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# Free Range Childhoods

Creating good neighbourhoods for children to grow up in

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Preface by Professor Leon Feinstein,  
Institute of Education

4Children



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[www.4Children.org.uk](http://www.4Children.org.uk)



## Preface

This pamphlet comes out at an important time. All main political parties have signed up with varying degrees of commitment to the target of removing child poverty in the UK by 2020 but there is a tremendous amount still to do and substantial barriers remain.

Research shows that children's life chances are strongly influenced by birth circumstances in terms of family resources of income, wealth and educational assets. However, other factors can mitigate or exacerbate the disadvantage that some children face at birth – the quality of relationships experienced both in the home and at school, the development of important skills, attributes and capabilities, and a sense of agency are all important in shaping life chances.

But children are also influenced by the wider environments in which they grow up, with community and neighbourhood factors also profoundly shaping development and outcomes, particularly as children mature and seek to gain independence. This can be a worrying time for parents and children. Whilst affluence can often provide parents with choice in how to deal with emerging concerns about their children – whether it is moving away from a worrying peer group, providing extra support for study or simply affording to change working patterns to make more time – poorer parents are more restricted in their options.

This pamphlet looks at this wider context of family, neighbourhood and culture which can undermine or enhance a child's development. It is concerned with the question of how to harness these features of context to improve outcomes for children. It argues for a new deal for families which is built on the growing body of knowledge about who is at risk of poor outcomes but also recognizes the danger of over targeting and the need to ensure that a wider range of families are able to access support and opportunity. Progressive universalism means building bridges between specific and universal services, between preventive and acute provision and thus achieving inclusion. This requires a system of social policy which is intelligent enough to provide neighbourhood and community services in light of the needs of all individuals and families, keeping the needs and voices of young people at the heart of provision.

## Free Range Childhoods

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This broader perspective also emphasizes that early intervention doesn't only mean early years intervention; drawing on the evidence that children and young people need a continuum of support through childhood and adolescence. Advances made in reducing inequalities during the early years are not self-sustaining and require reinforcement later on. The system of support needs to be flexible enough to recognize that children move in and out of risk as they grow up and experiences throughout childhood can impact on life outcomes in the longer term. Early years programmes such as Sure Start can do a great amount of good in increasing life chances for many children, but they are not an inoculation for life.

This pamphlet explores these often complex relationships between children, families and communities and explores possible ways forwards across a wide range of important themes in current policy thinking. It is well deserving of a wide readership amongst those interested in how we can work together across institutions, agencies and roles to provide better services for children and families.

**Professor Leon Feinstein**  
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5 December 2007

## Free Range Childhoods

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Children, young people and families have never before been in the spotlight as prominently as they are today. From media headlines to public policy and legislation, the welfare of our children and the nature of childhood in this country have moved centre stage, with an increasing recognition of the importance of supporting childhoods in our modern society. Our experience of growing up affects our lives and our life chances forever – good and bad. In our increasingly sophisticated world we should not forget this. If we want a society that is caring, socially responsible, achieving, inspirational and able to compete in the wider world we have to ensure that we offer children and young people the best start we can.

And talking to children and young people the message is clear – growing up today can be hard. At a time when children's lives are opening up as never before, too many lack the self-esteem, the confidence or the opportunities to make the best of the modern age. The Government has made major efforts to improve child welfare. Yet Britain still lags behind its European neighbours in many measures of childhood well-being. Many families are more affluent now than ever before, yet stubborn pockets of disadvantage remain. The statistics speak for themselves: 3.8 million children, nearly one in three, are living in poverty,<sup>1</sup> 770,000 children under 16 are disabled,<sup>2</sup> 11,000 under-21 year olds are currently in prison<sup>3</sup> and with changing patterns of migration, many children face the challenges of settling in a new country with a different language and culture, needing additional support.

This pamphlet argues for a new and bold settlement for children and families in the UK which acknowledges the challenges of growing up and bringing up children today and sets out a platform of support from Government for all, backed by guarantees to be delivered in every area.

From the early years to teens, these proposals build on developments to date to create a network of universal and joined up opportunities and services for all children and their families – and specialist support available at the earliest opportunity when needed – in and around excellent schools. This new deal for children and young people has the potential to provide the assurance, opportunities and support that Scandinavian parents and children have enjoyed for decades.

