



## Ten years of family policy: 1999–2009

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RESEARCH & POLICY FOR THE REAL WORLD

In the Family and Parenting Institute's tenth year, this discussion paper reviews developments in family policy in England during the past decade. It examines the progress that has been made and the challenges that still remain.

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### Introduction

The National Family and Parenting Institute (now the Family and Parenting Institute) was set up in 1999, following the Green Paper from the previous year, *Supporting families* (Home Office, 1998). Since 1999, substantial changes have taken place in family policy. This paper discusses the developments of the past decade across the diverse and interlinked strands of family policy.

One of the most significant developments has been the Every Child Matters agenda, which set in train a reshaping of children's services. Alongside new procedures and systems introduced to encourage information-sharing and multidisciplinary working, there has been an emphasis on intervention in the early years. This is exemplified by Sure Start, which has aimed to reduce the link between childhood poverty and life chances.

Another major development is a new focus on the role of parents. The Government has sought to tackle two issues, social exclusion and anti-social behaviour, through parenting interventions. The role of the state in parenting support generally has also been expanded, for example by requiring local authorities to develop a parenting support strategy and employ a single commissioner of parenting support services.

The Family and Parenting Institute has been influential in shaping policy on family services throughout this period. The report *National mapping of family services in England and Wales* (Henricson et al., 2001) described the current situation and also set out a model for future development, many aspects of which have been implemented.

Another strand of government policy is closely interlinked with economic policy. In 1999 the Government committed itself to the ambitious goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020 and halving it by 2010. To achieve this, direct transfers to families through benefits and tax credits have increased, focusing particularly on low-income families in employment. These have been accompanied by measures aiming to raise the employment rate among parents.

Lone parents have been singled out as a target group for welfare reform, alongside measures to improve childcare availability and affordability. There has also been a major expansion in maternity leave provision, along with the introduction of the right for parents to request flexible working, in an attempt to make it easier for parents to balance work and family responsibilities. The final section of this report focuses on shifting family forms and family

relationships, and the state's role in helping couples to stay together and to parent their children after separation.

Many challenges still remain in family policy, such as: integrating adult and children's services to meet families' needs; ensuring families have access to both good universal services and specialist ones; achieving child poverty targets; and creating real choice for parents in how they balance paid work and family responsibilities. The changes of the past 10 years have taken place against a background of national economic prosperity. The current recession is imposing new challenges on both families and public services, and even if the recovery is quick, the context for the next decade will be one of high public debt. This paper provides an overview of family policy as we move into that new era, in the hope that some lessons from the past can inform progress in the future.

### Every Child Matters: background to children and families policy

During the past 10 years there have been extensive changes in the way that services for children and their families are organised. The principles for change were set out in a Green Paper in 2003 entitled *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury, 2003). The new structures and procedures have been introduced over several years, and are still being altered as evidence is gathered about the extent to which they are fulfilling the purpose they were created for.

This chapter looks at the background to the original Green Paper and reviews developments since 2003, including Children's Trusts and information-sharing databases on children. Finally, it considers how the Government's ambitions for children are shaped by attitudes to childhood and adolescence.

#### The *Every Child Matters* Green Paper

In 2000, Victoria Climbié, aged eight, was abused and murdered by her guardians. Revelations about the failures to protect her by the many professionals involved in the case led the Government to set up an inquiry headed by Lord Laming. In January 2003, the report from the inquiry was published. It found that health, police and social services

missed 12 opportunities to save Victoria, and the report made 108 recommendations for child protection reform.

In September 2003, the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* was published (HM Treasury, 2003). While intended to deal with failings in the child protection system, the Green Paper in fact went much further, focusing on children's outcomes. The desired headline outcomes set out for children were: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution; and economic wellbeing. This positive vision was counterbalanced with a description of outcomes to be avoided: educational failure, ill health, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, abuse and neglect, crime and anti-social behaviour.

The principles set out in the Green Paper are: that early intervention is more cost effective; that prevention is possible because of knowledge about which risk factors from an early age are associated with negative outcomes; that parenting is important; and that services fail to intervene positively in children's lives because there is a lack of accountability and information-sharing.

In other words, to prevent future crime and social disadvantage, the state had to take a much more active and interventionist role in relation to children and their development. Good universal services would still be important, but so would the identification of those children who would benefit from targeted services. Information-sharing would be key to this.

Parton (2008) points out that these policies were not new in government thinking, but that this shift in the state's role towards children was based on ideas which had been in development for many years. He identifies ideas put forward in *Child protection: messages from research* (Department of Health, 1995). This stated that as well as protecting children from abuse, the state had a role in protecting them from contexts that have a negative impact on general health and development. Parton noted research during the 1990s which suggested that intervention in early childhood could improve children's outcomes, and also the Looking After Children project, a system for gathering information on children in care.

New Labour's belief in early intervention had already been put into practice through Sure Start. Also, the Children at Risk review, part of the 2002 Spending Review, contained other intervention proposals, including systematic identification, referral and tracking regimes and Children's Trusts.

The *Every Child Matters* Green Paper was brought into legislation through the Children Act 2004. This was accompanied by further detail contained in a series of documents: *Every Child Matters: change for children* (HM Government, 2004). With the aim of creating a seamless system of children's services, the proposed changes to local structures were significant. Local authority education and children's social services would be brought together under Directors of Children's Services. Children's Trusts would bring together these services along with local health services and others, and local Safeguarding Children Boards would replace Area Child Protection Committees.

Changes to frontline practice included: the use of a Common Assessment Framework; a universal database with basic details held on all children; a single lead professional for children known to more than one specialist agency; and promotion of a model of multidisciplinary teams of professionals based in and around schools and Children's Centres.

During 2004, another key framework on children's services was published by the Department of Health. The *National service framework for children, young people and maternity services* series of guidance documents set out a child-centred approach to health (Department of Health website). As with *Every Child Matters*, it highlighted the need to support parenting.

### National government

In order to integrate services for children, as envisioned in *Every Child Matters*, change would be necessary at all levels. At national government level, responsibility for children's social services moved from the Department of Health to the Department for Education and Skills, in June 2003. At the same time, Margaret Hodge was appointed as the first Children's Minister.

Further integration took place in July 2007. As part of Gordon Brown's first ministerial reshuffle, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was created to take lead responsibility overall for children and families, a move that was widely welcomed by children's and families' organisations.

However, other departments are still responsible for many policies that affect families. These include: the Department for Work and Pensions, responsible for child poverty, welfare to work conditions and child maintenance payments; the Home Office and Ministry of Justice, responsible for youth

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justice (shared responsibility with DCSF); and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (formerly the Department for Trade and Industry), responsible for employment law, including parental leave; while the Ministry of Justice controls the family courts.

### Children's Trusts

Children's Trusts were set up to ensure that services for children were well coordinated at local level, with one local strategy across different agencies. The precise form of Children's Trusts was originally left open in legislation, but the Government's intention now is to tighten the legislative framework, bringing schools more closely into the framework.

The Children Act 2004 created a duty on local authorities to make arrangements to promote cooperation between agencies and other appropriate bodies (such as voluntary and community organisations) in order to improve children's wellbeing (where wellbeing is defined by reference to the five Every Child Matters outcomes). The Act placed a duty on key partners to take part in the cooperation arrangements. There is also an enabling power for partners to pool budgets and resources.

Currently, the 'relevant partners' with the 'duty to cooperate' are: district councils, the police, the Probation Board, the Youth Offending Team, the Strategic Health Authority and Primary Care Trusts (PCTs), Connexions partnerships (providing information, advice and guidance for young people), and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

In practice, Children's Trusts consist of local authority education and children's social services and some children's health services. Some include other local services such as Connexions and Youth Offending Teams. Most local authorities were expected to have Children's Trust arrangements in place by 2006, and all by 2008 (HM Government, 2004).

The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill 2008–09 extends the statutory 'relevant partners' to include maintained schools (and Academies), Sixth Form and Further Education Colleges, and Jobcentre Plus. It places the Children's Trust Board on a statutory footing.

In October 2008, the Audit Commission published a report into Children's Trusts (Audit Commission, 2008), highlighting some practical difficulties from the early stages of their implementation. The pooling of budgets was rare, except in areas with a strong history of cooperation, and little evidence

was found that mainstream funding from social services, education and the NHS has been redirected. Joint commissioning strategies lacked impact because there was little experience or knowledge of joint commissioning. Engagement of the private, voluntary and community sectors was found to be limited.

### Children and Young People's Plans

Children and Young People's Plans were introduced with a similar purpose to Children's Trusts: to improve local strategic planning and service commissioning, while taking into account the views of parents and children. Originally the responsibility of local authorities, these will now be formally taken over by Children's Trusts.

The Children and Young People's Plan (England) Regulations 2005 under the Children Act 2004 required local authorities to work with partners to publish a Children and Young People's Plan by April 2006, setting out the actions and provisions by which they would improve children's and young people's wellbeing (the five Every Child Matters outcomes for children). The regulations specify a list of who must be consulted, including children, young people and their families, voluntary service providers and other local authority partners.

The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill 2008–09 gives the Children's Trust Board legal responsibility for preparing, monitoring and implementing the Children and Young People's Plan.

### Children's databases

A key finding from Lord Laming's report into Victoria Climbié's death was the need to improve communication between professionals from different disciplines, share information and clarify responsibility for children's safety and wellbeing. A range of changes to frontline practice have been introduced to bring this about, such as the creation of multidisciplinary teams in Children's Centres and lead professionals to coordinate services around the child.

