

FAMILIES@30

The State our children are in

Tim Loughton MP



Published by 4Children

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Introduction

Who'd be a teenager in 2014? Mind you, who'd be a parent of a teenager or young person in this day and age? And, come to think of it, what's the state got to do with all this?

By all accounts, growing up in Britain today is more challenging than almost ever before, or that is what my three teenagers tell me, usually heralding a bid for an increase in allowance or as mitigating circumstances for failing to return home at the agreed time.

Pressures to get into the chosen school; to perform well at the right school; to 'look cool'; to be resilient in the light of peer pressure; and to safeguard one's integrity both on and off social media - the many faceted phenomena of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood - are all everyday challenges that our children and young people have to deal with from an early age.

It's little wonder that mental health problems are affecting so many of our young people even younger¹. It's also little wonder that research from the University of Greenwich claims that many young people are suffering from a 'quarter life crisis' in their twenties as they seek more meaning from their existence².

The comprehensive 'Class of 2011 Yearbook' report by Relate³ revealed an interesting portrait of the average sixteen year old growing up in the UK today. Of every thirty sixteen year olds:

- ten will have witnessed their parents separate
- three will have suffered from mental health problems
- eight will have experienced severe physical violence
- three will be living in a step family
- one will have experienced the death of a parent
- and seven will report having been bullied

1 Nuffield Foundation (2012) [Social trends and mental health: introducing the main findings](#)

London: Nuffield Foundation

2 University of Greenwich (2011) [Quarterlife crises can be good for you.](#)

3 Relate (2011) [Class of 2011 Yearbook: How happy are young people and why does it matter?](#)

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The number of children diagnosed with sexually transmitted diseases has doubled over the last decade⁴ and hundreds of under-11s are being admitted to hospital for drink and drug related illnesses⁵. Teenage girls commonly worry about their body image, with an alarming 27% of girls aged 11 to 21 aspiring to cosmetic surgery, according to a study by the Girl Guides⁶.

I want in this essay, as part of 4Children's 30 year anniversary celebrations, to look at the relationship between family and state and at what I see as the apparently increasingly precarious position of children somewhere in between.

The children our State is in

Rather than title my essay 'The State our children are in,' I could equally have called it 'The children our State is in'. Much of my work previously as Children's Minister was involved with children in care, whose parents were deemed unsuitable to bring them up, either on a permanent basis or, more likely, temporarily.

That is a wholly different and complicated subject, but beyond those children for whom the State has direct parental responsibility, hardly a day passes without headlines urging Government action to intervene, to make children safer by adding more regulations to safeguarding manuals, to restrict more manifestations of social media or simply to wrap children up in more cotton wool.

Where are the parents in all this and where exactly does the family feature in all this too?

Is it an outmoded concept, a throwback to the 1950's, caricatured by some as a model of "a suit-wearing, bread-winning dad and aproned home-making mother?"

Whether it's the Mitchell family's constant refrain on the BBC1 soap opera *EastEnders* that 'we're family' or David Cameron's pre-election *cri de cœur* that family is in his DNA⁷, most of us still believe family does matter to most people.

Without getting bogged down in the truism that modern families come in many different forms, the evidence I have seen shows that the presence of mum and dad throughout childhood gives children the best chance of good health, successful education and freedom from dependency.

Yet our relationships between children and their parents are in danger of becoming increasingly sidelined by advances in technology. You can now buy prams that

4 Perry K (2014) [Children as young as 11 being treated for sexually transmitted infections](#), The Telegraph, 5 January 2014

5 BBC (2013) [UK A&Es seeing 'drunk children'](#) 30 September 2013

6 Girl Guides (2013) [Girls' Attitudes Survey 2013](#)

7 Chapman J (2009) [We'll rebuild Britain on the family: Cameron pledges to give power back to the people](#), Daily Mail, 9 October 2009

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incorporate computer screens to engage a baby; and Microsoft has designed a prototype teddy bear that contains microphones, a camera and software that can monitor a child whose image has been programmed into the computer and relay soothing pre-recorded words from the biological parents who may be hundreds of miles away.

Who needs the stimulation of human touch and the building blocks of attachment when you can have it all delivered remotely down a fibre-optic cable or, even more conveniently, have a Wi-Fi baby?

It's no wonder that we all too often struggle to shield children from the slings and arrows of social media, when many parents are accomplices in securing their children a place on Facebook well before the advisory age of thirteen⁸. Incredibly, nearly one in five children now get their first mobile phone by the time they are five⁹.

So where is the Government in all this and what, on a base level, are the costs for the taxpayer picking up the tab when things go wrong as a result; let alone the social costs to the individual children themselves?