## Free Range Childhoods

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But good childhood experience also goes beyond access to excellent services. Making friends, living in a safe and welcoming community, being able to spend time with family and having safe outdoor spaces in which to play and have fun are all what we would want for our children and what we must ensure is there for all. Creating good local neighbourhoods like these for children and young people to grow up in where they are valued and belong is at the core of the change needed. Regeneration has been a priority for decades but the challenge for change and revitalisation remains immense. Putting children, young people and families at the heart of local communities offers us an opportunity to reinvigorate neighbourhoods for everyone with the joined up support that children, young people and families need close to home as part of everyday life.

These proposals do imply a major public policy investment but the returns are high – with no child ignored and no family left without the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

## A more radical approach to supporting families

Government response to these new challenges has had some success. The commitment to end child poverty by 2020 has resulted so far in 700,000 children being lifted out of poverty and the Every Child Matters agenda has provided a clear set of objectives for practitioners and agencies to coalesce around and to guide the delivery of services. At the crux of this, the massive expansion of children's centres and extended schools and now integrated youth provision has sought to embed support for children in every locality and move the focus firmly on improving outcomes. The question is: have we done enough yet?

The fact that experiences and outcomes for children are still too unevenly distributed suggests not. The overall growth in affluence and prosperity amongst society masks the fact that a significant minority of families have not benefited, and remain trapped in cycles of deprivation; concern remains that progress towards the ending child poverty target has recently stalled, and measures have so far only picked the low hanging fruit. And whilst Every Child Matters is increasingly understood by those working with children, the five outcomes and overall framework have not yet broken through professional boundaries to become known or relevant to children and families and the wider public consciousness.

## Free Range Childhoods

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A step-change in approach is required, to bring together current policy initiatives and maximise their potential based on an understanding of the factors and contexts that interact with each other to influence or undermine positive experiences and outcomes for children. The different aspects of a child's life and development, in the context of family, public services and the wider community, must be addressed and mutually reinforce each other around the needs of the child.

This is not about the State taking over family life but recognising that Government has an important role in supporting children to have a positive experience of childhood and that from parental employment to local neighbourhoods, crime and schools, the intervention of Government has a major impact on the experience of growing up. It is also a recognition that we all benefit if children and young people get the support they need.

### **A system of support which includes more families than before**

All children and young people benefit from positive opportunities and support as they grow up. That's why it is crucial that the system we design is universal, extending the current entitlement around services for 3 and 4 year olds, health and schools themselves into a wider system which is capable of offering high quality opportunities for all with specialist support built in when needed.

In addition, because our experience of growing up is a result of a complex interplay of individual, family and community factors, a truly preventative system of support cannot be limited only to those identified as 'poor' or 'vulnerable' at birth. Inherited family circumstance plays a significant role in influencing life chances (those belonging to the lowest socio-economic group are six times more likely to experience multiple deprivations in adulthood than children born into the highest SEG<sup>4</sup>) – but a focus only on low income oversimplifies the picture. Factors such as parental interest in schooling have a crucial impact and can offset or mitigate the worst effects of poverty and these dynamics can undermine or enhance each other: high quality parenting can be boosted by good schooling, just as it can be undermined by weak educational settings. The universal setting is also crucial in providing an

accessible and non stigmatising route to services for parents. Universal services will often be the first point of contact for families who need help, which is particularly important when thresholds of support are high. Consistent evidence shows that even when parents ask for help they can be turned away when their needs are not sufficiently high. Creating a seamless system of support will mean that parents and children are less likely to fall between the gaps in services. It also means that ongoing support is available when needed.

### **A system which intervenes and offers support from 0–19**

Offering young children a good start in life through support for the early years is crucial and has a major impact on improving life chances. However it is not an inoculation for life and despite the positive impact of intervention and support in the early years, the gains will be lost if support is not continued at key stages throughout childhood. The evidence on this is clear; despite high levels of predictability for those children who are worst off, around half would not have been identified previously.<sup>5</sup> Life events and pressure points in child development create key moments and turning points – the 8–14 period, for example, is a crucial time when social, health and learning habits as well as peer groups begin to set. The transition years to secondary school – when many 11 year olds show a dip in attainment at Key Stage 3 – can also leave children susceptible to anti-social behaviour and social exclusion. Providing a continuum of support throughout childhood recognises the importance of key stages of development. It also provides the ongoing support for parents that is crucial if complex problems and difficulties are to be overcome.

