

# United Kingdom Special Parliamentary Hearing on Parenting, 14 July 1994 – Invited Editorial –

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Brief witness submission from Professor Richard Whitfield

## **Propositions**

First, two simple propositions backed by a range of multidisciplinary evidence:

1. Civilisations do not survive unless they give specific status to the relations between men and women for procreation and childrearing. Social disorder and eventual collapse are the consequences of neglect of this principle.
2. Only rarely do children thrive unless they have at least one adult who is both rationally and irrationally, and permanently, committed to their interests and welfare. Put rather more candidly, and in terms of identity, we are 'nobody without a committed somebody'.

## **Observations**

Now some related observations. From the implantation of the fertilised ovum at the mother's uterine wall onwards, human life is both robust and vulnerable. It has the potential to develop through a range of reasonably well mapped 'life stages', and each of these has biological, intellectual, emotional, social, moral and spiritual potential; there are genetic limitations, some occasionally severe.

Each life stage affects the next, and, after birth, the total social environment is crucial to both the development and sustaining of a person's potential. Our

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'being and becoming', the establishment and maintenance of who we are, our identity and sense of emerging life-story, are hugely dependent upon the quality and reassurance of our social environment. In infancy and early childhood we are especially vulnerable, not least emotionally in ways which have lifelong significance. The transition to the social status of young adult and young citizen is also a testing period if adolescence is not surrounded by flexible, yet containing, supportive structures, and sensitive listening ears.

The infant's, child's and adolescent's best chances of having committed, nurturing others who will supply continuity of care for no less than two decades, generally rest with the biological parents or equivalent substitutes located as soon as possible after birth. So reliable parenthood, whatever its detailed forms, is of central importance to the future of any society. Arguably the nurturing *work* (employment?) which parents and parent-figures do is their most important life task; and it has many social, educational and economic implications.

### Action Implications

I am presuming that this hearing would not be taking place without broad concern and agreement surrounding the above comments. But my summary is *action knowledge*, not mere sentiment. The more that we learn about the development of human potential is generally suggestive of improved practices in and conditions for childrearing, and the necessity of both public and private policies to back them up. Largely we ignore this knowledge, hoping perhaps that in enough cases the robust aspects of human organisms will outweigh their vulnerabilities. Given any combination of stressors at different points of the life course, this is rarely so in the emotional, social and moral domains in a culture which is image and material-rich, thus endowing both high expectations and anger and disillusion when they are not met.

There has never been a 'golden age' of childrearing but, to say the least, our society has been cavalier over the last 30 years about safeguarding the quality parenthood upon which literally everything ultimately depends. If we were rational in terms of safeguarding our own interests, let alone those of our children, we would give pride of place to the tasks of parenthood, to the conditions for secure attachment and reliable love. We would invest long in the essentials of cultural reproduction and extension. (For example, improving educational standards will prove unattainable unless we recognise in public policy that parents, in the context of home and family, are the child's first and potentially most important educators; the massive and long persistence of home background variables upon achievement in science is a small part of the evidence here).

When I was Director of Child Care at the Save the Children Fund I used to say of the UK context that the best chance of 'saving' a child was to 'save' his or her parents – giving them recognition, educational and other resources, status and support. Parents are both the front-line defence force and the potential empowerers of our children; yet they cannot execute their ever more complex tasks of parenting in modern societies without being appropriately empowered themselves. That involves far more than hand-outs. Centrally, it demands *unhur-*

ried time for active and informed parenting; so-called ‘quality time’ for mutually rewarding parent-child interaction can rarely be programmed, especially beyond primary school age.

A host of official and unofficial reports going back at least 20 years concerning the need for enhanced parenthood have been largely ignored in terms of public policies. For example, parallel recommendations in the highly acclaimed Court Report on Child Health Services (1975) and the Interdepartmental White Paper on “Violence in the Family” (1978) concerning the serious preparation of all boys and girls for the options of parenthood and adult roles in family life were never followed through.

The needed action has become urgent if we are to safeguard let alone enhance a viable social ecology. The evidence of transmitted deprivations between generations was persuasive even before a range of forces, including public policies, implicitly encouraged disrespect of our intimate attachments and the trust and hope which are embedded in them. *Only through a socially engendered sense of self-worth can the gift of reliable love be bestowed by parents on the next generation* as a condition for their eventual concerned citizenship. We sit on a powder keg of alienation, distrust, inner loneliness and no little despair triggered by the scarcity of reliable love, the loss of authority in containing institutions, and the reality of personal disposability (save perhaps as consumers) which now affects all sectors of society. Fear rather than trust permeates so many relationships.

