



POLICY CHALLENGE

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTING

Lord Joseph

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Lord Joseph

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

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The author

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Lord Joseph's publications include *Reversing the trends: a critical appraisal of Conservative economic and social policies* (1975) and *Equality* (1979).

Note

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1.

The importance of parenting

My topic -- the quality of parenting -- is an emotional minefield. But when deficient it underlies many problems and causes much misery. I admire the efforts by relatives, neighbours, friends and in Churches, voluntary services and public services -- to help. I hope to stimulate more awareness and better proposals. Unless some parenting improves, many of our hopes for the future will be undermined.

Most people approach child-bearing responsibly. They talk with parents and friends. They read and they listen. They want healthy children, physically and emotionally: they aim to become good or at least 'good-enough'¹ parents.

What is good-enough parenting? For children to become self-disciplined adults, capable of loving and being loved and of consideration for others, they need from their parents consistent love and discipline; unqualified love but firm guidance in values and behaviour.

Most people experience this and, when they become parents, pass it on.

But some have had no such upbringing or fail to benefit from it. And parenting that is not good-enough can lead to misery for the children and, as they grow up, failure at school, crime, violence, disregard for others and unhappiness for themselves.

Nearly twenty years ago I spoke² of the poor prospects for the children concerned and for society from parenting that is not good-enough. I called the topic 'The Cycle of Deprivation': some researchers³ concluded that I should have called it 'Cycles of Disadvantage'. No one denied the thesis. No one disputed the paradox that despite much material improvement, the old miseries of crime and violence and self-damage seemed not to be dwindling but to be increasing.

1. The phrase was much used by the late Mia Kelmer Pringle, Director of the National Children's Bureau.

2. At a meeting of the Pre-School Play Groups Association on 29 June 1972.

3. *Cycles of Disadvantage* by Michael Rutter and Nicola Madge published by Heinemann.

I believe that things are no better today. Indeed, the smaller generation of children is increasingly experiencing a life of poverty, broken relationships and fatherlessness.

What lies behind the difficulties of parenting?

There is ignorance: there is apathy: there is lack of moral values: there is mismanagement: there is poverty -- some due to unemployment: some to lone parenthood: and some, as I shall later argue, to the cumulative effect upon parents with dependent children of changes in taxation, national insurance and charges by successive governments of both parties. Any one or any combination of these factors may lie behind parenting that fails.

I am not being Utopian: these factors cannot be eliminated: but some can be reduced.

Poverty is a pressure: many regard it as the main pressure: but there are poor families who provide admirable parenting and there are prosperous families that do not. Inadequate money makes good-enough parenting more difficult, since it depends not only upon parental resources but also upon parental resourcefulness. Mismanagement of money that could be adequate is sometimes the problem.⁴ Single parent households are likely to be hard-pressed for money: that is a fact of life that cannot be escaped without increases in social benefits that could both increase the number of single parents and discourage the married and marriage still further.

In most cases two committed and married parents are the best framework for bringing up children. Convinced left-winners as well as right-winners accept that, despite its failures, the committed two-married-parent family succeeds better in bringing up children than lone parents. But lone parents with dependent children are not homogeneous: they are widows, widowers, separated, deserted, divorced and single-never-married: and in each group there is variety of values, relationships, abilities. Of these groups, the single-never-married, the divorced and the separated have increased most sharply. Many widows and widowers in particular, but also many from among the deserted or separated or divorced, cope, often heroically. But a single

4. *The Unmentionable Face of Poverty in the Nineties* by Digby Anderson, published by the Social Affairs Unit, 1991.

mother trying to be bread-winner and home-maker and child rearer, is almost sure to be hard-pressed and likely to provide an unsatisfactory life for children. Nevertheless though two-committed-married-parents are in general better for bringing up children than households with one parent, there are cases where particular lone parent homes are better for children than particular two-parent homes.