### **A system which is truly preventative**

The complex interaction of factors and processes which combine to produce different outcomes for children means that people who know and work with families will be the most appropriate to diagnose need and design support. This ensures that decisions are not taken based solely on the probabilities of a hypothetical family, but on an understanding of the particular situation of each family individually.

The importance of prevention and early intervention cannot be underestimated. Stopping problems from developing and intervening early where there are difficulties are vital to prevent the human, social and economic costs of dealing with families in crisis. Help and support should be flexible in order to deal with the evolving needs of the families involved; offer the level of support and help the families require; offer more tailor-made packages of support; and knit together universal services with those with the highest levels of need – to create a seamless system of support for children and families.

### Tackling poverty

In reducing inequalities and improving outcomes, the starting point has to be the family. The strong association of low income and father's occupation in the lowest socio economic group with high risk for children means that the eradication of child poverty has to be a major priority. Today 3.8 million children live in families below the poverty line (60% of median income), almost one in three in the UK.<sup>6</sup> Children born into poverty begin life at a disadvantage: they are more likely to have a low birth weight, which increases the chances of infant mortality and later health, cognitive and behavioural development issues.<sup>7</sup> Poverty undermines a child's opportunity to thrive: alongside the fact of material deprivation and a lack of access to basic necessities such as a balanced diet and good accommodation, children in poverty also find themselves excluded and have less chance to participate fully in society.<sup>8</sup>

If Government is to achieve its commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020 there is little doubt it will need a multifaceted approach. Increased investment in tax credits and benefits and average earnings are needed urgently.<sup>9</sup> Beyond that, measures must focus on more sophisticated support for particularly vulnerable families with enhanced help for lone parents, those with disabilities and particular ethnic minorities. Establishing work as a realistic option for all parents is central: extending the right to request flexible working to all parents and increasing access to training and in-work upskilling are key priorities.

Effecting change in the long term means breaking the cycle of entrenched intergenerational family poverty by supporting children

to increase their resilience and develop a strong sense of agency, raising expectations and aspirations.

### **Supporting parents and families**

Almost all parents consulted by 4Children<sup>10</sup> want to know about what is available for them and their families in their local areas; this basic information deficit often means the benefits of new initiatives are not felt on the ground. In addition, many parents felt a reluctance to ask neighbours or local services for help. The establishment of ‘drop in’ parent support sessions and surgeries in every area would provide much needed advice and guidance to all parents in a neutral environment, without stigmatising or judging those who need help. Approaches to parenting must also move beyond simply penal or behavioural, and prioritise building two-way relationships and empathy, rather than addressing the actions of individuals in isolation. Both parents must be given prominence in the child’s life. Promoting the responsibilities of the father and the quality of this relationship can improve the life chances of the child.<sup>11</sup>

### **Creating good local neighbourhoods for every child to grow up in**

Our experience of growing up is linked to the local area we live in. Many parents look anxiously at local schools, access to dentists and GPs, and the state of parks and green spaces before they plan a family move. However, for many options are limited; good neighbourhoods for families will often mean high house prices which are beyond the means of most. More worryingly, those who are poor and need help most will often rely on public housing and live in disadvantaged areas with poor facilities and amenities. Reconfiguring disadvantaged neighbourhoods around families will be essential if we are to improve outcomes for all.

## **Giving every child the best start in life – local support and opportunities for the early years**

Support for children in the early years is a crucial element of any locality. At a very early stage in life, poorer children fall behind those from wealthier backgrounds. Emerging findings from the Millennium Cohort Study demonstrate that by the age of 3, children who are disadvantaged in terms of parental income and education have already fallen up to a year behind their more advantaged peers.<sup>12</sup> High quality early years education has been shown to particularly benefit disadvantaged children, providing a positive learning environment they may lack at home,<sup>13</sup> and the rollout of children's centres across all communities offers a valuable component of extending positive early years services to all children.

There have been major gains in early years provision especially in relation to support for 3 and 4 year olds. However, despite significant investment in childcare and the expansion of places available under this Government, barriers to access remain in terms of affordability and appropriateness of childcare for the most vulnerable groups, including lone parents, children with disabilities, children from large families and those in workless households.<sup>14</sup> Investing in and widening access to childcare support should be a priority in supporting parents to give their children the best start in life.