Possibly the most ambitious, and sometimes controversial, development has been the ongoing introduction of a range of computer systems and assessment tools to promote information-sharing about children. The three main systems are: the Integrated Children's System, for social services to plan services for children 'in need' or 'at risk'; the Common Assessment Framework, for children with additional needs; and ContactPoint, holding information on every child.

### *Integrated Children's System*

The Integrated Children's System was the first of these systems to be planned. In 2002, a consultation took place on the Integrated Children's System, which was to be based on the 'Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families' from 2000 combined with the Looking After Children System, a planning system for looked after children (Department of Health, 2002). This system was mainly to be used by social services for children 'in need', as defined by the Children Act 1989, at risk or looked after by the local authority. It was designed to support assessment, planning, intervention and review.

In 2006, in *Working together to safeguard children*, the Government announced that the separate child protection register would be phased out by 1 April 2008 and be replaced by a child protection plan within the Integrated Children's System (HM Government, 2006a).

### *Common Assessment Framework*

The Common Assessment Framework, or CAF, was proposed in the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper in 2003. It is designed to be used at an early stage by any professional when they consider a child has additional needs that require the involvement of more than one service.

The aim is that the CAF will be used across all services for children. This will enable basic information to follow a child, thus reducing the need for duplication. It will improve joint working and communication between practitioners, by embedding a common language of assessment, and improve information-sharing (with consent) between professionals.

In addition to the 12 local authority areas which conducted formal trials of the CAF and the lead professional role during 2005/06, over two-thirds of local authorities chose to use the CAF during this trial year. All local authorities were expected to implement the CAF, along with the lead professional role and information-sharing, between April 2006 and March 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families website). The single, national IT system to support CAF, 'eCAF', is not yet in place.

### *ContactPoint*

Finally, ContactPoint is a planned database that will hold basic information on every child in the country. The Green Paper *Every Child Matters* proposed that there should be

local 'information hubs' with basic details on all children in the area and the contact details of professionals involved with them, suggesting that practitioners should be able to flag up on the system early warnings of concern about a particular child.

This system would be developed from the 'Identification, Referral and Tracking' system already being piloted in 15 local authorities since 2002/03. Section 12 of the Children Act 2004 provides the legislative base for a database with information about all children and young people to facilitate contact between professionals. It allows for the database to contain "information as to the existence of any cause for concern".

In December 2005, the Government set out plans to implement this information-sharing 'index'. Implementation costs were budgeted at £224 million over three years and operating costs at £41 million per year (Department for Education and Skills, 2005).

There was unease at the implications of 'cause for concern' flags on the database. The information to be included was therefore reduced to the names and contact details of practitioners involved and whether a CAF has been undertaken (brought into legislation in the Children Act 2004 Information Database (England) Regulations 2007). The information-sharing index was rebranded 'ContactPoint' in February 2007. Some frontline professionals started using it in May 2009 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a). ContactPoint contains basic identifying information for a child, contact details for the parents or carers and the practitioners working with the child, and the facility for practitioners to indicate they had undertaken an assessment or had other information to share.

### *Criticism of children's databases*

A 2006 report to the Information Commissioner set out four main concerns about children's databases: 'e-discrimination', in which information available to professionals about a young person's background creates negative expectations about them; the limited justification for intrusions of privacy, since evidence of the effectiveness for any individual of interventions to solve social problems is limited; a lack of care taken in obtaining consent or sharing information; and the risks associated with sharing incorrect information (Anderson et al., 2006). A report by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (Anderson et al., 2009) found serious conflicts with human rights or data protection law associated with

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some databases, including ContactPoint and the electronic CAF.

Another criticism is that systems may not help frontline professionals in their work. The first report of the Social Work Task Force stated that "the great majority of front-line social workers feel that the ICS [Integrated Children's System], as they currently experience it, does not support them well" (Social Work Task Force, 2009, p17), finding it bureaucratic and constraining. The Government has responded by accepting the task force's recommendations and promising to reform the system (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009b).

Research on how professionals from different disciplines used the CAF found benefits acknowledged, alongside some concerns about the increased workload that it could create and some difficulties in multi-agency working caused by inconsistent use (Apps and Kellett, forthcoming).

### Every Child Matters – what has changed?

Since the publication of *Every Child Matters*, there has been considerable investment in services for children and families, particularly in children's early years. One development is a much stronger focus on the role of parents, leading to many new initiatives described in detail in the next chapter.

Positive impacts from integrated working have been identified (e.g. Lord et al., 2008). The scale of the changes to structures and practices has presented a challenge, however, especially when accompanied by the continual introduction of new initiatives and pilot projects. Dent (2008) highlights the roll-out of Children's Trusts as an example of the tension between the pressure to transform services within a short timescale and the desire that policy should be based on evidence and evaluation of changes.

One aspect of children's services that has not changed is that child protection procedures continue to fall under heavy public scrutiny and criticism when something goes wrong. This occurred after the prosecution in November 2008 of 'Baby P's' mother and two other adults for causing the death of the 17-month-old child after prolonged abuse.

Lord Laming's review of child protection following this case highlighted, among other issues, that the pressure on local authorities to provide crisis support and intervention on a limited budget continues to hinder provision of preventive services. High thresholds for services mean that children and families often cannot access them when they are needed

(Lord Laming, 2009). Lord Laming also stated that "the tradition of deliberate, reflective social work practice is being put in danger because of an overemphasis on process and targets" (ibid. p32). Similarly, Henricson (2007) argues that fear of non-compliance with procedures undermines professional judgement.

The importance of supporting professionals as well as focusing on structures and procedures is highlighted by a recent analysis of Serious Case Reviews. "Practitioners who are overwhelmed, not just by the *volume* of work but also by its *nature*, may not be able to do even the simple things well. Good support, supervision and a fully staffed workforce is crucial" (Brandon et al., 2009, p1). The authors of the review highlight a failure, in many cases, on the part of professionals to see the whole picture or to focus on or listen to children.

The continuing lack of integration between adult and children's services is also a serious issue, covered more fully in the 'Think Family' section below (page 14). This affects families in which domestic abuse, mental health or substance abuse is an issue as well as those where parents' learning difficulties, physical impairments or health problems mean they need support in their parenting role.

Another problem is that where specialist services are developed locally without a clear national entitlement, a 'postcode lottery' may develop, with services absent or limited by high access thresholds in some areas. Rogers (2009) highlights this in the case of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

### Childhood and youth

The justification for almost all state intervention in family life is to protect children and promote their welfare. Perceptions of childhood and adolescence shape these policies and so are worth considering.

Financial investment in children's and family services is justified by evidence showing that outcomes in later life (such as mental health, educational achievement and relationships) can be shaped by experiences even in early childhood. However, this approach has been criticised for viewing children, in a widely used description, as 'human becomings', not 'human beings'.

In 2006, a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, signed by 110 teachers, psychologists, children's authors and others, set out the aspects of modern life which they believed were damaging children and causing depression and behavioural

and developmental conditions. These were: a sedentary, screen-based lifestyle; a test-driven primary curriculum; and pressure to “act and dress like mini-adults” (Abbs et al., 2006). While criticised for idealising childhood in the past and exaggerating the problems of the present, the letter reflected some general public concerns. In April 2008, a review was launched into the impact of the commercial world on children’s wellbeing (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). The publication of the Government’s play strategy in December 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008b), along with a commitment of £235 million to improve and develop play facilities, demonstrates how far in some ways the political landscape has changed to make childhood a serious political issue.

A different set of fears has arguably been influential in shaping youth policy, caused by negative media portrayals of anti-social behaviour, teenage parents and gang culture (Clark et al., 2009). In particular, the youth justice system has been subject to criticism for the UK’s low age of criminal responsibility, high numbers of young people in custody and the use of measures such as Anti-social Behaviour Orders as a fast-track route into the criminal justice system (Children’s Rights Alliance for England, 2008).

*Youth matters: next steps* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006a) set out a more positive vision – of young people having somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to. Section 6 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, which came into effect in January 2007, places a duty on local authorities to ensure that young people have access to a wide range of positive activities. Young people’s involvement in designing services is promoted and £190 million capital investment was announced in 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008c). However, there is still a sense that these services are viewed primarily as a means to divert some young people from becoming involved in anti-social behaviour or criminal activity.

Children are, therefore, seen as innocent victims to be protected (when young) both from abuse and from forces that threaten their enjoyment of childhood, and as being responsible for their own behaviour when over the age of criminal responsibility at 10 years old. One element that does not emerge strongly from government policies is a concept of children as people with rights and a voice of their own; the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is rarely referred to. Henricson and Bainham (2005) discuss the contradictions across different areas of policy between children’s rights and parents’ rights, which occur in the absence of a clear framework of understanding.

## Support (and compulsion) for parents

In the foreword to *Every parent matters*, Alan Johnson, Secretary of State, states: “Parents and the home environment they create are the single most important factor in shaping their children’s well-being, achievements and prospects” (Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p3).

By supporting parents in their children’s early years, the Government hopes to reduce the strong link between family background and low educational achievement. Another major policy objective is to reduce anti-social behaviour and crime by targeting parents. Parents who are seen to be shirking their responsibilities can be compelled to attend parenting programmes.

Alongside the increased use of support for ‘irresponsible’ families or those facing particular difficulties, there has arguably been a cultural shift over the past 10 years that has brought advice on parenting more into the mainstream. Television parenting programmes such as *Supernanny* are a relatively new phenomenon. In 2006 a survey found that almost three-quarters of parents had watched at least one parenting programme, and of these more than eight in 10 found something in the programmes helpful to them (National Family and Parenting Institute, 2006). However, perceptions that the Government is interfering too much in how parents bring up their children can still elicit criticisms in the media about a ‘nanny state’.

