

APPG on Social Mobility

Possible future work on Parenting – a consultation

This Consultation

The all-party parliamentary group on social mobility is seeking views on whether and how it might conduct some work on parenting as a key factor of life chances and social mobility. We would welcome responses by Monday 21st July 2014 to the numbered questions in the text, or any subset of them. Please email mhairi.fraser@parliament.uk.

“It is the last great taboo in public policy for governments to do something to help parents to parent. You see, if you’re in government, you’re worried [...] about the ‘nanny state’ accusation; you’re worried that this is the proper preserve of the private domain rather than the public domain. And in my view that has to change. And I think what you have done today in your report is suggested some ways in which that might become possible.”

-Alan Milburn, speaking at the launch of the *Character and Resilience Manifesto*.

I. Context

Perhaps the most salient conclusion of the APPG on Social Mobility’s recent work is that what happens in the first three years of a child’s life is of utmost importance for inter-generational improvements in mobility and life chances. **Parents**—not teachers, school administrators or government—are ultimately most responsible for a child’s development during these early years. Therefore, one might think that policymakers concerned about improving intergenerational mobility and reducing social determinism ought to be focused on **families and the home**.

As the quotation above from Alan Milburn indicates, there is often a natural hostility or scepticism to this kind of thinking. This is understandable: **no one would seriously suggest that government ministers or civil servants should seek to override or second guess parents on the raising of their young children**. But as Alan Milburn has stated, it may be possible to “convene change” on child development without intruding on parental autonomy.

Question 1: Is this a good policy area for the APPG on Social Mobility to get involved in as its next major project?

Question 2: If the APPG were to move ahead on looking at parenting initiatives, what would we need to say and do to avoid accusations of seeking to expand the “nanny state”?

Question 3: Is there a workable model for how government can work with other organisations to promote positive parenting?

We know more than ever before about the science of early childhood development. While almost all parents strive to act in the best interests of their children, most parents do not have the time to study child psychology or neuroscience. Therefore, government may be able to help by supporting the development of more parenting programmes and services that actually encourage, increase and improve parent-child interaction, as well as build parents' own support networks and personal confidence levels.

Clearly, being poor does not preclude excellent parenting and many people manage to be fantastic parents on a tight budget. Indeed there is both outstanding parenting and poor parenting in every income group and background. But low income and the problems that are sometimes associated with it – for example, existing from payday to payday, living in crowded housing or in noisy or violent surroundings, not having a buffer to cope with unforeseen events, having less ability to plan ahead – can make parenting harder. A key difference is that for children who grow up with fewer material resources additional support can be important for ensuring their future success, given that they may not be afforded many more chances later in life. So while economically disadvantaged families do not necessarily need more help than their more advantaged peers, as a group they nevertheless have the most to gain from the support that could be offered to parents.

Question 4: Can we remove the social stigma from the concept of parenting support, and if so, how?

II. Quick Knowledge Review

The second evidence-giving meeting of the APPG on Social Mobility in the lead-up to the publication of the “Seven Key Truths” focused on the early years. **Graham Allen MP** discussed the importance of parenting assistance for particularly challenged parents, e.g. teenage mums. He emphasised the positive effect that direct partnerships between teenage mums and paediatric nurses have on child development. There may also be other contexts where these kinds of partnerships make sense and could be expanded.

Graham Allen is a long-term champion of parenting initiatives, beginning with the book he co-wrote in 2007 with Iain Duncan Smith MP entitled *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens*. He has also released two reports on early intervention: a January 2011 report entitled *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* and a July 2011 report called *Early Intervention: Smart Investments, Massive Savings*. Both reports highlight the importance of parenting as part of a shift to an early intervention culture. This means not only reaching out to current and expecting parents, but also making sure that children are brought up with the skills that they need to be good parents themselves. This work led to the establishment in July 2013 of the **Early Intervention Foundation**, a charity devoted to research and advocacy in this area.

Dame Clare Tickell also gave evidence at the same meeting of the APPG, and spoke about the strong scientific evidence for the impact that play, a warm and loving home environment and communication have on both a child's physical brain development and their ability to effectively socialise with teachers and peers later on. She also suggested developing an early-years language diagnostic to try to identify two-year-olds who are behind in their language development, so that parents can be referred to resources for improving these crucial early-stage skills.

In March 2011 Dame Clare published a report entitled *Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning*. This review was produced in response to a call of for evidence on the early years foundation stage (EYFS), which was aimed at gathering evidence on best practice for improving each child's development during the critical early years. One finding of the report is that positive parenting/caring is the most important factor for development in young children. The review specifically encourages strong links between early years education providers and parents/carers. A government response to the EYFS response did not go into detail on parenting beyond general references to parenting classes.

In December 2010 **Frank Field MP** released a substantial report on early intervention initiatives called *Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children from Becoming Poor Adults*. One of his key recommendations on parenting initiatives was co-location of paediatric health services and parenting-support services. Parents, he writes, should be able to "register a birth, apply for child benefit, and discuss wider support in the same place." The government responded with a brief letter from the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister but it did not go into detail on parenting.