The early years are a crucial stage in a child's development, but progress made here can be undermined if the right support is not continued as a child grows. By the age of 10, children who were born into advantaged families but by 2 years were exhibiting low cognitive ability outperform children who had high cognitive ability at that age, but came from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> On average, children from wealthy backgrounds are nearly three times more likely to improve than those from poor backgrounds.<sup>16</sup>

The range of programmes and initiatives that currently exist should now be consolidated into a childcare guarantee for every parent, to ensure that there is flexible and affordable childcare accessible to all parents and in every community. The complex system of support is too difficult to navigate for many parents, and those who need it most too often benefit the least. Measures are needed to stimulate

## Free Range Childhoods

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both the supply of childcare and parental demand. Universal access needs to go further than the current entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds – beginning at birth and extending up to age 14, this provision would help create a continuum of support able to respond to life events and pressure points within families when needed.

Parents are of course the biggest influence on children so it is only right that they should be a key focus for Government support. Far from seeking to replace parents with a ‘nanny state’ approach, the role for Government is one which supports parents in their role, empowers them to feel confident and able to deal with the pressures that are brought to bear on families through 21<sup>st</sup> century childhood.

Evidence shows that supporting parents is vital in enabling children to achieve their potential. Good parenting can have a significant effect in reversing the impact of deprivation and research has demonstrated that encouragement from parents and the sense of a stable and warm home environment can enable children born with material disadvantage to become high achievers as adults.<sup>17</sup>

## Supporting children as they ‘grow up’

Many parents think life will get easier once their children start school but most quickly come to realise that this is not necessarily the case. The difference between office and school hours, with 13 weeks holiday stretching between, is the first thing to hit home, meaning the work–life balance needs to be rewritten – with flexible working and childcare around the school day unavailable or unaffordable for many.

However once children reach school age, the role of schools remains key to offsetting disadvantage because the quality of a child’s education, in terms of both academic attainment and the acquisition of social and emotional skills, is a strong indicator of life chances and children who do well at school are far less likely to experience poor outcomes, whilst low attainment is a common factor in most poor outcomes.<sup>18</sup> For children of this age, schools offer an important opportunity to start moving away from parental dependence and learn more about friendships, and peer groups start becoming more important. School also offers access to

## Free Range Childhoods

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learning more about the world around them, helping children develop interests, likes and dislikes through experience. The extended school agenda should be at the forefront of community response to this. The great potential of extended services for children lies in the ability to develop non-cognitive, social skills by providing a wide range of activities and experiences for all children. Research shows that extended school services help develop confidence, improve relationships and raise aspirations for children and young people. Extended services also offer the opportunity to provide intensive support for families with high level of need which can help to improve outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

As the Government makes good progress towards its target of all schools providing extended services by 2010, there must be an equivalent emphasis on the quality, not just quantity, of provision and the range of activities on offer for children and the very real need to communicate to parents what they can expect in their local area as a result of these reforms.

Sadly, despite improvements in academic attainment overall, good local schools are still out of reach for some children, particularly those who live in deprived areas – and there is considerable evidence to suggest that the acquisition of skills is socially stratified.<sup>20</sup> For example, children eligible for free school meals (FSM) are under represented in the top 200 state schools compared to both national averages and the postcode sectors in which the schools are sited. The overall rate of FSM eligibility at these schools was 3%, compared to 12.3% in their local areas and 14.3% nationally.<sup>21</sup>

The importance of parents in improving outcomes underlines the importance of a partnership with parents. Many parents say that their involvement falls off when their child starts school, with far less parental communication than in early years settings, for example. Ongoing engagement between the school and parents is a vital component of a child's educational advancement, with parental involvement in a child's schooling for a child between the ages of 7 and 16 being a more powerful force than family background, size of family and level of parental education.<sup>22</sup> Teachers must be supported and encouraged to increasingly step outside institutional confines to establish mutually reinforcing partnerships between the school and home learning environments.

## And moving into the teenage years...

What can seem like an ideal area in which to bring up younger children can often seem inappropriate and ill conceived for the teenage years. Growing independence and mobility can take teenagers beyond the confines of parental supervision as they begin to travel with friends to take up opportunities and meet others – reinforcing the need for good transport, safe places to go and things to do.

