

What About The Children?



Evidence to the
Early Years Commission : Questions 1 - 4
February 27th 2008

Question 1

Do you think enough significance is placed on the importance of a child's Early Years in public policy?

There has been a considerable increase in attention and government spending on services affecting young children in recent years but we believe it has been misdirected, with economic considerations outweighing infant mental wellbeing. Insufficient attention has been paid to the emotional needs of the children themselves, particularly the need for a secure, long-term attachment within the family.

As What About The Children? represents the emotional needs of children under three we shall confine our answers to this age group, which we emphasise must be considered separately from 3-5 year olds who, whilst still vulnerable, are generally more independent and ready to benefit from a few hours with other children away from their families than are the under threes.

Whilst we applaud recent increases in parental leave and benefits and the right for parents to request flexible working, we consider that many recent initiatives are detrimental and misguided. In particular the political pressure on mothers to return to paid work before they and their children are ready and the many direct and indirect financial subsidies which encourage them to do so. Linked to these is the requirement for children's centres to provide year round full day care for very young children, even though they cannot fill the places. This means they have less money to spend on support which has more beneficial outcomes for the children.

The cost of nursery places is rising faster than inflation and all sectors: public, private and voluntary, are demanding greater subsidies, whilst mothers who wish to look after their own young children get no extra help. This situation is unjust and unsustainable and provision of nursery places provides a poor substitute for family care.

We believe that in cases where childcare outside the family is needed for limited periods, due to the ill health of the mother, this is best provided by one individual carer, either one to one or in a very small group situation, by a nanny or a childminder, rather than in a nursery.

According to **Catherine Hakim's 'preference theory'** as many as 60% of mothers are influenced by government policy in their choice of how much time they can spend to look after their own children.

The devolvement of public health responsibilities to local areas has led to serious cuts in the numbers of health visitors (HVs) in many parts of the country and the introduction of schemes using lesser qualified staff to cover some of their roles. We believe that HVs have an important and highly skilled role in diagnosing postnatal depression and poor attachments between mothers and infants and consider that their universal service must be restored.

Initiatives which have been found to promote infant mental health have recently closed due to lack of funding e.g. Parents In Partnership - Parent Infant Network (PIPPIN) and the Sunderland Infant Programme. Surely it is short sighted to withdraw funds from preventive projects such as these?

The Sure Start programme has been failing to reach the most deprived children and we recommend a mix of strengthened universal services and others which are carefully targeted. All should address children's and parents' emotional needs.

Question 2. What in your experience is the effect of a child not receiving sufficient or appropriate nurturing in the early years?

The Scientific Advisory Board of Watch? believes that children who do not receive sufficient or appropriate nurturing are affected in the following ways:

- They are more likely to become aggressive.
- They are more likely to become disobedient.
- They are more likely to develop infections
 - More coughing at night,
 - 69% more admissions to hospital and, if day care is used before the age of 2,
 - significantly more doctor diagnosed asthma.
- They are more likely to have raised cortisol levels in their blood, a sign of stress.
- Cortisol levels raised long term are probably a risk factor for the structure and development of the brain in children.

Question 3. What do you consider to be the main causes of these problems?

- Parents can't afford for one of them to stay at home to look after their own children
- Lack of understanding of children's emotional needs

- Group childcare a contributor to infant stress, creating brain chemistry alterations
- Widespread lack of knowledge of the long-term consequences of emotional neglect
- The role of parenting is undervalued and undermined in comparison with paid work
- Lack of public support for mothering while bad mothers are condemned as pariahs
- Mothers' own attachment difficulties contribute to a child's fragile emotional health
- Lack of a secure long term child : adult attachment relationship within the family
- Insufficient attention, inconsistent or negative care are all emotionally damaging
- Parenting is regarded as a burden rather than to be enjoyed
- Mothers have to commit when they will return to work too soon
- Public denial and recognition of separation anxiety between mothers and infants
- In the drive for financial security, children's needs are regarded as secondary rather than paramount
- Mothers at home often feel isolated and depressed, with few home-making skills
- Lack of preparation for parenting while following careers
- Family strife and lack of commitment by parents to raise their children together
- Lack of role models for home-making and mothering

Question 4. Have you witnessed any programs or methods by which these difficulties could be counteracted in order to provide the best possible life chances for our 0-3's and the adults of the future?

We reiterate the fiscal measures we recommended last year to the Centre for Social Justice, on the related problems of poverty, stress and family breakdown, which would enable parents to have a genuine financial choice to look after their own children at least until the age of two, but will today concentrate on the services about which we have most expertise.

- Inform parents of children's emotional needs through universally available parenting classes such as those which were run by **Parents In Partnership - Parent Infant Network (PIPPIN)**.
- Provide opportunities for parents who are looking after their own children to meet at parent and toddler groups and to enjoy activities such as **baby massage, music and singing** (see supplementary notes), toddler gym, and games TOGETHER. Many of these activities are available at children's centres, but not to all parents.
- **The one o'clock clubs** in London parks, which have play facilities for anyone looking after children under five and are open to all without stigma, should be available throughout the country.
- An introductory course on relationships and developmental psychology should be given to all senior secondary pupils; this should include basic information on infant brain development with particular emphasis on the link between close loving nurturing in infancy and a healthy emotional brain in maturity. (In the meantime this should be mandatory for everyone working with young children). This could build on **The Roots of Empathy** course developed in Canada.
- Day nurseries are not suitable for the under threes and parents should be warned of the physical and emotional health risks of group childcare.
- Unless we break the cycle of poor parenting due to parents' own attachment difficulties, relationship problems will persist. Early diagnosis and therapeutic intervention at an early stage is essential. **The Oxford Parent Infant Project (OXPIP)** provides an excellent model, but the success of this programme depends on sufficient skilled health visitors and psychotherapists.
- A similar successful project was the **Sunderland Infant Programme** and another is the **Solihull Approach**.
- These preventive programmes involving early intervention to promote infant mental health have proved to be very cost effective and should be given secure long term funding (in contrast to subsidising universal day care).
- Disturbed 'hard to reach' parents should be able to benefit from support services such as **Homestart, Parents As First Teachers (PAFT)** and **Newpin** throughout the country.
- It might be worth considering **Mia Kellmer Pringle's idea** that there should be a new binding contract for couples who wish to raise a family giving priority to the needs of their children for at least 10 – 15 years?

(Further information on all references and named projects is given in the supplementary document)