This chapter discusses the ways in which the Government has sought to increase parenting support provision through funding universal services such as helplines and targeted ones such as the Family Nurse Partnership pilot projects, including the wide range of initiatives aimed at reducing anti-social behaviour. It looks at policies towards two groups in particular – fathers and teenage parents, and at recent attempts to move beyond *Every Child Matters* and a narrow view of parenting to create a ‘Think Family’ approach.

### Parenting support – a new role for the state

The National Family and Parenting Institute mapping of family services in England and Wales found that provision was geographically uneven, with little progress being made on a strategic approach to family and parenting services (Henricson et al., 2001). Policy initiatives over the past 10 years have aimed to transform this situation by: requiring

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local authorities to plan and commission services; building up a national evidence base and support for commissioners and frontline staff; and investing in specific pilots and initiatives. Children's Centres and Extended Schools have been seen as key access points for family support.

One of the early acts of the Labour administration was to set up the National Family and Parenting Institute. It was launched in 1999 as an independent charity to be a centre of expertise to which the Government, professional bodies or voluntary organisations could turn for advice on parenting issues (Home Office, 1998).

Then, in the 2002 Spending Review, £25 million was allocated to the Parenting Fund to invest in parenting support. The fund aimed to do more for groups of parents who had been less well served by mainstream services, such as disabled, black and minority ethnic parents, to strengthen the network of services in the voluntary sector and to highlight and promote good practice. The first round of funding from 2004 has been followed by two more rounds of £14 million and £12 million respectively.

The role of parents was also highlighted in *Every Child Matters*, one of the themes of which was 'Supporting parents and carers'. The Green Paper stated that parenting and family support would be improved through universal services, targeted and specialist support, and compulsory action where necessary.

In 2005, the Treasury report *Support for parents: the best start for children* provided an overview of government policy. It announced pilots of Parent Support Advisers in schools. These advisers would take on a preventive role to work in partnership with parents, where it seemed that children and their families could benefit from additional help, and to identify appropriate support (HM Treasury, 2005).

The *Respect action plan* (Home Office, 2006) focused on anti-social behaviour but also set out a strategy to improve the availability and quality of parenting support in general. Plans included the establishment of a national body to train and support practitioners (the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners was launched in November 2007). The Respect Action Plan announced that local authorities were to be responsible for commissioning these parenting services. To support them in this, there would be:

- guidance for Directors of Children's Services on commissioning parent and family support services through Children's Trusts

- an online toolkit to help commissioners identify the most suitable parenting programmes
- a requirement that every local authority have a senior 'parents' champion'.

New National Occupational Standards were also proposed to raise the quality threshold for all members of the children's workforce working with parents.

In *Parenting support: guidance for local authorities in England* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b) local authorities were asked to identify a single commissioner of parenting support services, develop a parenting support strategy and provide a range of services as appropriate, from early intervention to enforcement measures. This was followed in 2007 by *Every parent matters*, which set out an overview of policy relating to parents and parenting (Department for Education and Skills, 2007).

In early 2007, the Treasury held a policy review on children and young people, to inform the Comprehensive Spending Review. Among the proposals arising from this was a universal advice service for parents, providing a gateway to the wide range of support for parents on offer through the third sector. The report *Aiming high for children: supporting families* also proposed funding for Children's Centres to support outreach and provide parenting classes for up to 30,000 parents, with a particular emphasis on reaching more fathers (HM Treasury, 2007).

Then, in December 2007, the Children's Plan was launched (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007a), promising a "long term vision to improve schools and a step-change in the way parents and families are supported", and an additional £1 billion funding over three years (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007b). Plans specifically aimed at parenting support included:

- adding to the Respect parenting experts (focusing on anti-social behaviour) to ensure there are two expert parenting advisers in every local authority
- increasing funding for Parent Support Advisers, allowing them to reach 10 to 15 schools in each local authority.

An expansion of intensive phone-based support services was also promised, which was implemented as the Parent Know-How programme of helplines and advice websites, launched in March 2008 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008d).

In particular, Sure Start Children's Centres (see page 12) and Extended Schools have been promoted as access points for parenting support. The concept of Extended Schools as a hub for community services was put forward in the White Paper *Schools achieving success* (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). The Education Act 2002 gave powers to local authorities to prepare the way for Extended Schools to provide childcare from 8am to 6pm, parenting support and other services. In 2002/03, 25 local authorities were funded to develop Extended Schools pathfinders.

*Extended schools: building on experience* (HM Government, 2007) sets out a core offer of services that all children should be able to access through schools by 2010. This includes: a varied range of activities including study support, sport and music clubs, combined with childcare in primary schools; parenting and family support; swift and easy access to targeted and specialist services; and community access to facilities including adult and family learning, ICT and sports grounds. As of April 2009, it was estimated that around a third of schools were providing access to extended services (Department for Children, Schools and Families website).

### Parenting and anti-social behaviour

Before coming to power in 1997, Tony Blair used the memorable slogan 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' to define New Labour's approach. The 'causes of crime' originally referred to social problems such as poverty and unemployment. However, policy increasingly focused on the quality of parenting as a cause of crime, both in the short term for teenagers and in the long term for young children (Blair, 2007). Initiatives designed to intervene in parenting have been introduced alongside a focus on behaviour that is 'anti-social' rather than criminal, with young people in particular targeted by fast-track penalties such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs).

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced ASBOs, restricting a young person or adult's behaviour, and parenting orders. Parenting orders were to be used where a young person receives an ASBO or is convicted of an offence, or where a parent is convicted of failure to ensure their child attends school. They require the parent to attend a counselling or guidance programme (e.g. a parenting class) for up to three months, and to comply with any other requirements in the order (for example, to ensure their child attends school regularly) for up to 12 months.

These orders were extended by the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, which states that a court making an ASBO against a

person under the age of 16 must make a parenting order against the parents of that child if it is satisfied that the parenting order would be desirable in the interests of preventing repetition of the behaviour that led to the ASBO. The Act also allows the local authority to apply to the magistrates' court for a parenting order if a pupil has been permanently excluded or been excluded twice within a year. The Act also introduced parenting contracts (voluntary contracts that are an alternative to a parenting order), which are to be used by Youth Offending Teams, schools and local authorities.

Some commentators have drawn attention to the contradiction between the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which abolished *doli incapax* in England and Wales (the presumption that 10–13-year-olds were incapable of knowing the difference between right and wrong), and policies that assume parents are responsible for their children's offences, thus creating a situation of dual responsibility (Commission on Families and the Wellbeing of Children, 2005).

Similarly, Koffman (2008) argues that these policies based on parents' 'responsibility' for children's behaviour turns a political slogan about parents' responsibility to teach children moral principles and acceptable behaviour into a legal responsibility, without a clear logical basis for this.

In January 2006, in the Labour Government's third term, Prime Minister Tony Blair launched the Respect Action Plan, a strategy to tackle anti-social behaviour. A significant theme was the role of parents, and it quoted the statistic that "85% of people in the UK think that parents not bringing up their children properly is the biggest reason for the perceived rise in anti-social behaviour" (Home Office, 2006, p17).

As described above, this strategy document set out a new framework for parenting support in general. Two proposals targeted on anti-social behaviour in particular were the extension of parenting orders and the piloting of Family Intervention Projects. Schools would be allowed to seek parenting orders directly, and parenting orders could be made in respect of a child's 'serious misbehaviour' in school, even if they had not been excluded. Also, agencies such as community safety officers and housing officers would be able to enter into parenting contracts and orders.

The Respect Action Plan stated that a small number of households are often responsible for a high proportion of anti-social behaviour, and proposed a national network of intensive family support schemes to deal with these. These Family Intervention Projects would be based on schemes

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such as the Dundee Families Project, which works with families at risk of eviction because of anti-social behaviour.

During 2006 and 2007, 53 Family Intervention Projects were set up (19 of which were based on existing projects). Key features of the projects include: the use of a keyworker to 'grip' the family; a contract ('behaviour support agreement'); the use of sanctions; practical support to reduce household chaos; a whole-family approach; and improving parenting skills. A positive evaluation of their impact was published (White et al., 2008), with further funding and expansion having been announced in the Children's Plan (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007a). The Youth Crime Action Plan (HM Government, 2008) then pledged funding and support to local authorities to help them focus on a small number of families (on average 40 in each area) whose complexity of problems place children and young people at greatest risk of becoming high-rate offenders. The aim is to have reached 20,000 families across the country in 2010.

In July 2006, Children's Minister Beverley Hughes announced funding for another scheme focused on preventing anti-social behaviour. Pilots in local authorities would implement one of three evidence-based parenting programmes for parents of children aged 8 to 13 'at risk of poor behaviour' (Department for Education and Skills, 2006c). In 2008, the *Youth taskforce action plan* announced that this programme would be expanded over the following three years to the majority of local authorities (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008e).

In November 2006, funding was announced through the Respect initiative for parenting experts in 77 areas to help parents worried about their children's behaviour. These experts were dubbed 'super-nannies' by the media (BBC, 2006). In an interview with the BBC in August 2006, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, had spoken in strong language about the need to intervene early, even 'pre-birth', to avoid future anti-social behaviour.