The teenage years are a crucial point of development, during which long-lasting attitudes and capabilities begin to form. They are a period of experimentation, of identity formation and learning. Yet changes in working patterns and family and community structures have had a sharp impact on young people themselves with 80% of parents of teenagers now working. Taken simultaneously with the decline in known adults around and willing to help, the effect for young people is profound. Overwhelmingly young people identify boredom as a significant issue, with the sharpest effects being felt in the hours directly after the end of the school day. 34% of 11–16 year olds reporting that they regularly return home to an empty house, with significant amounts of time unsupervised as a result.<sup>23</sup>

However it is not young people alone who are affected by these changes. Flick through any local paper and the headlines will speak for themselves with consistent concerns from the local community – especially from older people about anti social behaviour. In its more extreme form one of the results of an increasing amount of unsupervised time has been a rise in the number of gangs, estimated during 2006 to involve 6% of 10–19 year olds and 12% of 14–16 year olds.<sup>24</sup>

Supporting children and young people through these years can be challenging and for communities teenagers can make uncomfortable neighbours, but there is a gain for all of society if the right support is on offer and accessible for this generation. Extended schools, though they embody the potential to offer a wide range of out of school services around schools, are not yet a reality in most areas. At the same time, most young people do not have access to a youth centre in their area at the times they need or that offers the range of contemporary activities they want to see made available. The Government's ten year strategy for youth,

*Aiming High for Young People*, promises much in terms of increased investment for facilities for youth. However, notwithstanding an important prioritisation of the most deprived areas, many local communities will have to wait a number of years to see substantial improvements in provision – meaning that for many young people the necessary step-change of activity and support will not become a reality soon enough to meet their needs.

Stepping up that activity to bring real support and opportunities to all young people now in local communities is an urgent priority, backed up by the specialist support and targeted intervention that we know some young people will need. Supporting transition into teenage years should also be crucial with a concerning gap in provision for older children, with less than one childcare place for every 200 children from 11–14.<sup>25</sup> Supporting families to spend time with their teenagers will also be crucial.

## **Access to good public space for children and young people, parks and places to play**

Children and young people don't spend all their lives in services. Indeed, from the earliest of ages access to good parks that are child and family friendly with good places to play and spend time are a key aspect of childhood experience. As children grow older they will spend an increasing amount of time in public arenas benefiting from a rich and vibrant environment that is welcoming, interesting and safe.

The opportunity to use and enjoy safe play areas, leisure and arts facilities, and green spaces is highly important for children's development and wellbeing, as they explore and discover the world about them.<sup>26</sup> Yet the needs of children have often been the last to have been considered when public space is being planned. Too often children and young people find themselves separated spatially from the rest of the community into designated areas; or excluded entirely.<sup>27</sup> And it is no coincidence that the most deprived children and families are the most let down by their neighbourhoods – children who live in high density inner cities feel unsafe after dark and are less likely to live near well-maintained green spaces.<sup>28</sup> Poor housing and a lack of private gardens and transport only make the same children more dependent on public spaces in their locality.

## Free Range Childhoods

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As the arguments rage over the dangers of wrapping children in cotton wool, the reality for most is that the balance of risk seems too skewed: parents often voice fears that their locality is too risky for children and they have little confidence that their neighbourhoods are safe places.<sup>29</sup> Too many children and young people are limited in their leisure time with restricted freedoms and access to the outdoors as a result.

In reality, planning policy tends to be driven by two major concerns, which relegate the needs of children as users: economic regeneration and transport.<sup>30</sup> The need to attract commerce and pressure on land supply threatens the areas children use, and research has uncovered the surprising extent of children's fears that their open spaces are threatened by developers.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, the dominance of the car in public areas has very stark health ramifications for young people, with two thirds of deaths and serious injuries among children involving child pedestrians injured in road crashes.<sup>32</sup>

Countries that scored highly on the well-being indicator of the UNICEF Report, notably the Netherlands and in Scandinavia, have planning and transport systems that have shaped their built environment in ways that promote the visibility and activity of children and young people in the public realm.<sup>33</sup>

Rolling out this approach in the UK would seek to empower children and young people and emphasise their equal right of access and enjoyment, promoting safer streets and bringing their needs into the mainstream. All spaces would be have 'playable' potential and encourage both children's and intergenerational cooperation and social interaction<sup>34</sup> and include the needs of older children.<sup>35</sup> Skate parks, music and performance areas and use of community square and parks are popular demands of young people. With an injection of imagination, often stagnant youth provision can also be transformed to create a range of places and spaces for young people to meet and have access to music, arts, sport and other activities that can challenge, stimulate and broaden horizons.