I am not saying, therefore, that single-parenting inevitably means inadequate parenting: nor am I saying that difficulties in parenting are inevitably transmitted to the next generation. There is no doom: but there is a tendency. Unfortunately, we seem to be adding to the cycles of disadvantage. Women, for example, who were maltreated as children are least inclined to repeat this as mothers when they have a supportive husband and a secure marriage. Now, not only will such women be more likely to become single parents, but single parenthood, when a cohabiting man or a stepfather moves in, is more likely to expose the children to violence or abuse.

2.

The climate of opinion and the socialising of children

The socialising of children, the upbringing of children to accept the values of a civilised society, is overwhelmingly the responsibility of parents. It is not a direct task for government: nor is it the primary responsibility of schools, or social services or the NHS nor even of the Churches -- although they all have a role to play, particularly in praising good and good-enough parenting. It will be a blessing as gradually current school reforms raise the quality of education, especially of the less academic. Meanwhile one can only sympathise with teachers who have to cope with unsocialised children.

It is crucial for society that good-enough parenting be almost universal since much misery occurs when it is not: and crucial that it be done by parents since the efforts of others cannot necessarily offset the damage done by parents who have not coped.

It is harder now to be good-enough parents. The extended family has been dispersed. The framework based on religious belief has weakened. The influence of television may be baleful: the bad examples of behaviour set by many adults and popularised by the media make the task of bringing up children with sound values harder than before. The strong tie between family values, cultural identity and national interest has been weakened.

It may be said that failure to socialise many young is bound to result from modern life coupled with weaker beliefs and sanctions. But does evidence support this? Some West European societies seem to have less delinquency and fewer problems than we with the same background factors. Is perhaps parenting held in higher esteem there than here? Is there a greater sense of community than here? In brief, do the French, the Dutch, the Belgians and other members of the EEC have better or worse parenting than the British?

No one, especially not a conservative, can expect a quick transformation. But there could be greater expectation that more parents should act responsibly -- and expect to be criticised if they don't. In creating such an expectation what is said by churches and schools can have an effect. I do urge that every chance be taken to emphasise that at least good-enough parenting is crucially important to children -- and

to society, which, in turn, must value and reward parenthood.

Published perceptions of the quality of parenting tend to focus on finance: low income is assumed almost to justify parenting that is not good-enough. Low income does make parenting more difficult, but many parents with low incomes manage their budgets and their child-rearing admirably: and some parenting on higher incomes is not good-enough: so researchers need to recognise that quality of parenting is as relevant as finance.

I am not suggesting that there was a golden age in which all parenting was good-enough. But there were factors tending to protect children and society which have weakened and which perhaps we should reinvigorate. 'What will the neighbours say?' recognises that some sorts of behaviour are unacceptable: I regret that lone parenting has become acceptable. I realise why the stigma on unmarried parents came to be seen as itself an evil, because it spilt over to the child -- the innocent child. 'There are no illegitimate children, only illegitimate parents.' Precisely. That is why we need somehow to revive the concept that casual procreation is unacceptable for the child.

If no blame attaches to those who behave irresponsibly we shall have more irresponsible behaviour: and no corresponding respect for those who behave responsibly. This used, I believe, to be widely understood. What used to be widely approved was marriage and parenthood; and social provisions and conventions reflected this approval. Now, alas, attitudes seem to have changed and marriage as the proper background for child-rearing tends to be denigrated.

Voluntary bodies, that see some of the resulting unhappiness, have to make a judgement: if they or their agents campaign for better and better social benefits for lone mothers they will encourage trends that lie behind much misery.

That is why I focus on the scope for voluntary bodies to discourage lone parenting or parenting that does not cope. Somehow parents and potential parents who may not either by example or instinctively or by their own preparations be equipped to be good-enough parents need to be helped.

These are large categories: there are existing parents who find that they cannot cope: there are teenagers -- and older -- who don't realise the implications of bringing a child into the world: there are girls who see childbirth as the only fulfilment but do

not realise the strains, exhaustion and responsibilities involved. There are men who breed irresponsibly -- though perhaps the recent Maintenance Act may discourage some of them.