At its extreme, the absence of strong family structures contributes to the chaos of the herd instinct and lawlessness that we saw in the riots of 2011. On an everyday basis, family breakdown costs society £46 billion a year¹⁰, so it is vital that we heed the Centre for Social Justice's shocking revelation that by the end of their childhood, a youngster is considerably more likely to have a television set in their bedroom than a father living at home¹¹.

I believe that marriage matters too. As the CSJ's 'Breakthrough Britain' demonstrated, fewer than one in ten married parents have split by the time a child is five, compared with more than one in three couples who are not married¹².

For me, the killer statistic is that if your parents are still together when you are 16, there is a 97% chance that they are married¹³. For the one-in-ten babies now born to parents who already live apart, the almost predestined disadvantage hits earliest¹⁴. And after a marital split, the income of women with children falls on average by 12%¹⁵, so poverty usually follows with all its implications.

8 Boyd D (2011) [Why Parents Help Tweens Violate Facebook's 13+ Rule](#), Huffington Post, 01 November 2011

9 Uswitch (2013) [More than a million British kids get first mobile phone by the time they're five](#)

10 Relationships Foundation (2013) [Counting the Cost of Family Failure 2013 Update \(Research Note\)](#), Cambridge: Relationships Foundation

11 Centre for Social Justice (2012) [Forgotten Families? The Vanishing Agenda](#)

12 Centre for Social Justice (2007) [Breakthrough Britain](#)

13 Centre for Social Justice (2007) [Breakthrough Britain](#)

14 Wallop H (2010) [One in ten children born to parents living apart](#), The Telegraph, 22 October 2010

15 Jenkins SP (2008) ['Marital splits and income changes over the longer term'](#) University of Essex

But have we really drilled down into the question of why the ratio of one in five children living with a single parent in the UK is so high – the fourth highest rate throughout all European countries¹⁶?

That is hugely important, because although most single parents (often single not of their own volition) do a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances, the evidence is clear to me that, on average, children brought up in married families do better than those brought up in single-parent families.

This is true across every significant measure: educational achievement, health, alcohol and drug abuse, behavioural problems, and so on¹⁷. This is not intended to undermine the role of those parents who find themselves outside of marriage for all sorts of reasons, but it is an inescapable statistical fact that children with married parents have a distinct advantage and for all the reasons given above. This has to be a desirable thing, not least for the State who will have to underwrite the cost of many of the downsides.

So what, in practice, should the relationship between state, family and children be? In 2012, I developed my own modest 10 point plan of how the UK Government could show itself to be serious about promoting the value of family and our responsibilities to children beyond the not always benign grasp of the State¹⁸.

Fifteen months on, I've had the chance to update and review this plan, and I've set these 10 points out in this essay as my vision for that relationship and to give some examples of where practical action, prompted by government, would empower children and the family, not subsume it:

1. Rebalancing the relationship between State and family

The role of the state is surely to support families not supplant them. For many, the surreptitious influence of the anti-smacking brigade, the obesity police or the accusing bureaucracy of excessive Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, now known as the Disclosure and Barring Service checks, (which the Government are now reversing) has led many decent parents to question their own right and capability to parent.

Looking back at the report commissioned by the Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children, established by the then National Children's Home (NCH) and the National Family and Parenting Institute around ten years ago, I was struck by just

16 Atkinson BA and Marlier E (eds) (2010) '[Income and living conditions in Europe](#)' Eurostat Statistical Books

17 Pryor J, and Rodgers B (2001) *Children in Changing Families*, Oxford: Blackwell cited in Mooney A, Oliver C and Smith M (2009) [Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being: Evidence Review](#), London: Department for Children, Schools and Families

18 Tim Loughton (2012) [The state our children are in](#). Speech to Centre for Social Justice, 10 December 2012

how paternalistic its recommendations were¹⁹.

The report was set up as a study into the relationship between the State and the family in the upbringing of children, included its obligatory recommendations for the State to criminalise smacking by parents and raise the age of criminal responsibility. The report is also littered with examples of the role of various government departments and public agencies in prescribing services handed down to parents, requested or not. As Jennie Bristow, who runs the website 'Parents with Attitude', had reminded us, 'parents aren't partners with the State: Parents are parents.'²⁰

By way of contrast, the Family Commission,²¹ set up by 4Children and chaired by Esther Rantzen, more recently took a much more enabling approach. Families should be offered relationship support in times of relationship breakdown, with the help of an online portal run by families for families.

A family friendly kite mark, like an 'Investor in People' accreditation, should guide families to family friendly employers and practices and not mandate them. A legal entitlement for a Family Group Conference (FGC), giving them the right to shape the solutions to family changes themselves, is another recommendation I support.