## A vision for children and young people

Communities flourish both socially and economically, if children and families come first and are placed at the heart of community solutions. Local areas prosper when parents are able to support their children and are able to access work. They also prosper when children and young people feel a sense of ownership over local spaces and become actively engaged with their community. Investing in local services can help regenerate communities by creating a trusted and reliable support base for all children and their families.

The Government has committed to a Sure Start Children's Centre and extended school in every community by 2010, but to really support good childhoods we need to go much deeper and further than this. Every child and young person deserves support from community based services throughout their childhood, empowering them to realise their potential and aspirations. We have the potential of universal, integrated services – from early years to out of school and youth services – providing children and young people with the space and capacity to learn, build positive relationships and develop the skills necessary to live healthy and enjoyable lifestyles. These services need to be available to all children and young people aged 0–19, and should have the capacity for offering extra support for children and young people with particular or specialist needs. Such centres of support have the potential of being as natural a part of the community landscape as the primary school and the GP's surgery. They offer the potential for seeing children's lives and their needs in the round and developing solutions that reflect their complexity and diversity.

The starting point must be the child, not the system. Children do not exist in a vacuum, separate from the rest of adult and public life; a commitment to 'child-proofing' every policy, on a national and a local level, would establish a stronger and much needed focus on outcomes. Every policy, beyond those traditionally associated with children and care, must be evaluated on the merits of its implications for children, and its contribution to narrowing the gap in outcomes. Alongside this, new ways of assessing what works to narrow the gap and quality of life improvement indicators need to be developed and guide performance.

## Free Range Childhoods

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Local Area Agreements, which are becoming compulsory from 2008, will be key to developing the coordination that is required to deliver for children and young people. By putting Local Strategic Partnerships at the centre of negotiation, delivery and monitoring of the priority outcomes in the local area, authorities will be able to develop holistic responses which address the range of children's needs. Statutory targets for early years and education should be combined with other performance indicators across a range of areas including health, housing, employment, transport and youth to allow councils a stronger role in shaping delivery and establishing partnerships between providers, with an explicit focus on children's outcomes.

Children do not live their lives according to the policy and institutional silos that adults distinguish between and practitioners work within. Their experiences of home, children's centres, school and their wider community are interchangeable and they can both complement and undermine each other. There must be a greater emphasis on building partnerships across these areas, with the child's needs as a guiding concern. The engagement and empowerment of parents, in services and in the workplace, is critical to building and supporting their capacity to raise and provide for their children. Breaking down the barriers that currently exist around children's institutions and the rest of society will foster truly family friendly communities, with confident and sustainable partnerships established around the child, for the good of the child.

To maximise the potential of developments to date in a way that also make sense and can be relied upon by parents, the new Children's Plan needs to draw together the plethora of initiatives into a coherent system of support for all children and young people. The programme would offer seamless support for children of all ages, within a joined up system, across the services and in every community. Support for all would coexist, with proactive and preventative action for those most in need. Strong strategic leadership to drive through this agenda must be combined with an innovative Children's Profession working outside traditional boundaries, using local knowledge to assess need and design appropriate, personalised support. Underpinning this Children's Programme, an outcome-focused and mainstreamed Children's Fund for all services and support would simplify the plethora of funding streams and maximise the benefits to all children, families and communities.

## Recommendations for change

- **A clear commitment to the nation to support parents to bring up their children, whilst supporting positive childhoods for children from birth to 19**

Government has invested significantly in services for children and young people over the last ten years as part of an ambitious programme of service reforms. Yet the impact of these improvements can be slow to be felt, with many parents and children remaining confused and unaware of the range of support available. Providing an explicit commitment and guarantee of support in every area will be key to raising awareness and expectations of children and parents to offer them the reassurance and support they need.

At the same time the children's service system is in urgent need of simplification. From childcare to youth provision, specialist support and multi agency work to wider specialist services, children and families still sink under the complexity of professional boundaries and systems, meaning that many do not get access to the support they should.