But can anything be done?

3.

Can the climate of opinion be changed?

It seems to me that adolescents, boys as well as girls, at a time when sexuality is widely articulated, should be made more aware, preferably by their parents but, if not, by others with their interests at heart, of the emotional, physical and social implications of pregnancy and of the responsibilities of parenthood.

I repeat that most make themselves aware in time. But for a minority that is not true. At school attention to parenting is apt to be in classes for less academic girls; boys are unlikely to attend; the emphasis will probably be on practical details such as nappy-changing.

As for sex itself, the emphasis tends to be on protection from disease and from pregnancy rather than on the larger issues of relationships and responsibilities. Indeed the assumption in recent years that casual sex is almost the norm must have brought intense and undesirable pressure on many young people. In some situations adults may take promiscuity and cohabitation for granted, with the result that individuals who do not take either for granted are made to feel freaks.

And surely adolescents should be warned of the difficulties where a child is brought up by a lone parent and of the importance of parents sharing the responsibilities and acting as role-models for the child.

Certainly there is immense scope for voluntary services.

The great charities -- National Children's Home, Barnardo's, NSPCC, Save The Children, The Children's Society -- focus, by many Family Centres and related institutions, on trying to rescue children from neglect or abuse: they do huge good: it is unthinkable that their work should stop: there are, alas, more cases of need than they can meet. They achieve much, but is there more that they can do in addition to increase prevention as well as to rescue? Might they not provide support for parents and children in their own homes at any stage of family life when problems look like becoming or have become overwhelming?

Then there are charities that seek to help parents who need and want help at home early in their child-rearing by offering one-to-one or one-to-two befriending.

There is perhaps a special strength and effectiveness in one-to-one or one-to-two support in the family's own home where parents -- no matter how unable to cope they may have been -- have the baby or toddler actually in front of them.

In Home-Start, first set up by Margaret Harrison in 1973, volunteers who are themselves parents, are carefully selected and with a short training aim to become trusted friends of any family with at least one or more young children, self-referred or referred by Health Visitors or social workers. These volunteers spend an average of about 4 hours a week in the family's own home for about 18 months. The volunteers have no powers and no authority -- and they can be thrown out by the parents at any time -- but they almost always leave the family concerned better able to cope and to enjoy parenting. Indeed some of the parents befriended themselves become Home-Start volunteers. Home-Start now has over 130 branches providing practical help, support and friendship via over 4000 volunteers to over 6,000 households containing nearly 15,000 children plus their parents last year.

On a smaller scale but more intensively there are the admirable Family Service Units attaching skilled workers to families particularly overwhelmed by problems.

I focus on voluntary services though there are everywhere Health Visitors and social workers. But, despite good intentions and dedication, they are not ideal as preventive workers partly because they are too busy to spend much time in a household; and partly because their powers can daunt families already lacking self-confidence. The large Child Development Programme initiated by Dr Walter Barker in 1979 has found ways of involving Health Visitors. It is active in over 25 areas, helping thousands of families a year. By agreement with some Health Authorities some Health Visitors are retrained and deployed to support parents at home.

There is the National Childbirth Trust with all its activities. There is the Community Education Movement, stemming from the pioneering work of Eric Midwinter and John Rennie in Coventry and elsewhere, and its wide range of family initiatives. There is Parent Network; there is Stepfamily.

Some voluntary bodies ministering to parents with dependent children involve the parents in providing the service, such as the Pre-School Playgroups Association: these services tend to improve the skills of the parents, and indeed the Pre-School Playgroups offer short Doorstep courses for parents in the playgroups themselves.

4.

Can prevention by voluntary bodies be encouraged?

I suggest that we cannot expect to have the civilised life that everyone wants while many children are not being socialised by their parents. Government cannot and should not tackle the job because officials are not chosen for parental skills and might be tempted to apply political bias, which could be hostile to the family.

Voluntary services could, however, perhaps help even more than they do already.

What sort of steps do I have in mind?