*"Now when I say intervene even if people don't want it, I don't think it is too much to say if you have got someone who is a teenage mum [...] not married and not in a stable relationship, well look here is the support we are prepared to offer you, but we do need to keep a careful watch on you and how your situation is developing because all the indicators are that your type of situation can lead to problems in the future.*

*"[...]if we are not prepared to predict and intervene far more early then there are children that are going to grow up in families that we know perfectly well are completely*

*dysfunctional and the kids a few years down the line are going to be a menace to society and actually a threat to themselves."* (Blair, 2006)

One criticism that has been made of parenting orders is that they punish mothers alone for their child's behaviour and ignore non-resident fathers. The guidance on parenting contracts and orders was revised in 2007 placing greater emphasis on the importance of working with both mothers and fathers (Ministry of Justice et al., 2007).

In July 2007, the newly created Department for Children, Schools and Families took responsibility for a new Youth Taskforce to replace the former Respect Taskforce. This move was welcomed by many, as they believed it signalled a more preventive and child-focused approach to youth justice and anti-social behaviour policy.

### Truancy

Although much less high-profile than crime or anti-social behaviour, another area in which the Government has sought to enforce parental responsibility is children's attendance at school. In this area, parental responsibility is more clearly defined. If a child of compulsory school age is registered at a school and fails to attend school regularly, then the parent is guilty of an offence under section 444(1) of the Education Act 1996. Prosecution can result in parents receiving a fine of up to £1,000 for each child.

The Criminal Justice and Court Service Act 2000 amended this section to introduce a more serious offence, which is when a parent knows their child is not attending their registered school and fails to act to cause the child to attend. This can lead to a fine of up to £2,500, a community sentence (including a parenting order) or a custodial sentence of up to three months. In 2002, the Prime Minister suggested taking child benefit away from parents whose children were persistently truanting from school, a proposal which was later withdrawn (Grice, 2002).

In 2003, a fast-track process was introduced whereby parents of persistent truants are given around 12 weeks to ensure that their children attend school regularly, or else face the risk of prosecution. The Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 allows parents to escape prosecution for truancy by paying a penalty notice of £50 (or £100 after 28 days).

The first parent was imprisoned under the legislation in 2002, amid extensive media coverage. Between 2004 and 2007 in England around 20 parents a year were imprisoned

and many more fined (1,953 in 2003, rising to 3,788 in 2007) (House of Commons Hansard, 2009). Fines typically ranged from £50 to £100 (National Audit Office, 2005).

### Parenting support and social exclusion

The UK can be seen as an unequal society, not just because of wide variations in income and wealth between households at any one time, but because these differences persist throughout the generations and social mobility is limited. The Government has sought to reduce the strong link between family background and children's outcomes through targeted support for parents, particularly in their children's early years.

Research shows that socio-economic background has a significant impact on educational achievement, an effect that starts early and accumulates over time. The Millennium Cohort Study following almost 16,000 children found that at three years old, children from families with income over the poverty threshold were, on average, about 10 months ahead on 'school-readiness' tests compared to those below it (Hansen and Joshi, 2007). Similarly, by around age seven, children who did poorly in cognitive tests at 22 months but were from an affluent background, were found to overtake those who originally did well on the tests but were from a low socio-economic group (Feinstein et al., 2007).

Another major study following 3,000 children (the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) Project) found that for children aged three to seven, the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income (Sylva et al., 2004). These research findings have been influential on the design of early years services such as Sure Start.

There has also been increased emphasis on involving parents of school-age children in their education, including the 'hard to reach' (Reynolds, 2006). This is emphasised in the Children's Plan, which states, "Parents' support for their child's learning is an essential foundation for achievement. Parents told us they want to be more involved in their children's education, and schools see the benefits of greater engagement with parents" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007a, p53).

However, there has been criticism from some quarters. Gillies (2008) criticises an approach she perceives as measuring working-class parents by middle-class norms without taking into account the context and values in which they are bringing

up their children. She sees poor parenting as being blamed for future disadvantage, ignoring the inequality in society.

In *Reaching out: an action plan on social exclusion*, published in September 2006, the focus was on those families seen not to be benefiting from the general investment in services. The Prime Minister's preface to the report stated that "about 2.5 per cent of every generation seem to be stuck in a lifetime of disadvantage. Their problems are multiple, entrenched and often passed down through generations" (HM Government, 2006b, p3). This focus signalled an increasing emphasis on a small number of 'problematic' families, with initiatives such as the Family Intervention Projects already described.

However, targeted services are not necessarily associated with social exclusion. For example, families with disabled children or mothers with post-natal depression need specific help regardless of class or income. In general, universal services may be more effective at reaching disadvantaged families than targeted services because they are more widely accepted. This argument was made strongly by the Family and Parenting Institute (2007) in relation to the importance of retaining an effective universal health visitor service. However, targeted services are clearly necessary to meet families' specific needs – an approach described by the Government as 'progressive universalism'.

### Sure Start

Sure Start was a flagship programme for the New Labour Government. An ambitious attempt to reduce the link between childhood poverty and life chances, it was inspired by early years programmes in the US, such as Head Start, which showed that pre-school provision and family support could have long-term benefits for children.

The 1998 Treasury-led cross-departmental review that led to the establishment of Sure Start determined that an effective early intervention should be: two generational, involving parents as well as children; non-stigmatising; focused on a range of factors; and based on involvement of parents and local communities (Glass, 1999). The programme aimed to 'join up' core child and maternal health services with early learning and childcare and family support. There was to be an emphasis on outreach, helping those who were hard to reach and families with specialised needs (Glass, 2005).

It was hoped that the disadvantages of both targeted and universal services would be avoided by targeting distinct geographic areas of disadvantage and making the services

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universal within those areas. The programmes were administered by local partnership boards involving statutory and voluntary agencies with parental involvement in management (Glass, 2005).

The local programmes were promised 10 years of ring-fenced central government funding. A UK budget of £540 million was allocated over three years to fund 250 programmes. In the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review this was increased to £500 million to set up at least 500 local programmes by 2003/04. This expanded programme was expected to reach one-third of poor children under four years old (HM Treasury, 2000).

A similar service, Early Excellence Centres, slightly predated Sure Start. These combined early education and daycare services, adult education and training, parenting support, health and other community services. By autumn 2003 there were 107 centres.

Meanwhile, the Neighbourhood Nurseries initiative, rolled out from 2000 in England, was specifically focused on expanding childcare provision to reduce unemployment in disadvantaged areas. The original target was to create 45,000 new childcare places for 0–4-year-olds by 2004 in existing or new nurseries in the most disadvantaged areas of England, offering full daycare for children from birth to school age.

The 2002 inter-departmental childcare review included plans to establish Children's Centres for pre-school children in the 20 per cent most disadvantaged wards (1,700 centres). Children's Centres would provide "a core offering that includes good quality childcare, early years education, health services, family support, parental outreach and a base for childminders" (HM Treasury, 2002, p33).

In the 2004 Spending Review, further funding for Sure Start was announced, with a more ambitious target of 2,500 Children's Centres by 2008. *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*, published by HM Treasury in December 2004, included a target of 3,500 Children's Centres to be in place by 2010.

In September 2005, there were 350 Children's Centres. By September 2006 there were 1,000, of which approximately 500 were previous Sure Start Local Programmes, 430 previous Neighbourhood Nurseries and 70 previous Early Excellence Centres. Since April 2006, funding has been provided through local authorities to fund all Children's Centres, including all former Sure Start Local Programmes (National Audit Office, 2006). Guidance

published in 2006 explained that Children's Centres located outside the 30 per cent most disadvantaged areas would provide more limited services, depending on the level of need and existing services in the area (Department for Education and Skills, 2006e).

Norman Glass, who led the Treasury working group that proposed the original Sure Start, criticised the loss of autonomy and the change from Sure Start's focus on health, education and community development, towards childcare and supporting maternal employment, describing it as "a sort of New Deal for Toddlers" (Glass, 2005). While praising the increased policy emphasis on the early years, Glass also described the plans as having "Scandinavian ambitions and British funding levels", and was not the only one to question what the impact on services for disadvantaged families would be of spreading Sure Start funding over 3,500 Children's Centres.

In late 2005, early findings from the national evaluation of Sure Start Local Programmes prompted considerable media attention. The evaluation found little evidence that the Government's flagship programme was producing results to justify the funding invested in it. The positive effects found were small, and for more disadvantaged families, such as lone parents and teenage mothers, there were even some signs of negative impacts. However, supporters of the programme pointed out that it was still in its early stages, and that the evaluation compared whole areas with Sure Start Local Programmes to those without (instead of looking at the impact on families who had actually used the services). Barrett (2007) highlights the complexity of the Sure Start evaluation and the need for caution in interpreting the findings.

This negative coverage did not deter the continued roll-out of Sure Start in its new form as Children's Centres. The 2007 Children's Plan included a commitment to improve outreach to disadvantaged families through Children's Centres, with funding to enable local authorities to fund two outreach posts in centres serving the most disadvantaged communities.

A recent Ofsted report reviewing integrated services in Children's Centres found that outreach to the most vulnerable families remained a challenge. However, family support workers provided a valuable service: parents felt the centres helped them bond with their babies and learn about child development, and children, especially those with learning difficulties, were more confident and better prepared for school (Ofsted, 2009). In May 2009, the Government announced that there were 3,000 Children's

Centres across England (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009c).

### Teenage parents

A focus on helping disadvantaged parents to improve outcomes for their children naturally includes teenage parents. Poorer mental health, poverty and higher infant mortality are all associated with teenage pregnancy (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007c). The Government's teenage pregnancy strategy dates from 1999 and has two targets: to halve the number of under-18 conceptions by 2010 (and to establish a firm downward trend in the rate of under-16 conceptions); and to increase the participation of mothers aged 16–19 in education, employment and training to 60 per cent by 2010.

Although England still has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Western Europe, and on current trends will not meet the target for 2010, the rate is falling steadily. There are considerable variations across local authorities, with some experiencing dramatic reductions in teenage pregnancy (Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Group, 2008).