This is the approach I have always favoured, where the State is there to serve, to enable, to promote the family, not to stifle it, nor to direct or supplant, other than in those severe cases where neglect or cruelty harms the children. Of course, the interests of the child must come first, but for the vast majority of families the interests of the parents do not and should not make this mutually exclusive.

2. Intervening early is key

A strong attachment between a child and parent shapes the whole of childhood from birth. Where that attachment is missing it needs rehabilitating early. When older children start to go off the rails, early intervention is the key. The Government has rightly championed the principle of early intervention, but it needs to become more than a slogan and a function of the now defunct 'Early Intervention Grant.'

As the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ)'s report card on the Coalition Government's family credentials stated²², 'early intervention is central to reversing social breakdown.' Those with poor speech at the age of two, for example, are destined to a lifetime of failure

19 Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children (2005) Families and the state: two-way support and responsibilities: an inquiry into the relationship between the state and the family in the upbringing of children

20 Kavanagh M (2009) [The perils of modern parenting - whatever happened to muddling through?](#) The Telegraph, 2 November 2009

21 4Children (2010) [Family Commission](#)

22 Centre for Social Justice (2012) [Building a social recovery? A second year report card on the Coalition Government](#)

unless they receive help, a Government adviser has warned²³. Former Minister Frank Field MP claims that ‘the success individuals achieve during their adult lives can be predicted by their ability level on their first day of primary school’.²⁴

The UK Government is rightly promoting early attachment, be it through an extension of the health visitor role, early years assessments, or by making sure that Children’s Centres and family hubs are accessed by those most in need.

My Parliamentary colleague, Andrea Leadsom, is an expert in the field of attachment, having run charities offering attachment services. As she has said, ‘the baby that is securely attached to his or her carer will generally be able to cope with life’s ups and downs, and will develop an innate sense that the world is a ‘good place’. The baby whose carer is depressed, over-anxious or who has issues with substance misuse, domestic violence or severe mental health problems can often not achieve that essential secure bond.’²⁵ Indeed, a US academic study has shown that teenagers from a family with a history of alcoholism have brains wired for risk taking²⁶. This helps explain why alcohol problems can run in families and provides another example of the need to break the generational downward cycle.

Driving improvements in the quality of schooling for all, as I believe my former boss the Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove is doing, offers the best prospect of promoting social mobility and of ‘widening the ladder’ out of poverty.

But we also need strong families, with parents having strong attachments to their children, to get level headed kids to arrive at school in the first place, full of enthusiasm and able to learn and benefit from staying there. Young people who read at home on a daily basis are thirteen times more likely to perform above the level expected for their age in literacy²⁷. Pushy teachers need pushy parents. And whilst this might sound more ‘nannying’ than most of the support mechanisms I am highlighting, it is surely a good investment when we know the price of failure, both financially and socially.

That is why the Government’s woefully undersold flagship project on “Troubled Families”²⁸ needs promoting better. It will be game-changing if it can join up action between professionals focused on solving the often multi-generational multiple problems that those ‘expensive’ families suffer and inflict on others.

23 Gross J (2011) *Two Years On: final report of the Communication Champion for children*

24 Field F (2012) [Focus on the under-fives to give all children an equal chance](#), The Guardian, 24 September 2012

25 Leadsom A (2012) [Better early years intervention can help create a generation of emotionally secure children](#), Conservative Home, 2 October 2012

26 Cservenka A and Nagel BJ (2012) Risky Decision-Making: An fMRI Study of Youth at High Risk for Alcoholism, *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 36(4) p 604

27 Clark C (2012) [Children’s Reading Today. Findings from the National Literacy Trust’s annual survey](#). National Literacy Trust

28 Department of Communities and Local Government [Policy on Helping Troubled Families Turn Their Lives Around](#)

Family Intervention Programmes, the forerunner of the 'Troubled Families Programme' or 'Families with Multiple Problems' as it was originally called, have an impressive track record. Piloted in places like Nottingham between 2007 and 2011, families enrolled in FIPs saw a 58% reduction in anti-social behaviour and their children were 53% less likely to truant or have problems at school. Notably, the results also revealed a 34% reduction in the number of families with child protection issues²⁹.

Social finance is becoming increasingly innovative in attracting new sources of money to invest in children's futures, combining a financial return with a clearly defined social return. Last year, a charity launched an eight year Future for Children bond, which will invest in a project from Essex County Council to improve the lives of disadvantaged 11-16 year olds³⁰.

These are huge gains - for early intervention at an early age, or early intervention at an early stage - for older children in chaotic families. But they need to be part of a coordinated and joined up family policy that addresses why these problems happen in the first place and keep happening. We need a 'family with multiple problems' approach for government that needs to overcome multiple family policy problems where responsibility has become dissipated across a large number of departments and lacks central coordination.