- a) Commission The National Children's Bureau to update 'The Needs of Parents' -- which described the huge fragmented voluntary effort already being made in 1984.
- b) Commission an impression of the quality of parenting within the EEC and the conditions that appear to account for its perceived quality and deficiencies.
- c) Set in hand continuing research to show the relative effectiveness of different methods of trying to help parents be good-enough.
- d) Consider whether more Home-Start and similar networks cannot be brought into existence to mobilise, train and deploy suitable volunteers from the ocean of goodwill that exists.
- e) Explore ways that home management and child upbringing might feature more effectively in the curriculum.
- f) Commission short films to convey the realities of caring for a new-born baby; the emotional and socialising needs of a young child as it grows; and the natural demands made on parents by all children and their exhausting as well as delighting effects. With PTA agreement such films might be shown to teenage classes with an appropriate adult to discuss questions.

- g) Adolescents will perhaps become better parents themselves if they have experienced the outcome of parenting by others. If schools encourage community service, adolescents -- academic as well as non-academic, boys as well as girls -- could become supervised helpers in settings such as infant schools and playgroups.
- h) Talk to teenagers in school to advise them that individuals do have control, even if choices are limited, over their own lives. They can make their lives better or they can make them much worse. Planning and particularly family planning is about even larger choices than the mechanics of sex and contraception.
- j) Helped by the YWCA, groups of lone mothers now exist willing to send in a spokeswoman where PTAs agree to urge teenagers not to embark on parenthood as they themselves did.

Perhaps some voluntary bodies might set up a working party to consider a few such initiatives to help the many voluntary local activities in support of good-enough parenting.

I am not, not, not suggesting that any attempt should be made to set up some national voluntary body to lead efforts to reduce parenting difficulties: that way would lie bureaucracy, hierarchy and the risk of pernicious attitudes. We have a blessedly spontaneous, blessedly local, blessedly independent network of voluntary activities including the local arms of the Churches and of national voluntary bodies. All I am suggesting is that there be made available to them, for their own use if they think fit, some helpful material.

5.

What is for government?

Government certainly should try to adopt policies which recognise the realities and the importance of parenting.

A nation must renew itself not just in physical but in social and cultural terms. The upbringing of the next generation to the values of a civilised community is an imperative.

There are some who argue that the procreation of children, under God, is voluntary and should no more attract tax relief than the acquisition of any other costly responsibility. I do not agree. The child does not choose to be born. Moreover those who have no children depend upon later generations to maintain the structure of society and to provide the services on which all depend.

If governments are to encourage good-enough parenting they will need a consistent policy of recognising stable marriage of two committed parents as the best framework for the rearing of children. Given such a climate of approval the sustained effort and self-sacrifice required by good-enough parenting (with its joys and fulfilments and its anxieties and disappointments) will be more forthcoming.

Perhaps finance matters less than the attitude -- favourable or indifferent or hostile -- to parents and parenting.

Nevertheless finance matters -- and the least that governments can be expected to do, it seems to me, is to honour the long-standing 'taxable surplus' principle that income should be taxed in relation to the number dependent on it.

By this yardstick I believe that successive governments have not taken the costs and responsibilities of child-rearing enough into account. Child tax allowances have been withdrawn: tax thresholds have fallen in real terms sharply: families now pay tax at below Income Support levels: National Insurance contributions have risen substantially: parents who both work are taxed less than when one stays at home.

It is true that Child Benefit -- replacing, in effect, more extensively the age-related Child Tax Allowances that didn't help those who paid no direct tax -- is a recogni-

tion both of the 'taxable surplus' principle and of the significance of child-bearing and rearing.

But I suggest that there is not a sufficient gap between the tax treatment of families with dependent children and those taxpayers without dependent children. Families with dependent children, for instance, have gained less over recent years in real terms, taking Child Benefit as well as tax into account, than childless couples.