As well as reducing the number of teenage pregnancies, there has been a focus on providing services to improve the health and wellbeing of young mothers and their children. More recently, attention has also been paid to engaging young fathers in *Teenage parents next steps* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007c).

Based on the Nurse-Family Partnership in the US, a programme of intensive home visiting for vulnerable first-time mothers from pregnancy until their child is two years old, the UK Family Nurse Partnership pilots started in April 2007. The 10 pilot sites worked with mothers aged under 20 and also some 20–23-year-olds (Barnes et al., 2008). As part of the 2007 Spending Review, funding was announced to extend the scheme to another 20 sites from 2008/09. The Child Health Strategy, published in February 2009, announced an expansion to 70 sites by April 2011, with a view to rolling it out for the most vulnerable first-time young mothers across England over the next decade.

### Fathers and family services

Evidence that men's active involvement in parenting is beneficial for their children's wellbeing (e.g. O'Brien, 2004) has, particularly since 2007, led to government publications

and guidance documents stressing the importance of engaging with fathers. More of these documents now refer to 'mothers and fathers', rather than 'parents', recognising their differing needs.

In research carried out in 2007, interviewees in local authorities and family services generally described services as being 'neutral' towards fathers, rather than proactive. Except for Children's Centres, there was generally very little monitoring of engagement with fathers by family services or local authorities (Page et al., 2008). The three national policy documents they felt were most influential in encouraging father-inclusive policy and practice were the overarching policy document *Every parent matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), *Planning and performance management guidance for Sure Start Children's Centres* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006d) and the *Sure Start Children's Centres practice guidance* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006e), the latter including a chapter on engaging fathers.

Other examples of policies targeted at fathers include the following:

- The 2007 strategy on teenage parents included the needs of young fathers as well as mothers (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007c).
- *Aiming high for children: supporting families* announced there would be additional funding in 2010/11 to provide parenting classes in Children's Centres for up to 30,000 parents, with a particular focus on fathers, for example, by recruiting more male outreach workers who can target fathers (HM Treasury, 2007).
- Funding announced in 2008 for a set of online advice services and phone helplines for parents included two aimed specifically at fathers: [www.dadtalk.co.uk](http://www.dadtalk.co.uk) and [www.dads-space.com](http://www.dads-space.com) (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008d).
- The updated *Child health promotion programme*, covering health services during pregnancy and the early years of childhood, places considerable emphasis on engagement with fathers, including non-resident fathers, by maternity and child health services (Department of Health, 2008).
- *The children's plan one year on* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008f) made a commitment to publish guidance for the children's workforce on how to communicate with non-resident fathers.

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- In summer 2009, a 'Think Fathers' campaign was launched to encourage public, health and family services to be more 'dad friendly' and inclusive of fathers.

Scourfield and Drakeford (2002) described New Labour's approach to men in the home as one of 'policy optimism', leading to policies that are encouraging and facilitative. It is interesting to compare these policies on family services with those relating to work-life balance, reviewed below, which may arguably have more effect on men's active parenting.

### Think Family

An important piece of the jigsaw missing from the Every Child Matters focus on integrated working between children's professionals is the need for adult services to be similarly included, in order to understand the needs of the whole family.

The Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force ran a 'Families at risk review' from March 2007 to early 2008. The first report from the review, *Reaching out: think family*, states: "Against a backdrop of rising prosperity and improved outcomes for the majority of families, there is a small minority of around 2% of families who experience multiple problems" (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007, p4). These families are said to put children at a higher risk of adverse outcomes and exert a heavy cost upon public services and the wider community. The proposed solution, set out in that report and in the following report, *Think family: improving the life chances of families at risk*, is a 'Think Family' approach.

*"A system that 'thinks family' has no 'wrong door': contact with any one service gives access to a wider system of support. Individual needs are looked at in the context of the whole family so clients are seen not just as individuals but as parents or other family members. Services build on the strengths of families increasing their resilience and aspirations. Support is tailored to meet need so that families with the most complex needs receive the most intensive support." (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2008, p4)*

This approach is being trialled in a Family Pathfinder programme in 15 local authorities from 2008 to 2011. Six of the Family Pathfinders also receive additional funding to deliver services for families with young carers.

The need for professionals working with adults on issues of mental health, substance misuse and domestic abuse to recognise the needs of children and young people in the

family is a consistent feature of Serious Case Reviews undertaken into the deaths and serious injuries of children (Lord Laming, 2009). An integrated approach is also vital for families where parents' learning difficulties, physical impairments or health problems mean they need support in their parenting role.

In a Commission for Social Care Inspection survey of 50 local authorities, two-thirds reported that their policies tended to focus separately on adults' and children's issues and only 12 per cent said they took a whole-family approach (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2009). A major shift is clearly necessary before service delivery even begins to approach a 'Think Family' approach.

The 'Think Family' approach means that family workers take time to understand the role of the extended family and non-resident fathers, who are often ignored. It also means professionals such as health visitors can engage with issues that may seem outside their remit; for example, the couple relationship.

## Child poverty and benefits

In 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair committed the Government to an ambitious goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020 and halving it by 2010. The approach taken would be a dual one of direct transfers to low-income families through benefits and tax credits, accompanied by measures to raise the employment rate among parents.

This chapter focuses on transfers to families, particularly through tax credits, and the overall progress on reducing child poverty in the 10 years since 1999. A later chapter deals in more detail with Labour's employment programmes as they have affected one group in particular: lone parents.

### Tax credits

Tax credits have been one of the Labour Government's major policy initiatives to redistribute income to lower-income "hard-working families" with children, thus reducing child poverty and providing a financial incentive to employment. They were first introduced in 1999, following a Treasury review that examined the US earned income tax credit. It was hoped that tax credits, as well as providing a work incentive, would be less stigmatising than welfare benefits and would prove more acceptable than social security benefits to most claimants and taxpayers as a whole (Strickland, 1998).

In 1999, Working Families Tax Credit replaced Family Credit, a means-tested benefit for families with an adult working at least 16 hours a week and dependent children. Working Families Tax Credit was more generous than Family Credit because it had a higher income threshold at which the credit was withdrawn (£90 instead of £79), and because the credit was then withdrawn more gently (a 55 per cent taper instead of 70 per cent) (Strickland, 1998). Working Families Tax Credit included a childcare credit of 70 per cent of actual childcare costs up to £100 a week (£70) for one child or £150 a week (£105) for two or more. The number of recipients was expected to double from the 780,000 previously claiming Family Credit (Dilnot and McCrae, 1999).

Working Families Tax Credit would generally be paid through the pay packet, rather than to the woman as Family Credit had been, although families could choose to have it paid to the woman (Strickland, 1998). Dilnot and McCrae (1999) observed a tension here between redistribution (getting more money to children in poor families) and labour market

objectives (increasing the incentives to work). They also noted that the Government's rhetoric around its introduction focused mainly on the latter, although the former would probably be more significant.

Children's Tax Credit was introduced in April 2001, reducing the income tax bills of around five million income-tax-paying families with children under 16. However, Working Families Tax Credit and Children's Tax Credit were only interim measures (Brewer, 2003). In April 2003 they were replaced by Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit.

Working Tax Credit is not limited to families with children, but can be claimed by others who are in low-paid work. It has a childcare element operating in the same way as Working Families Tax Credit did: when first introduced, families could (depending on income) claim 70 per cent of eligible childcare costs, up to £135 a week for one child and £200 for two or more children (now 80 per cent of £175 and £300 respectively).

Child Tax Credit provides income-related support to the main carer and is not dependent on the carer being in work. It is made up of a family element that is paid in full up to a certain threshold of household income, then gradually withdrawn. The threshold and withdrawal rate are set so that around 90 per cent of families with children are entitled to all or part of the family element. The child element of Child Tax Credit is payable only to lower-income families. Around 50 per cent of families are entitled to all or part of the child element (Brewer, 2003), and it is paid at a higher rate for disabled children.

The largest gains from these tax credits would go to the poorest families, with households with children gaining far more, on average, than those without (Brewer, 2003). Working Tax Credit improves the financial reward for moving into work for some people (single people and the primary earner in a couple), but worsens it for others (some second earners in couples) (Brewer, 2003).

Tax credits came with a significant drawback for many families. They are based on income for the previous tax year, so if families' circumstances change from one tax year to the next, they may no longer be entitled to the same level of tax credit and may have to repay the overpayment. The Government originally estimated that 750,000 families would be overpaid each year because they experienced a rise in income of over £2,500 and would have to pay back money (not including those whose entitlement changed because of adults or children arriving or leaving the household) (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009). However, in

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2004/05, out of five million families receiving tax credits, two million were affected by overpayments (totalling £2.1 billion) (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009).

To reduce the scale of this problem, from 2006/07 the amount that a family's income could increase within a year without having to repay overpayments was dramatically increased to £25,000. This change in the rules reduced the number of families who had to pay back money because their income had risen, but in 2006/07 1.3 million families were still affected by overpayments totalling £1 billion (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009). The cost of this change was estimated to be in the order of £500 million a year (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2007).

A report by the Parliamentary Ombudsman (2007) found that aspects of the administration system for tax credits that had caused unnecessary financial distress to families had been improved, but there were still concerns about complaint handling. The Ombudsman questioned whether a system with such inherent uncertainty was suitable for low-income families who needed to budget carefully. Changes continue to be made to the tax credit system (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009).

### Other benefits for families

Tax credits, while important, are not the only financial benefits for families. Others are set out below.