3. Shared parenting means both parents

Dadlessness impacts heavily on teenage boys especially, yet still too many willing fathers are frozen out of their parenting role after an acrimonious split.

The Government is sticking to its guns with the long overdue full presumption of shared parenting in the Children and Families Bill³¹, which progressed slowly through Parliament throughout 2013 and into 2014, in the teeth of a barrage of opposition from vested interests.

It does not undermine the paramount principle of the welfare of the child if legislation requires courts to ensure both parents play as full a part as possible in the upbringing of their children, however acrimonious a split may have been. In 91% of cases, it is the father who is likely to be the non-resident and, potentially, the increasingly marginalised parent³². An absent father leaves a gap that no one else can ever quite fill.

As Mrs Justice Parker recently pronounced loudly and correctly in the High Court,

29 Department of Education (2011) [Monitoring and Evaluation of Family Intervention Projects and Services to March 2011, Statistical Release](#)

30 Essex County Council (2012) [First local authority to award Social Impact Bond to help young people on the edge of care](#)

31 UK Parliament (2014) [Children and Families Bill](#)

32 Hunt J and Macleod A (2008) [Outcomes of applications to court for contact orders after parental separation or divorce](#)

'Parents who obstruct the relationship with either mother or father are inflicting untold damage on their children and it's about time the professionals truly understood this.'³³ Divorce or acrimonious splits for cohabiting parents can be toxic and it is the children who suffer the poison most devastatingly and for longest.

This position was confirmed by research undertaken by NetMums³⁴, which chillingly revealed that many children from broken marriages turn to drink, drugs, or self-harm, with the divorced parents often unaware of the effect their split has had upon them.

If it comes to it, we need to do divorce better. Children need to be the first and last consideration when the terms of the split are being fashioned. The state, in the form of the courts, needs to know and practice that and parents need to know to expect it and what the consequences will be of promoting any other antagonistic priorities.

Before it comes to that, parenting and relationship support needs safeguarding and expanding through Children's Centres and other programmes which are still very 'mumcentric' and too often treat dads as an afterthought. It is to be greatly welcomed that the Government has been investing heavily in relationship support and in parenting classes for both parents, using the non-judgemental expertise of the voluntary sector.

As Rob Williams put it, whilst he was Chief Executive of the Fatherhood Institute, we need 'to equalise our expectations of fathers and mothers and hold both to account for their responsibilities. From registering the birth to looking after a child's health, schooling, nutrition and even behaviour, the system assumes that mothers are the responsibility holders and fathers may or may not be involved.'³⁵

4. Developing positive role models

Another side product of dadlessness is, in part, the absence of role models for boys, but girls need strong influences too.

There was an interesting piece in The Sun newspaper recently by Lord Sugar, not someone I usually empathise with, who was lamenting the lack of profile of role models in business influencing children and young people³⁶. His Apprentice accomplice, Karren Brady, has of course been active in encouraging more young women into business, while the Girl Guides' Girls' Attitudes Survey revealed that 72% of girls support more women in business, while 60% are put off a career in

33 Barrett D (2013) [High Court judge says warring parents cause 'untold damage' to children](#), The Telegraph, 23 December 2013

34 Netmums (2013) [Get families talking about separating](#)

35 Loughton T (2012) *The State Our Children Are In*, Lecture to the Centre for Social Justice 10 December 2012

36 Sugar A (2012), [Kids need role models more than ever... if BBC don't want this show I'll take it elsewhere](#), The Sun, 25th October 2012 [subscription only]

engineering, for example, because of a lack of female role models³⁷.

But, of course, it doesn't stop there, because if you ask teenagers today who their role models are, they would most likely mention some footballer or reality show C List celebrity, who have probably been plastered all over the tabloids stumbling out of a night club worse for wear, with the remnants of a line peppering their nostrils.

Yet, as Mariella Frostrup observed in the Mail on Sunday, surely we should be using the cult and power of celebrity to communicate strong messages to impressionable young men in particular. She advocates a 'Man Army,' determined to change cultural stereotypes amongst those who condone or, worse still, engage in some of the more appalling forms of sexual abuse that have hit our headlines too often over recent months. They need to say 'loud and proud, that rape is for cowards, child abuse is despicable and treating girls like pieces of meat is simply unacceptable'.³⁸

On a more mundane level, we need academic role models as well, to help make doing well at school something that all children will aspire to. According to the latest study from the National Literacy Trust, one in six children admitted they were too embarrassed to read in front of their friends for fear of being labelled a 'geek'.³⁹ Is that a uniquely British trait?

