their children to mature and take appropriate responsibility for decisions as they grow older.

The community

Values set and held in the community have a profound influence on parents, assisting them to promote their children's well being, valuing their role and respecting the tasks they undertake.

The community has responsibilities to

- value, respect and protect children by working with the State to promote the well being of all children
- protect children from discrimination and violence

⁴ Qinton: Message from Research 2004

The role of the State

Parents want the State to assist them to make a success of the complex role of parenting, without being prescriptive or intrusive.

The State's role to care – its supportive role – at times sits uncomfortably with the State's role to control and thus regulate the behaviour of parents and children. Within this tension sits the complexities of rights and responsibilities that parents have for their children.

Finding the right balance between the duty to support and the duty to protect resonates with the challenges faced by parents and families. It is fundamental that any intervention against the wishes of the family must be through a process which is judicial, fair and transparent, enabling parents to challenge allegations made against them. However, it is important that children's rights are protected in this process and we believe that the protections in the Children Act 1989 and Human Rights Act 1998 should not be undermined by developments in family and youth offending policies.

As children grow older, the influence of peers and external influences significantly increase and the influence of parents wanes. Current family policy, which appears at times to be punitive towards parents, needs to adjust to reflect this reality. Recent research findings support the evidence from our help and information lines and projects that parents often feel the State does not provide sufficient support for parents of teenagers.

The State responsibilities:

Policy

- create the economic, social and political conditions to enable parents and families to bring up children promoting their well being and enabling them to achieve their potential.
- to ensure that its policies, legislation and initiatives are informed by the views of parents and families and that inequalities in life chances for families and children across different ethnic groups and children with disabilities are eliminated by monitoring and addressing inequality in the impact of policy and practice. Specific advice about the services needed, must be sought from Black and minority ethnic families, and other families with specific experiences, such as parents with a child with ADHD, or family members caring for a child who cannot live with their birth parents.

Financial

- Tackle family poverty by creating suitable employment opportunities with flexibility to suit family needs and to support long term unemployed parents gain skills to enter the workforce, if they wish to do so.
- Provide an equitable tax and benefit system that provides adequate financial support for all children, including those who are cared for by family and friends.
- Giving real choice particularly in early years or when a child or young person needs particular care and support by extending financial support for parents to remain at home to bring up their child.

Education

- investment in pre school, nursery, primary and secondary education which enables real choice together with wide ranging formal and informal good quality pre school, after school and respite care.
- Provision of suitable accessible play and leisure opportunities for all children and young people.

Information advice and support services to support bringing up children

- Provision of a wide range of services involving parents, families, children and young people **that** are:
 - Useful and accessible,
 - non stigmatising and
 - not dependent on a post code lottery.
- Parenting support, including information and signposting points through a wide range of providers. This should be available both locally and nationally at family centres, schools, faith based organisations and community venues, including libraries. A broad variety of media should be used including:
 - help and specialist advice lines,
 - web based signposting and
 - information and material available in community languages.
- Parenting support at times when parents need additional support including key transition points and times of difficulties. Such support to include parenting programmes informed by parents' views about what is useful.
- Professional and volunteer staff who are respectful of families and the role of parents and who have the skills to empathise, promote and protect children's well being.
- Provision for parents to enable a parent, carer or person working with a child to identify the child and family's needs in a straightforward way to enable services to be provided speedily and well informed signposting.
- To acknowledge the complexities of parenting and ensure that services are developed in a way that does not stigmatise or blame those seeking information and advice and support.
- Support for parents during separation, including mediation, in order to assist parents to minimise damaging conflict, and enable children to have safe ongoing contact with both their parents and extended family.

Practical issues that the State needs to address to develop effective support services

- Involve parents and families in the planning and delivery of services so that they have optimal effect by being well received.
- Ensure that Black and minority ethnic families and excluded families are directly consulted in service development.
- Enable families to participate in decision making about the service they and their children receive through developing advocacy services and using models of family group conferences.

- Ensuring that parents and children know what information agencies hold about them on any individual or shared data base.
- Straightforward and accessible procedures to clarify processes, contribute to decision making, and challenge decisions and information they consider to be inaccurate.
- Standards for measuring performance by service providers which incorporate these requirements.

Conclusion

Our experience is that parents seeking information and advice from our services, and our wide range of parenting programmes and projects, often feel isolated and frustrated. Many callers to our advice lines recount how their efforts to get help were unfruitful, frequently because the threshold to access support services was set so high. Whilst some families may be able to draw on their own resources, many families find pressures and difficulties to be overwhelming. A culture of blaming and stigmatising does not encourage families to come forward and ask for help and it flies in the face of research evidence on the positive effect of a good partnership on outcomes for children.

The State is quick to take credit when children and young people succeed. Parents delight in the successes of their children too. Parenting is rewarding. But for all families there will be times when they struggle. Some will struggle more than others but that does not mean that the State should abandon or blame these families. When challenges and difficulties begin to emerge, most will welcome appropriate support and will use it effectively.

Parents and families know what will assist them. The task of the State and service providers is to find out from parents what will help and work in partnership with them to raise their children to achieve their potential to become well adjusted, social and productive adults.