#### *Child benefit*

Alongside tax credits, child benefit has continued to be a universal benefit for all children who have a 'right to reside' in the UK. The amount of child benefit was increased in 1999 for the first child only, and since then has remained steady in real terms (Bennett with Dornan, 2006).

#### *Maternity grants*

From 2000, low-income expectant mothers could claim a £200 Sure Start Maternity Grant, conditional on having contacted a healthcare professional for advice; this replaced the £100 Maternity Payment. The Maternity Grant was increased to £300 and then to £500 from April 2002. More recently, from April 2009 the universal Health in Pregnancy Grant of £190 has been introduced, again conditional on receiving ante-natal care.

#### *Child Trust Fund*

The Child Trust Fund was launched in 2005. Each child receives a £250 voucher at birth, to be invested in an account accessible only after their 18th birthday. Further contributions to the account by family and friends are not taxable, and the scheme is designed to ensure that all children start adult life with some capital to draw on. Children from low-income families receive an additional £250, and further government payments have since been introduced for all children at age seven, for children in care and for disabled children.

#### *Minimum wage*

Finally, while not specifically aimed at families with children, the national minimum wage should be mentioned. This was introduced in April 1999 at £3.60 an hour for workers aged 22 and over and has particularly benefited women, who are over-represented among low-waged employees. Originally worth 48 per cent of median hourly earnings in the UK, the rate has more than kept pace with rising wages, accounting for 52 per cent of median hourly earnings in April 2008 (Office for National Statistics, 2009a).

With effect from 1 October 2009, the national minimum wage adult rate (paid to workers aged 22 and over) will rise from its current level of £5.73 an hour to £5.80 an hour. This increase is the lowest since a statutory minimum wage was introduced in April 1999.

### Child poverty – progress so far

Although adult out-of-work benefits have fallen in value in real terms (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2008), child benefits and tax allowances have increased in value (Sutherland et al., 2008) and employment has risen. Until 2004/05 there were significant reductions in both the numbers and the proportion of children living in poverty. However, in the second half of this decade it became clear that progress was stalling (see Figures 1 and 2). This is attributed by Hills et al. (2009) to slower economic growth and greater pressures on public finances after 2003.

Because the main child poverty target relates to median income, a rise in general prosperity will not reduce child poverty while inequality remains high. Out of 30 OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries the UK has the seventh highest income inequality (OECD, 2008). In 2009, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found

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**Figure 1 Proportion of children in the UK living in poverty (below 60% median income)**



**Figure 2 Number of children in the UK living in poverty (below 60% median income)**



Source (both figures): Households below average income data (Department for Pensions, 2009)

income inequality had risen (on most measures) in each of the previous three years, reaching its highest level since the time series began in 1961 (Brewer et al., 2009).

To meet the Government's 2010 target of halving child poverty, child poverty needs to fall by 1.2 million between 2007/08 and 2010/11. Before 2009, it was estimated that on current plans, the Government would fall short of this target by 600,000 and that additional spending of £4.2 billion a year would be required to meet it. However, Budget 2009 allocated less than £0.2 billion towards meeting the target (Brewer et al., 2009).

In September 2008, Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced that the Government would introduce legislation to make the child poverty targets legally binding. The Child Poverty Bill 2009 places a duty on the Secretary of State to meet four UK-wide income poverty targets by the end of the financial year 2020, to report annually on progress and to publish a strategy every three years. The four targets relate to relative low income, combined low income and material deprivation, absolute low income, and persistent poverty.

Work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that the British public does not necessarily see poverty in the UK as a problem (for example, Castell and Thompson, 2007).

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# Work-life balance and childcare

The last 10 years have seen a major expansion in maternity leave provision and the introduction of other rights, such as paid paternity leave and the right to request flexible working. Policies have sought to improve choice through increasing both the time available to care for young children (through leave and flexible working policies) and the time available to work (increasing childcare availability, and its affordability through tax credits). This chapter reviews these measures and looks at how far they have increased real choice for parents in how they balance paid work and family responsibilities.

### Time to care – parental leave and flexible working

Policies giving more rights to employees have often been resisted by business organisations. However, allowing parents more flexibility and time to care for their children not only benefits individuals, but also can reduce the number of women withdrawing from the labour market altogether when they have children, with the associated benefits to the economy.

The first practical changes to UK maternity and paternity rights were triggered by the 1996 EC Parental Leave Directive (96/34/EC). This required Member States to ensure that employers give a minimum of three months' unpaid leave to both mothers and fathers after the birth of a child. It also requires an entitlement for employees to time off work for urgent family reasons in cases of sickness or accident.

The UK implemented the directive from December 1999. Each parent can take up to 13 weeks' unpaid leave per child during the first five years of the child's life. Until this point, fathers had no rights to any leave, nor was there any right to time off for family emergencies. From December 1999 ordinary paid maternity leave also increased from 14 to 18 weeks. Unpaid additional maternity leave for up to 29 weeks after birth became available to employees with one year of continuous service for their employer, rather than the two years' service that was previously required.

The 1997 EC Part Time Work Directive was implemented in the UK through the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000. These regulations

ensure that part-timers are not treated less favourably in their contractual terms and conditions than comparable full-timers.

In March 2000, the Government launched the Work-life Balance Campaign. This aimed to raise awareness of the benefits for employers in developing policies that would enable employees to effectively balance their work with their life outside work. A Ministerial Advisory Committee on Work-Life Balance was set up and a Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund created to fund relevant projects (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). This fund was extended to five rounds of funding, totalling £11.3 million (Nelson et al., 2004).

The Employment Act 2002 increased statutory maternity leave to 26 weeks' paid ordinary maternity leave and a further 26 weeks' unpaid additional maternity leave. The qualifying period for the latter was cut further from a year to six months' service. The Act also introduced two weeks' paid paternity leave. The provisions in the Act came into effect from April 2003.

The Act also introduced the right for parents of children under six (or under 18 for a disabled child) to request flexible working patterns once they have worked for 26 weeks for their employer. It also placed a duty on employers to give proper consideration to the request. Employers can reject requests for certain business reasons set out in legislation, but must follow a set procedure and timetable in considering the request. Decisions can be challenged at an employment tribunal on the grounds that the procedure was not followed correctly or that they were based on incorrect facts, but not on any other challenge to the business reasons given.

The Work and Families Act 2006 extended these rights further. With effect from April 2007, all women eligible for ordinary maternity leave would also be able to take additional maternity leave, up to a year off work in total. Maternity pay was extended from 26 weeks to 39 weeks (nine months). It also extended the right to request flexible working to carers of disabled adults.

The Act also contained provisions, which have not yet been implemented, for transferring maternity leave to fathers. This idea was introduced in the 2004 childcare strategy (HM Treasury, 2004). A consultation in 2006 set out further details. At the same time as extending paid maternity leave to one year, 'additional paternity leave' would be introduced (Department for Trade and Industry, 2006). Once the child was 20 weeks old, if the mother had returned to work with unclaimed pay and leave, the father could claim up to 26 weeks' leave with 'additional paternity pay' until the child's

first birthday. These measures were promised "before the end of this Parliament", but have not yet been enacted.

The rate of statutory maternity/paternity pay continues to be an issue. In 1999/2000, statutory maternity pay was £59.55 a week. In the 2001 pre-budget report, an increase was announced from the current £62.20 to £75 a week from April 2002 and to £100 from April 2003. Since 2003, steady uprating has resulted in a rate of £123.06 from April 2009. This compares to median gross weekly earnings of £412 for women working full time (Office for National Statistics, 2008) or £200.55 for someone working a 35-hour week on the minimum wage.

One 'family-friendly' measure the Government has not implemented is the 1993 European Working Time Directive, setting a maximum 48-hour working week. The previous UK position has been retained, which means that employers can ask employees to opt out of this limit. A fifth of male employees in the UK work over 48 hours a week, compared to 6 per cent of female employees (Trades Union Congress, 2008).

### Time to work – childcare provision

The Labour Government has made early years and childcare a priority. Two policy objectives lie behind this: to support disadvantaged families during children's early years and in this way improve these children's life chances; and to provide childcare to enable mothers to move into the labour market, so reducing child poverty and increasing economic competitiveness and growth.

The aim of the 1998 childcare strategy was "to ensure good quality, affordable childcare for children aged 0 to 14 in every neighbourhood, including both formal childcare and support for informal arrangements" (Department for Education and Employment, 1998, p7). To do this, three needs were identified:

- to raise the quality of care (for example, through regulation and training standards)
- to make childcare more affordable (through tax credits)
- to make childcare more accessible (funding to increase the number of childcare places and improved information for parents, and a free early education place for all four-year-olds) (Department for Education and Employment, 1998).

An inter-departmental childcare review by the Strategy Unit (2002) resulted in the announcement in the 2002

Comprehensive Spending Review that funding for childcare would more than double in real terms between 2002/03 and 2005/06 to allow the creation of at least 250,000 childcare places by 2006.

Plans for a free early education place for all three-year-olds (12.5 hours a week, 33 weeks a year) were announced in September 2000 and implemented in April 2004. Pilots of free part-time early education for 6,000 two-year-olds in disadvantaged areas were also announced (in the 2004 Budget). The 2007 Budget announced funding to extend this entitlement for three- and four-year-olds to 15 hours by 2010, with a long-term goal of 20 hours a week.

The childcare strategy was updated in 2004, as *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare* (HM Treasury, 2004). This stressed the role of Sure Start Children's Centres and Extended Schools in childcare delivery. Extended services, which include opening hours from 8am to 6pm, are currently available in a third of schools and are planned for all schools by 2010. This strategy was followed by the Childcare Act 2006. This, the first Act to deal solely with early years and childcare, gives local authorities a duty to assess the availability of childcare in their area and to ensure there is sufficient childcare for all working parents, or those in training, especially those with disabled children.