Not that long ago, youngsters would have identified their role models as a favourite grandfather or successful aunt, a teacher or even a resident father. Seldom is that the case now⁴⁰. And with politicians, the police and public service broadcasters increasingly smeared and demonised in the public eye, with varying degrees of justification, who are our children and grandchildren supposed to look up to?

That brings me on to my next category, which I have called:

5. When Harry met Granny

One of the most depressing forces at work in society has been a growing distrust between generations and 'ne're the twain shall meet'. Fuelled by selective media reporting in which every teenager is portrayed as a prospective hoodie wearing mugger, young people appear increasingly cut adrift from our older citizens.

The demographic friction can inadvertently be manifested in government policy as pensioner spending priorities usually trump those for younger people. Every pensioner

37 Girl Guides (2013) [Girls' Attitudes Survey 2013](#)

38 Frostrup M (2012) [Who can teach boys that women aren't meat? Men - and that means you, footballers, singers and Top Gear presenters](#), Daily Mail, 25 November 2012

39 Clark C (2012) [Children's Reading Today: Findings from the National Literacy Trust's annual survey](#). National Literacy Trust.

40 The Children's Society (2009) [Four out of five children 'don't have good role models'](#)

enjoys a free bus pass courtesy of central government, but 16 year olds in most parts of the country have to pay adult fares. What a great bit of common sense it would be if we could operate a swap scheme, where better off pensioners who didn't rely on their bus passes could give them to a young person whose prospects really were hampered by travel costs.

But aren't we missing a trick here, not least for those teenage boys who are lacking a father's influence at home? Should the state not be working with businesses and voluntary organisations to harness the growing pool of recently retired but restless seniors who can offer mentoring skills to dadless teenage boys, for example, who need direction in their lives?

I would like to see a national register, promotional campaign and training support available to build such an army of volunteers. Similarly, young people who volunteer disproportionately more than any other age-group have much to offer older people in return. The diverse range and energy of those excellent Gamesmakers at the Olympics and Paralympics showed how we really could all be in this together - another social prize with huge potential financial benefits for the state as well. As someone who has been involved with the excellent National Citizen Service from inception, I can see the enormous potential here in social cohesion and in cultivating a sense of belonging and national identity.

6. Re-energising the Bailey Review

Reg Bailey's excellent report from 2011 into the Sexualisation and Commercialisation of Childhood - Letting Children Be Children⁴¹ - made specific recommendations to Government to support responsible parents who are battered on all sides by advertisers and the media, intent on making their children prematurely grow into adult consumers. These included:

- Ensuring that magazines and newspapers with sexualised images on their covers are not in easy sight of children
- Reducing the amount of on-street advertising containing sexualised imagery in locations where children are likely to see it
- Making it easier for parents to block adult and age-restricted material from the internet

⁴¹ Department for Education (2011) [Let Children Be Children Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood](#)

- Ensuring the content of pre-watershed television programming better meets parents' expectations
- Introducing age ratings for music videos

Research for UNICEF UK reiterated that children in the UK feel trapped in a materialistic culture and don't have enough time to spend with their families⁴². The implementation of the Bailey Review needs to become a priority in government. So far, it has been more about warm words than urgent action. But its implementation needs to be in partnership with parents and children and not in isolation from them.

7. Keeping kids safe online

Technology marches on through the medium of social media – no self-respecting teenager leaves home without checking statuses on Facebook or tweeting prolifically. Yet with Facebook keen to dispense with the advisory age of thirteen for its users, despite the unresolved dangers around cyber bullying, do child protection considerations stand any chance of keeping pace with child communication imperatives?

And with the head of Google suggesting in the Wall Street Journal that youngsters' private lives are so well documented on the internet that they should be encouraged automatically to change their names on reaching adulthood - to distance themselves from embarrassing photographs and material on social media sites⁴³ - it's little wonder that mental health problems are affecting so many of our young people even younger.

The Government has acted urgently to improve safeguarding against child abuse and to expose and counter child sexual exploitation. But for most parents the everyday fear of their children being exposed to adult and violence images or to grooming and bullying via social media is a minefield.

The UK Council on Child Internet Safety, which I chaired, has done some important work to bring the whole industry together in a united and complementary collection of practical solutions⁴⁴. The aim is that wherever you turn children and concerned parents will be confronted with warning messages about the hazards that lurk on the internet if it's not used responsibly, and what to do about it.

Whilst inappropriate access to adult and violent images is a serious worry and - as

42 Ipsos MORI and Nairn A, for UNICEF UK (2011) [Children's Well-being in UK, Sweden and Spain:](#)

[The Role of Inequality and Materialism](#)

43 Jenkins HW (2010) [Google and the search for the future](#), The Wall Street Journal, 14 August 2010

44 [UK Council on Child Internet Safety](#)

research for the NSPCC has shown⁴⁵ - can be linked to impressionable teenage boys' attitudes to sex and relationships, I believe the use and abuse of social media is an even bigger worry, and that we have only seen the tip of the iceberg so far. Social media is everywhere and it is the future.