The National Family Trust has we believe articulated a range of research-informed proposals related to parenting which can command wide support (see for example our “Families and the Nation” published just prior to the last General Election). With St George’s House at Windsor Castle the Trust has been sponsoring a range of consultations on family policy, many of which have emphasised the context of stable relationships and, preferably, two active parents for secure childrearing; these have both personal and community aspects.

While policies which are friendly with respect to parenting inevitably involve issues of family law, the built environment, family economics (including employment availability and flexibility, and taxation/benefits), a part of any serious programme of action to improve parenting must involve a range of preventative educational initiatives in communities, schools, colleges and universities, utilising, where appropriate, the enabling resources of the mass media.

### Some Specific Suggestions

The need now is not for more basic research, but for appropriately evaluated action involving *major shifts of resources to those who have or are likely to have responsibility for raising children*. Key components of this new investment need to be:

1. Serious, structured and demanding attention to the fourth ‘R’ – relationships – within the National Curriculum of schools. This should include the specific objective of emotional literacy. With associated values-informed lifeskills, including human communication, time and money management and psychologically informed health education, some 15% to 20% of the educational budget

must be devoted to this area with parallel investment in teacher-leader formation through the FE and HE system. Less time should be given to all other core curriculum subjects to make room for this. However, given a clearer understanding by young people of human development, of the emerging self, and of others and their needs in relationship, many of the contemporary emotional blockages to effective learning, including class disruption, would be reduced so that educational 'standards', as hitherto assessed, would I believe rise. (The National Family Trust's "Life Foundations" teaching and student resources, developed with trials over the past 6 years, with sadly no investment from central government, are concrete illustrations of this advocacy and include a wide range of sessions on parenting, partnering and family dynamics for flexible use in a variety of contexts beyond the primary school).

2. Parenthood-related education concerning different phases of child and family development should be conveniently available through inter-professional collaboration in every neighbourhood, and seen as a normal part of community provision. Included in strategies for this should be informed befriending models such as those pioneered by Newpin and Homestart which are highly cost-effective. Those at the grandparenting stage should be welded into such community movements to support hard pressed parents, while an aspect of pre-parenting experience should include the structured attachment of young people to such community endeavours. Parenthood activities are not 'ageist'; all children are a community responsibility – literally *our* children; for 'it takes a village to raise a child'. Parenting is thus everybody's business. Proper national resources should be allocated in core departmental budgets to move what is presently a very patchy and threadbare cottage industry forward. This will include creative use and refurbishment of many existing community buildings as non-judgemental 'family resource centres' where professionals' ethics and behaviour actively promote empowerment rather than dependence.
3. Pregnant women and young mothers should be showered with every possible status in the community, and by their menfolk. Biological imperatives have psychological and social consequences. Given the emotional vulnerability of infants and young children, our neglect of maternal depression and its antecedents is a national scandal; that syndrome is socially evident but politically invisible.
4. The 'gentling' of all boys and young men, and their preparation for fatherhood, is crucial to the well-being of mothers and the creation of a truly caring society in which civil authority is respected. This is part and parcel of the educational and related work (1 and 2 above) within which some gender-specific aspects are desirable. We must endeavour to avoid creating families without reliable fathers. This will involve specific cultural movements in which the mass media have a vital part to play, and the creation of a wide range of alternative-to-Rambo role models. Specific work with males at risk of, or involved in, delinquency is naturally an aspect of this, but the needed movement is not basically one of 'special needs' response.
5. Environmental conditions sensitive to child safety, secure play, personal health, parental supervision, and convenient access to enriching and support-

ive services can clearly relieve parental stress and sense of confinement. There are far too few examples of family-friendly housing and transport infrastructures which could also encourage the growth of 'natural neighbouring' and corporate responsibility for our children.

6. Parenting, and other committed caring, must be perceived as *work* with economic value. Serious sharing of employment opportunities, recognising parental responsibilities at different life phases, would decrease the lack of focussed attention (ie neglect) which huge numbers of children now experience.

### **In Conclusion**

Fundamentally public policy must recognise that we are social beings. We need each other in intimacy and friendship to make each other possible. Atomisation of family groups and excessive individualism run counter to personal and public interests; we either hang together or hang separately. The tasks of parenthood, as key aspects of citizenship, bring our innate interdependence into sharp relief. All social policy in reality becomes irrelevant and involves huge resource wastage unless we endow parenthood with status and resources. This is not now an option for the right, the left or the centre. It is crucial to any political morality.