The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) Project, following 3,000 children, demonstrated the importance of good-quality pre-school provision for children's outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004). Parents will also be concerned about the quality of the childcare to which they entrust their children.

Measures to improve the quality of childcare provision in the 2004 strategy included: a Transformation Fund for training and professional development; a new qualification and career structure for the early years and childcare workforce; and a single quality framework for services for children from birth to five, implemented from September 2008 as the Early Years Foundation Stage.

However, attempts to reverse the historic low pay and poor qualifications of the childcare workforce tend to affect both the cost to parents of childcare and the financial viability of providers, creating an inevitable trade-off in a situation where public funding is limited. Compared to other OECD countries, childcare costs create a significant barrier to work in the UK. For example, for a couple where one works at the average wage and the other starts work in a low-wage job (two-thirds of the average wage), childcare costs would take up almost a third of family net income (OECD, 2007).

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The number of registered childcare places more than doubled between 1997 and 2008 to 1.3 million (Department for Children, Schools and Families website). The Daycare Trust (2007) found there had been increased provision of childcare places but a continued mismatch between demand and supply at local level. Provision in school holidays remains limited.

Unlike school education or health services, childcare is not provided as a free, universal service. Lloyd (2008) highlights a contrast between early education, which is seen, as with other education, as a 'public good', and childcare, which is regarded as a commodity to be purchased by parents. Government policies to increase the supply of childcare, even in disadvantaged areas, have focused on 'market failure' remedies, using 'pump-priming' funding (Lloyd, 2008). The assumption is that when this ends, increased demand and subsidy through tax credits will be sufficient to create sustainability. However, the sustainability of this childcare provision in disadvantaged areas has been repeatedly questioned (e.g. Daycare Trust, 2007).

### Men and women earning and caring in the real world

The extent to which men wish to be involved with the care of their children has clearly increased from previous generations. In a 2005 study, 87 per cent of fathers questioned said they felt as confident as their partner in caring for their child and 70 per cent said they would like to be more involved in childcare (Thompson et al., 2005). In another study, around a fifth of men questioned said that part-time flexible working would be ideal when their children were young and two-thirds favoured full-time flexible working (Williams and Jones, 2005).

However, childcare is still generally seen as a woman's responsibility, while it is assumed that a man will continue to work full time after the birth of his child. In the British Social Attitudes Survey 2008, 41 per cent of men and 29 per cent of women agreed that "a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works" (NatCen, 2008). In 2002, women were found to make up 98 per cent of those going part time for family reasons (Barrett, 2004).

The effect of both career breaks and part-time work on women's future earnings can be dramatic. In 2008, women working part time earned 31 per cent less than the median hourly earnings of women working full time and 40 per cent less per hour than men working full time (Office for National Statistics, 2008). Thus, the gender pay gap increases the probability that women rather than men will reduce their paid

work hours to care for children, and this reduction in hours further increases the gender pay gap.

Women's choices are restricted by men's choices as well as by their earning options (and those of their partner) and childcare availability. An example of this divergence between ideals and reality is found in the 2007 British Social Attitudes Survey where 41 per cent of women had liberal views about the role of men and women but a traditional division of labour in their own home (NatCen, 2008). Some of the associated costs do not become apparent until long after a decision is made. For example, women who have spent time out of the labour market face reduced pensions. Their reduced earning power may also suddenly become more significant after divorce.

Governments can choose whether their policies reflect established patterns of behaviour and attitudes or seek to change them (Lewis, 2008). It has been argued that the desired model promoted by government policies is the "adult worker model" (Lewis and Giullari, 2005), where both men and women work full time and children are cared for in formal care settings. Duncan et al. (2004) contend that these policies ignore the moral imperative that women feel to care for children and place their needs first, and that care work is undervalued. These issues have been brought into particular focus by policies on welfare reform and lone parents, described further below.

Others believe the main problem is that 'gender-neutral' work-life balance policies are insufficient to encourage men to take on a greater share of unpaid care work and allow women more genuine choice. One policy that is an exception to this 'gender-neutrality' is the extension of paid maternity leave to nine months, with the entire period continuing to be reserved for women. While cross-country comparisons show parental leave is usually taken by mothers, the UK is unusual in formally reserving it for women, and thus reinforcing expectations about who will care for babies and young children.

Fathers are entitled to three months' unpaid parental leave and two weeks' paternity leave at the same rate as statutory maternity pay (currently £123.06). That the proposed 'additional paternity leave' would be paid at the same rate is one reason why the father, if he is the higher earner in the couple, may choose not to take it. International research suggests that fathers will take leave only if it is well paid and some of the leave is reserved for them (the 'use it or lose it' model) (Moss, 2008).

## Welfare reform and lone parents

Over recent decades, the proportion of children living in lone parent families in the UK has steadily increased, from 12 per cent in 1981, to 22 per cent in 2001 and 23 per cent in 2008 (Office for National Statistics, 2009b). This group has been targeted as one means of achieving Labour's targets on child poverty, since the probability of living in poverty is more than doubled for children of lone parents. As Figure 4 shows, the risk of poverty is especially high for those lone parents not in paid work.

This chapter outlines the Government's policies, which, in implementing the principle that "work is the best form of welfare", have increasingly moved towards compulsion for lone parents. Plans to allow advisers to impose benefit cuts on lone parents have been controversial, seen as posing a risk to the welfare of vulnerable families. The impact of these recent policies is yet to be seen, either on individual families or on the employment rate of lone parents as a whole, which is well below government targets.

### Policy development on lone parents

A target was set to raise the proportion of lone parents in work to 70 per cent by 2010. However, during the first two terms of the Labour Government there were no proposals to reduce lone parents' entitlement to claim Income Support until their youngest child reached 16.

One of the early initiatives introduced by the Government was the New Deal for Lone Parents, a voluntary programme that gave advice and support on job search, training, benefits and finding childcare to lone parents receiving Income Support. The programme was implemented nationally in 1998.

Compulsory annual Work Focused Interviews were first introduced in April 2001 for lone parents starting to claim Income Support whose youngest child was aged at least five, and for existing claimants whose youngest child was 13. These interviews were gradually extended to other groups, so that by April 2004 they applied to all lone parent claimants. From the end of October 2005, quarterly Work Focused Interviews were introduced nationally for lone parents with a youngest child aged 14 or over. Pilots from October 2004 tested measures to encourage lone parents into work, including a £40 a week In Work Credit for lone parents who

have been on Income Support for at least a year, a £20 Work Search Premium, and an In Work Emergency Fund available to help lone parents with crises during the first 60 days of employment (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2004). The New Deal Plus for Lone Parents pilots from April 2005 combined these measures with others into one package (Hosain and Breen, 2007).

In 2005 the Department for Work and Pensions published its five-year strategy, *Opportunity and security throughout life*, which set an overall target of 80 per cent employment, retaining the 70 per cent target for lone parents. It announced more pilots, the Pathways to Work for Lone Parents, bringing together the New Deal for Lone Parents, Extended School Childcare and the In Work Credit/Work Search Premium.

Regarding compulsion, the strategy states:

*"[...] we think it would be wrong simply to move lone parents from Income Support onto the Jobseeker's Allowance regime: an unrestricted requirement to search for work is inappropriate, given the complex and difficult circumstances many lone parents face. We think such an approach would be expensive, unfair and ineffectual."* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2005, p38)

The Green Paper published the following year, *A new deal for welfare: empowering people to work*, continued in a similar track, increasing the frequency of Work Focused Interviews to six-monthly for lone parents who had been claiming Income Support for at least a year (every three months for those whose youngest child is at least 11) (Department for Work and Pensions, 2006a).

In November 2006, the Department for Work and Pensions published a report by Lisa Harker, an independent policy adviser with a background in social issues and childcare, on meeting the child poverty targets. This focused on the need for Jobcentre Plus to offer better support to all parents, not just lone parents, and for jobs to offer good prospects to avoid in-work poverty (Harker, 2006). Regarding lone parents in particular, Harker cautiously supports an increase in conditionality, suggesting it should be directly linked to the forthcoming local authority childcare duty to secure sufficient childcare for working parents.

*"If a stronger package of support for lone parents was in place and lone parents genuinely had access to affordable childcare and work that fits with their family commitments, there would be grounds for extending conditionality. The UK is out of step with many other countries in having*

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*relatively weak conditionality in their system for lone parents. Strengthening lone parents' responsibility to prepare for a return to work would be a logical next step.*" (Harker, 2006, p23)

*"However, stronger forms of conditionality – along the lines already expected for Jobseeker's Allowance claimants – could undermine the success of the New Deal for Lone Parents."* (Harker, 2006, p24)

A second review on welfare to work by the banker David Freud reported in March 2007. This recommended that when lone parents' youngest child reaches 12, they should be moved on to Jobseeker's Allowance and be required to look for work in order to continue receiving benefits, with further reductions in the age of the youngest child to follow (Freud, 2007).

In response to these reports, the Government published a strategy document, *Working for children*, in March 2007. This supported David Freud's proposal to remove eligibility for Income Support for lone parents whose youngest child is 12 or over. It was argued that in the UK much less was asked of lone parents in return for their benefits than was the case in other OECD countries (Department for Work and Pensions, 2007a).

Some elements of Lisa Harker's report were also adopted, with a new focus on couples claiming benefits as well as on lone parents. The proposals included: recording the childcare needs and preferences of all parents; piloting a 'New Deal for Families' approach by extending support available in the New Deal for Lone Parents Plus pilot areas to all families with children in those areas; and introducing mandatory six-monthly Work Focused Interviews for the partners of parents claiming Jobseekers' Allowance.