Liverpool judge Nigel Gilmore said that he is increasingly seeing in court instances which began on Facebook⁴⁶. Disputes on that social media in particular are leading to a growing number of violent crimes, because members of the social network post messages they would never say in person. Police are being forced to deal with petty squabbles on social network sites every day, when they could be tackling more serious crimes.

For impressionable youngsters, social media is one of the strongest and most constant influences on their lives. Almost half of young Britons say that friends seeing unflattering pictures of them is one of the biggest concerns in their life⁴⁷ and that's before we enter the growing minefield that is 'Sexting,' with its huge potential for lasting and viral damage.

Whilst the Government is trying to tackle abuse and harassment online - trolling, as it is more commonly known - this debate is one that we have only just started. It's also one where, more than most, the state actually has a leading role in so many aspects of a child's life, through the curriculum in schools and in enabling and encouraging parents to keep up at home.

8. Cotton wool kids

We need a renewed crackdown on the 'health and safety' mentality that risk assesses rough and tumble activities out of sight. Kids take knocks, pick themselves up, and learn from them – get over it! But it is more complicated than that.

Figures published in 2012 showed that half as many children are being admitted to casualty after falling out of a tree as they were ten years ago. But children are almost twice as likely now to go to hospital for injuries caused by repetitive and strenuous movements, such as playing on their computers and Xboxes for too long⁴⁸.

That is hardly surprising when it has been estimated that by the time children born today turn seven, they will have spent the equivalent of an entire year watching some

45 Ringrose, Jessica, Gill, Rosalind, Livingstone, Sonia, Harvey, Laura (2012) [A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': a report prepared for the NSPCC](#), NSPCC; Christine Barter, Melanie McCarry, David Berridge and Kathy Evans (2009) [Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships](#), NSPCC

46 The Telegraph (2012) [Facebook is fueling violence, claims judge](#), 27 September 2012

47 Vouchercodes (2012) [Young Brits Suffering From Virtual Vanity](#)

48 NHS (2012) Accident Statistics

form of small screen⁴⁹. What is potentially worrying about this is that internet addiction causes changes in the brain, like those seen in alcoholics and cocaine addicts. Indeed, clinics are now springing up offering similar therapeutic support⁵⁰.

Should the state be intervening to rebalance the average child's day, when they're spending - on average - ten times as long on the computer or watching TV as playing outside?⁵¹

Is it up to the state to take away the cotton wool, wrap minors up warm and propel them outside, as they do from an early age in Scandinavian kindergartens, or should we just be making the healthier options more attractive?

And, more appropriately, following on from my earlier points, shouldn't the state be doing less and standing out of the way of those parents who are doing more and are not being afraid or dis-incentivised from taking responsibility where it starts - at home?

As regards our attitudes to sport, are we in danger of fritting away the Olympic legacy in a misguided mutually exclusive search for academic excellence? Instilling a natural instinct for good quality sport and physical activity isn't just about seeking good health. Team sports, in particular, promote good socialising skills, discipline and engagement, which, in turn, encourage a child's appetite to learn in the classroom too.

9. Children turn into voters too

In my view, the current debate about lowering the voting age at elections to 16 - with Scottish schoolchildren being the first democratic guinea pigs over the top in September 2014 - is a red herring. When only 44% of current 18-24 year olds, many voting for the first time, actually turn out to exercise their democratic responsibility at general elections, versus 65% for the population as a whole⁵², it's clear we already have a bigger problem to solve. If we can shrink this gap, then we can legitimately have a debate about the capacity of 16 year olds to join in the democratic process.

In the meantime, there is much more we can do to engage young people in the decision making process in their communities and about the issues that fire some of them up.

The Government's 'Positive For Youth' strategy⁵³ is a way of engaging young people in their local communities, encouraging them to knock on the door of the local town hall and, most importantly, giving them a seat at the top table when they do.

49 Richardson H (2012) [Limit children's screen time, expert warns, BBC](#)

50 Nightingale Hospital (2010) [Britain's first dedicated Young Person Technology Addiction Service](#)

51 Adams S (2012) [Children spend 10 times as long watching TV as playing outside: survey](#), The Telegraph, 13 July 2012

52 Ipsos MORI (2010) [How Britain Voted In 2010](#)

53 HM Government (2010) [Positive for Youth: a new approach to cross-government policy for young people aged 13 to 19](#)

Failure to do so is a false economy. Children and young people might account for 20% of the population, but they represent 100% of the future. They need to be inspired to take an interest in their local areas and to make a connection with the political processes that shape them. Yet, for too many young people, politics just isn't 'cool.' We need to make it so, or suffer the democratic deficit that threatens as a result. This is with or without the likes of the comedian/actor Russell Brand's recent clarion call on BBC's Newsnight for revolution⁵⁴ with no thought of what next.