In 2011, **CentreForum** released a report entitled *Parenting Matters: Early Years and Social Mobility*, which communicated the now-familiar scientific and economic arguments for early years interventions. That report recommended a public campaign similar in style to the 'five a day' public health campaign promoting healthy eating, based around the five things parents can do every day to encourage child development. These five things are:

- 1) Read to your child for 15 minutes.
- 2) Play with your child on the floor for 10 minutes.
- 3) Talk with your child for 20 minutes with the television off.
- 4) Adopt positive attitudes toward your child and praise them frequently.
- 5) Give your child a nutritious diet.

Also in 2011 the Government:

- launched the **CANParent** scheme, in which parents in Camden, Middlesbrough, High Peak and Bristol can receive £100 vouchers for parenting classes. The vouchers are available from health providers and Boots pharmacies.
- launched the '**Troubled Families Initiative**', led by Louise Casey. The goal is to incentivise local authorities to target families that meet 3 of the following 4 criteria: 1) children are involved in youth crime, 2) children are out of school or frequently truant, 3) a parent is on out of work benefits, or 4) the family causes a significant cost to the taxpayer. The scheme operates according to a "payment-by-results" model whereby local authorities receive initial funding per troubled family, with further funding provided for each instance in which the authority is successful in alleviating the social problems that led to a particular family's "troubled" status.

In 2012, a group of parenting professionals and church leaders set up the **National Parenting Initiative (NPI)**. The goal of the initiative was to encourage participation in parenting courses and create an online database that allows parents to enter their postcode and find the nearest parenting class.

This year, **Character Counts** has launched a digital service called *EasyPeasy* which delivers games to parents to play with their child to increase and improve parent-child interaction. The games are based on the scientific evidence base on the role of 'character' in shaping life chances.

Finally, **Dr. Bruce Perry** is a U.S. neuroscientist and psychiatrist who has worked extensively on neurological and behavioural issues relating to young children, and gave a presentation in the House of Commons in April of this year as a guest of the Early Intervention Foundation. Dr. Perry's work makes a strong case both for parenting and for the presence of a large network of support for children so that they can have a maximal number of positive interactions throughout the early years. According to his work, the quality and quantity of basic psychological developments such as language formation and facial recognition that occur early in life can be a great predictor of future behaviour.

Question 5: Could the APPG add any value by reviewing the evidence and impact of these and other parenting reports/initiatives to see if further policy recommendations could be made before the next election?

III. Possible lines of Enquiry

There are two "poles" of government involvement in parenting and family issues. At one end is the important work identifying dangerous and highly troubling family situations and intervening for the safety of the child. At the opposite end are campaigns encouraging all families to be more mindful of child development in the early years and supporting parents to be the best they can be.

Programmes that specifically target low-income parents can be seen as stigmatising and uptake can suffer as a result. Health visitors report that their caseloads are such that they need to prioritise intervention in cases of abuse or neglect, rather than making slight but important improvements to the practices of well-meaning parents. As a result, outside intervention beyond the normal health visitor programme tends to be associated with serious parental failings and highly correlated with lower socioeconomic status.

Question 6: If the APPG on Social Mobility decides to do some work on parenting, should it be more focused on the neediest cases or on more universal parenting measures?

As mentioned in our *Character and Resilience Manifesto*, in **Leksand**, Sweden, parents are invited at the ante-natal stage to join a community-based group of expectant parents. These groups continue to meet over the first few years of the child's life and serve as a hub for parenting support. This model is currently being rolled out nationally in Sweden. The success of the Leksand model, along with the literature presented above, suggests that community-based prenatal education, which many expectant parents are positively disposed towards, could be expanded into more long-term peri-natal support. This can include family-nurse partnerships in especially vulnerable cases such as teenage parents, and classes, playgroups and children's centres for less vulnerable families.

Question 7: Is the move from ante-natal to peri-natal support feasible and/or desired? What sort of uptake could be expected?

Finally, there is the possibility of research into the wider factors that influence parenting practice. These could include, for instance, adequate housing, diet, availability of transport, etc. While the

upside of these lines of inquiry is that we may find significant correlations, the downside is that we could lose a narrow focus on parenting.

Question 8: What, if any, less obvious factors that influence parenting should the APPG be focused on?

Finally, is there is a natural connection between positive-parenting initiatives and the Government's increased investment in early years' education, especially for two and three year olds?

Question 9: Should the APPG seek to integrate its potential new focus on parenting with work in the area of early years education, or do we see these as two separate areas of focus?

Question 10: What are some other examples or case studies of parenting initiatives that the APPG should consider? This could include initiatives aimed at either especially disadvantaged families or a wider audience.

IV. Other Resources

There are undoubtedly many individuals and organisations who can provide insight and expertise into policy and practice concerning parenting.

Question 11: Are there any particular individuals and organisations that you would recommend be contacted to provide additional insights relevant to the questions posed in this document?

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Claire Tyler/Meg Hillier/Damian Hinds