- **Deliver good neighbourhoods for children to grow up in**

Families want their neighbourhoods to be good places in which to bring up children. That means good parks, with lots going on in them (such as children's playgrounds and family days), places to play, good nurseries, childcare and drop-ins for young children, and good schools. As children grow up, parents say that they want lots of activities and involvement opportunities for their school age children and youth clubs for older children. Good information on what is available locally is crucial.

To achieve this, the Government should incorporate the needs of children across all that it does. It should establish 'Children's Zones' in key neighbourhoods – as a base for the provision of a range of play, sports and physical activity, leisure and childcare opportunities. It should provide funding for family days and events in parks; carry out a Child Impact Statement as part of planning permission procedures; and provide extra support for children

## Free Range Childhoods

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and families in rural areas, who are too often left out of Government funding and initiatives.

- **Special help when children and families first need it**

There needs to be local help for children and families who need it, at the earliest time they need it, as part of everyday life. Joining up integrated frontline delivery across the age range 0–19 would maximize support for children and families throughout childhood and utilise the benefits of cross-agency working.

Interventions and support must build on each other as the child grows rather than falling away after the age of Sure Start – challenges remain into the teenage years and support is often needed in addressing these. It is only into adulthood, significantly later in life, that marriage, parenthood and employment narrows the number of influences and risk factors, whilst performing a normative effect on outcomes.

- **Help for parents to work and bring up children**

Families' working patterns and arrangements have a major impact on family life. Most families would like to balance home and work better but are unable to do so. Extended rights to request flexible working for parents with children over 6 are key, as is a bold guarantee to provide childcare with a free entitlement for of hours for children aged 1–14.

- **Support happy and confident childhoods**

Whilst fantastic opportunities for children to learn, play and develop are important, having the right social and emotional support and the skills to deal with difficulties and challenges as they emerge is crucial. Family relationships, parenting, children's friendships and wider attitudes to children in the community all have a key impact on the childhood experience. And for those who are vulnerable these skills are even more crucial, enabling children and young people to outwit the disadvantage that they are faced with day in day out.

## **Free Range Childhoods**

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To support this it is recommended that developing social and emotional skills and resilience is built into school and in out of school activities. Access to ongoing parent support in the community – especially at times of difficulty – is crucial, as is a partnership with parents throughout school. And it is important that we make the needs of children a number one priority at times of family breakdown, with support for children available to all. Involving parents in local community activities and activities for children, and building intergenerational opportunities to make friendships and share experiences across the age range, put children and young people centre stage – building a community that involves and is proud of its children.

## Free Range Childhoods

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- 1 *Child Poverty and Income (2007)* A briefing by Barnardo's, CPAG, One Parent Families and Save the Children for the Campaign to End Child Poverty
  - 2 [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)
  - 3 [www.crimeinfo.org.uk](http://www.crimeinfo.org.uk)
  - 4 Based on analysis of the 1970 Cohort Study. Based on fathers' occupations, the highest SEG is professional, the lowest unskilled. See Feinstein L, et al. (2007) *Reducing Inequalities: Realising the talents of all*, National Children's Bureau.
  - 5 Feinstein, L (2006) 'Predicting adult outcomes from earlier signals: modelling pathways through childhood', Report for HMT, version 1.3. Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education
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## Free Range Childhoods

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## **Free Range Childhoods**

### **Creating good neighbourhoods for children to grow up in**

Children's welfare and the importance of supporting childhood in our modern society are in the spotlight as never before - from media headlines to public policy and legislation. This pamphlet argues for a new and bold settlement for children and families in the UK which acknowledges the challenges of growing up and bringing up children today and sets out a platform of support from Government for all, backed by guarantees to be delivered in every area.

From the early years to teens, these proposals build on developments to date to create a network of universal and joined up opportunities and services for all children and families - and specialist support available at the earliest opportunity when needed. But good childhood experience goes beyond access to excellent services. Creating good local neighbourhoods for children and young people to grow up in where they can have fun, be safe, valued and belong is at the core of the change needed. Major public policy investment would bring high returns - with no child ignored and no family left without the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

4Children is the national charity dedicated to creating opportunities and building futures for all children and young people. From children's centres to extended schools, childcare to play provision, parenting support to support for young people - 4Children is at the forefront of delivery and support for innovative children's services.