10. Remember kids are kids

Amidst the high tech circus and social media frippery lurks some deeply alarming statements about how society views young people and how teenage girls, in particular, view their lot. As the NSPCC warned in 2012, as many as 280,000 teenage girls are suffering from sexual abuse because they believe it is an accepted part of relationships or do not believe they can stop it⁵⁵; or the chilling description from social workers in Rochdale about fourteen and fifteen year old girls entrapped into a web of sexual abuse at the hands of forty year old strangers, that they had made a 'lifestyle choice'.⁵⁶

Children have rights and parents have responsibilities, but when 14 year old girls who have been lured into sexual abuse by child sex exploiting gangs are described as having made 'lifestyle choices', then misguided political correctness has knocked common sense out of the court to a dangerous level. Parents need the confidence and support of government that the parent child status remains paramount until that child becomes an adult.

I appreciate that questions of support become highly problematic when we stray into the territory of underage sex, teenage contraception and Gillick competence⁵⁷.

Parents should and need to do better at talking frankly and realistically with their own children about the whys and wherefores of relationships and at empowering them to make the right decisions about sex. In practice though, too many children lack the confidence or indeed the vocabulary and, in any case, talking to their own parents about sex is just something children don't do. Why on earth would you want to do that? So, in many cases, therefore, parents sheepishly and often presumptuously rely on the state, aka their children's school.

54 BBC Online (2013) [Russell Brand: 'I've never voted, never will'](#)

55 NSPCC (2012) [Teenage girls staying quiet about sexual abuse](#)

56 BBC Online (2012) [Rochdale grooming lessons 'not learnt'](#), 11 Oct 2012

57 A term originating in England and is used in medical law to decide whether a child (16 years or younger) is able to consent to his or her own medical treatment, without the need for parental permission or knowledge

Yet in 2007, the UK Youth Parliament produced an excellent report revealing that over 40% of 11-18 year olds thought that Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in their schools was poor or very poor. Some 70 per cent of 17 year-old girls reported not having received any information about personal relationships at school⁵⁸.

I doubt this position has changed significantly since then, especially as a more recent Times Educational Supplement survey revealed that three quarters of teachers received no sex education training⁵⁹. Whilst experiences are mixed, in too many schools it is Mrs Miggins, the metaphorical geography teacher, who has a couple of periods free on a Thursday afternoon and finds herself in charge of SRE for that term. No matter that she has had no specialist training and the following day will be expected to teach the same children in the same setting about volcanoes and glaciers in place of sensitive discussions about condoms and sexuality.

Our children have never been better informed about the mechanics of how to do sex. They have never been better taught and armed with the technology to seek it out, or the morning-after drugs to avoid one of its consequences. The trouble is that their capacity to determine what and when makes for a healthy sexual relationship, based on what they are told at school, has not kept up with the technology. We have taught them, or increasingly they are teaching themselves, the how, but without the why or why not.

Not surprising then that teenagers are increasingly vulnerable to deeply damaging interpretations of what makes for 'normal' relationships, too often sourced from the deeply damaging ubiquitous free vending machine that is internet hardcore pornography. A few months ago, I caught a particularly alarming radio interview with a teenage girl. Her initiation to sex had been acting out rape scenes with a teenage boy addicted to violent sex sites. Most alarming of all, her reasoning for why on earth she had gone along with it was that "she didn't think she had the right to say no".

Meanwhile, we have a stalemate on the curriculum review of quality sex and relationship education. Actually, the poor state of SRE in our schools is symptomatic of how the confused relationship between the state, in the form of schools and families and their children, is dangerously letting our young people down.

To combat this, the Government's focus has largely been on filtering out pornographic websites from impressionable young eyes and what requirements there should be on internet companies to police the internet, especially against violent sex predators.

⁵⁸ UK Youth Parliament (2007) *SRE: Are you getting it?*

⁵⁹ Frankel H (2010) *Let's Talk About Sex*, TES, 3 December 2010

But this is only part of the problem. Surely the fundamental issue we are failing to address is why the teenage boy sought out violent sex websites and ‘normalised’ them as a way of conducting a relationship in the first place. Why on earth did the girl not have the confidence and savviness to tell him where to go; and where were the parents in all of this? There are many contributing factors to this problem, but at its heart is the continuing failure to instil good quality sex and relationship education in our children, both at school and at home.