The best way to provide such a gap is not obvious. It could be said that to increase Child Benefit in real terms might encourage irresponsible parenthood and discourage the thrifty. On the other hand, to means-test parents in or out of work so as to help those with dependent children more may not only equally encourage irresponsible child-bearing and discourage the thrifty but also multiply the numbers subject to the poverty trap and the 'Why work?' syndrome, increase dependency and disincentives, and expand the already huge administration.

Moreover, bearing in mind that parenting occurs mainly when people are relatively young with relatively low earnings, all but a minority of the child-rearing population have small if any 'taxable surplus' during such years. The exemption from tax of Child Benefit offsets for a minority the tax that they bear, but net total income for the bulk of taxpayers still penalises the family with dependent children compared to taxpayers on the same income without dependent children. Moreover the penalty of a wife giving up earning when her first child is born is not taken into account by the tax system. I therefore urge that in addition to tax-free Child Benefit, age-related Child Tax Allowances should be reintroduced. There is, I understand, no great difficulty in having both a tax-free Child Benefit and Child Tax Allowances.

I suggest that it would moreover be sensible for government to consider the whole treatment of families with dependent children to see how best to recognise their responsibilities more consistently so as to encourage good-enough parenting.

6.

Parents, child-rearing and jobs

Issues for voluntary services, employers & government.

The mother is and will generally be the most important parent during a child's early years, with of course help from the father. But as the child grows it is the father who becomes as significant and important in the child's life and to the child's development. The father's contribution may not be identical to the mother's but it is no less important for all that. Parents complement, support and reinforce each other's efforts.

For many reasons many mothers will want and/or need to work outside the home: finance will play a part in most cases. Some mothers will have to earn to have any tolerable standard of living: some will want to earn to supplement income: some will want to work outside the home for variety, companionship, fulfilment or to pursue a career -- or more than one such reason. Moreover a life solely with young children, however beloved, may be draining. Some mothers who pursue careers may have to sacrifice the pinnacles of their career prospects to protect the priority of their children.

While all this is true, it is also true that there are many, many mothers who want to stay at home with their children at least in their early years -- and with several children this may involve a long absence from work.

And most parents will want to be available for older children with all their anxieties and with their need of a solid, loving and guiding base.

From all this follows certain implications:

For employers, there will be more need for flexible working arrangements for mothers and also for fathers. It will not be easy for employers to compete and still to provide even more flexible options -- and it will be helpful if public and political opinion understands this. Nor can firms be expected to keep particular jobs open too long -- and if they were, fewer jobs would be available for married women. But some mothers will want to return after several years away; all mothers will want leave when a child is sick; many mothers will want part-time jobs in term-time and in school hours. And refresher training will often be needed.

Fathers too will want to have some leave for child-care: after all, some parents will decide that at particular stages it is the mother's career that will take priority.

For voluntary services,

there will increasingly no doubt be calls for more good day-care. But it is not sensible to look to a nanny-state to provide it all, though it may make sense to look to government, central and local, for contributions to voluntary service overheads. Good day-care will be costly unless it can be provided at least in part voluntarily: it will do more harm than good if it is impersonal or with constantly changing staff. And there are certainly risks in day-care. There are alarming reports from America of the damage done to children's development there by day-care. One of the results of the enquiry I have suggested into Western European parenting will be an assessment of the degree to which, for instance, French day-care provision is satisfactory. The Pre-School Playgroup Association and others have pioneered and there is more pioneering and provision needed yet.

All is easier where there is available a loving and loved parent substitute; but granny is probably now at work herself -- even if she still lives near.

Summary

I have tried to argue that along with a few other top national priorities -- defence, the rule of law, stable money, educational standards, international competitiveness -- is the upbringing of children.

As a Conservative I do not expect to achieve the kind of change we all -- whatever our politics -- want by direct efforts for immediate effect. I recognise the importance of changing the climate of opinion and of working indirectly as well as directly with a view to the longer term. That is why attitudes are so important. That is why I hope that the Churches and the voluntary services will seek and find ways to reach the parents of today and the parents of tomorrow and to champion, educate, encourage and help the spread of the blessing of good-enough parenting.

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