Whether it is SRE or other aspects of the ‘healthy living’ agenda, surely we need our parents to have a far greater role here and we need to have a proper warts and all debate about it. Parents should be confident enough in themselves; confident enough to seek appropriate support when they need it to and not always be looking over their shoulder trying to second guess the latest Government crackdown to curb underage access to violent porn, obesity, substance abuse or anti-social behaviour. So I suggest we need a confidence boosting crusade of ‘localism for parents’, just as the Government is rightly promoting for local communities.

Conclusion

We complain about society’s commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood, yet when we seek to put children’s rights ahead of the protection they need while they remain children, then surely the state is complicit with it. When we strive to prescribe in such terms how children should be brought up or when they should be taken away, we must do so in a way that does not undermine the confidence of good parenting that in the vast majority of cases is the bedrock of strong families and produces resilient and balanced children.

In the past 25 years, there have been over 100 separate Acts of Parliament affecting children across the UK. Have they strengthened families, emboldened parents, clarified the relationship and expectations between state and parents and their children? In too many cases I fear not, but we keep on legislating. As my fellow essayist Richard Reeves⁶⁰ said: ‘a revealing linguistic change in the last 30 years is the way that ‘parent’ has become a verb as well as noun.’ Have we used that as cover for poor legislating?

Children are children for a reason – they are still growing up and need their parents to help them, guide them and protect them in that process. The State, which generally makes for a lousy parent, needs to remember that first and foremost.

⁶⁰ Reeves R (2013) [The Symmetrical Family](#), 4Children 30 Year Essay

About the author

Tim Loughton MP



First elected to Parliament as MP for East Worthing and Shoreham in 1997, Tim was an important part of the Conservative Education team for a number of years. During the party's time in Opposition, he served as Shadow Children's Minister for seven years, from 2003 to 2010. Over this time, Tim served as a Member on a number of Bill committees including the Adoption & Children Bill 2001-2002, Children Bill 2004, Childcare Bill 2005, Children and Adoption Bill 2006, Children and Young Persons Bill 2008 and Children Schools and Families Bill 2010. Following the 2010 General Election, Tim was appointed Minister for Children and Families, a position he held until 2012 where he was responsible for the implementation of the Government's proposed legislation on children and adoption. Tim has also been involved with a wide range of relevant All Party Parliamentary Groups, and is currently Vice-Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Child Protection.

Prior to becoming an MP Tim had an extensive career in finance, which included eight years as a Director at Fleming Private Asset Management, and has also been a governor of a primary school and a technical college in Battersea.

About 4Children

4Children is the national children and families charity, which develops, influences and shapes national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families and works with a wide range of partners to deliver real support for children 0-19 and families in their community.

4Children (or the National Out of School Alliance as it was originally known) was established over 30 years ago in response to growing concern about the welfare of so called 'latchkey' children. Since then, the charity has gone on to deepen and broaden its work around the needs of all children 0–19 and their families and, starting around seven years ago, delivers services, including more than 80 Sure Start Children's Centres, nurseries, out of school clubs and youth and family support.

The charity works with families, communities, local authorities and governments to develop new policy proposals and delivery solutions, to meet the evolving challenge of supporting children and their families.

Find out about 4Children's wide range of support programmes, campaigns, services, products and events at www.4Children.org.uk.

Information Helpline: 020 7512 2100

The views expressed within this pamphlet represent those of the author.

About the series

This essay from Tim Loughton is the final in a series of pamphlets being published to celebrate 4Children's 30th Anniversary year, 2013-14. Other essays published to date in this series include:

- The Symmetrical Family – Richard Reeves
- Young Dads: overlooked, undercounted, but out there – Rt Hon. David Lammy MP
- Modern Motherhood – Cherie Blair
- Flourishing children, smarter government: Learning from the frontline – David Robinson

For more information visit www.4Children.org.uk/30-years

The State our children are in

Member of Parliament, former Children's Minister and Parliamentary "Friend of 4Children" Tim Loughton MP, looks at the relationship between family and state and what he calls an "increasingly precarious" position of children somewhere in between.

This essay, the final in a series of five commissioned to celebrate 4Children's 30th year in 2013, sees Loughton set out his 10-point vision for how the UK Government could "show itself to be serious about promoting the value of family", and give some examples of where practical action would empower children and the family.

Loughton calls for a rebalancing of the relationship between State and family, supporting not supplanting them, and with the interests of the child always first, and making the case for the huge gains to be made from early intervention in a child's life. Other elements of this plan include the importance of shared parenting and positive role models for children, and for improving online safety.

"Children are children for a reason – they are still growing and need their parents to help them, guide them and protect them in that process. The State, which generally makes for a lousy parent, needs to remember that first and foremost"

www.4children.org.uk/30-years