The Green Paper published in July 2007, *In work, better off: next steps to full employment*, proposed that from October 2008 lone parents with a youngest child aged 12 or over would have to transfer to Jobseeker's Allowance, and from October 2010, this age would be reduced to seven years (Department for Work and Pensions, 2007b). The White Paper, *Ready for work: full employment in our generation*, confirmed these plans, with the addition of an intermediate step, cutting the age to 10 in October 2009 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2007c).

These proposals were controversial. The Social Security Advisory Committee recommended that the Government should not proceed with the regulations implementing these changes (Social Security Advisory Committee, 2008). Its

concerns included: the availability of childcare, the likelihood of lone parents being 'trapped' in low-wage employment and the impact of the sanctions regime on children. Despite this, the Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2008 were passed into law so that from November 2008 new or repeat lone parent claimants could no longer receive Income Support if their youngest child was 12 or over, with this rule applied to existing claimants from July the following year.

In 2008, further changes to the benefit system were proposed, which would abolish Income Support and create a new system based around Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and the new Employment and Support Allowance (the replacement for Incapacity Benefit). The White Paper *Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future* explained that claimants would be divided into three categories: 'no conditionality' (including lone parents and partners of JSA claimants whose youngest child is under 12 months); 'progression to work' (including lone parents and partners with a youngest child aged between one and seven); and 'work-ready' (including lone parents and partners with a youngest child aged seven or over) (Department for Work and Pensions, 2008a).

A 'Work for your benefit scheme' was also proposed, which would require people who have been on Jobseeker's Allowance for two years to participate in full-time activity for up to six months "to develop their work habits and employability skills". This would be piloted from 2010.

The Welfare Reform Bill 2009 brings these changes into legislation, abolishing Income Support and moving all claimants on to either Jobseeker's Allowance or, if disability or illness affects their ability to work, on to the Employment and Support Allowance; requiring job search by partners of benefit claimants; introducing a new regime of benefit sanctions for non-attendance at Jobcentres or participation in work-related activity; and enabling 'Work for your benefit schemes'.

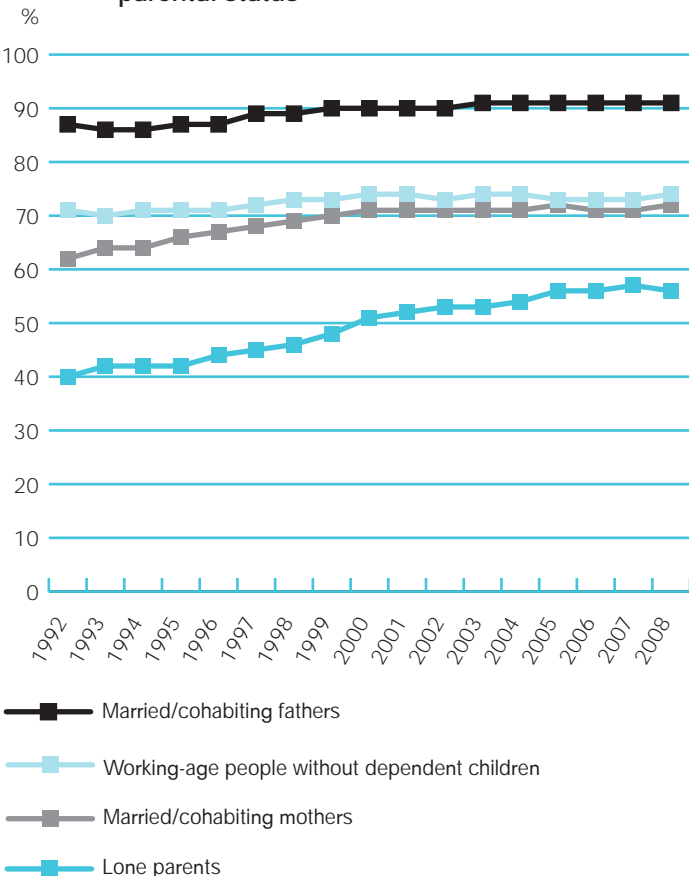
Following a period of economic prosperity, the UK economy started to shrink in the second half of 2008. This altered economic climate led to criticisms of the plans as being unrealistic when there were fewer jobs available. However, the Government rejected this view, with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions arguing in the House of Commons: "We should not repeat the mistakes of the recessions of the '80s and '90s, when hundreds of thousands of people were shuffled on to inactive benefits to keep the unemployment count down, and trapped there

without support, abandoned and scarring our communities" (House of Commons Hansard, 2008).

**Policy impact**

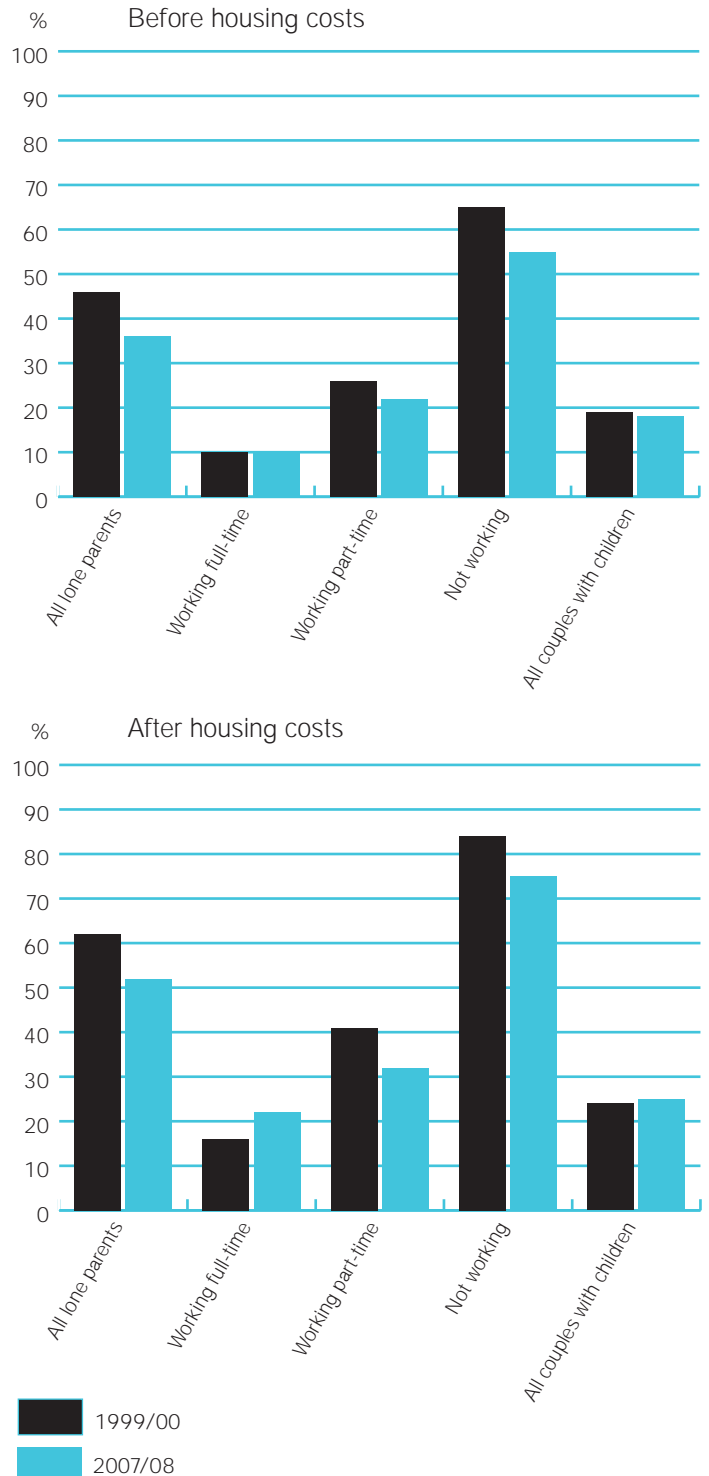
Figure 3 below shows that the proportion of lone parents in employment was already increasing during the 1990s, and has increased more than any other group. However, this increase has slowed in recent years and the employment rate is still well below the Government's 70 per cent target. The risk of living in poverty for lone parents as a whole has decreased somewhat, but is still very high for those who are not working. Although poverty among lone parents and their children has been reduced to some extent, it is still significant (see figure 4).

**Figure 3 Employment rates of working age people by parental status**



Source: Labour Force Survey (Spring percentages). National Statistics website: www.statistics.gov.uk

**Figure 4 Poverty risks (risk of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median household income)**



Source: Households below average income data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2009)

## Ten years of family policy

# Family structure and family policy

The rising proportion of children living with lone parents (currently around a quarter of children) has already been mentioned. In addition, re-partnering creates stepfamilies, with their own set of challenges. More than 10 per cent of all families with dependent children in Great Britain were stepfamilies in 2005 (Office for National Statistics, 2007a). Same-sex couples with children make up a smaller proportion of the population but challenge traditional views on the family. Whether the state should seek to support one family form above another is a highly political question. This chapter starts by setting out the ways in which the Government has recognised new family forms in legislation.

One occasion when the state must intervene is when parents cannot agree between them on the care of their children after separation or divorce. The state then has to adjudicate through the family courts. It is also involved in enforcing the financial responsibilities of non-resident parents (usually fathers). Whether these roles are carried out as well as they could be to reduce harm to children is one question addressed here. Since evidence suggests that adult relationship support can not only reduce the chance of family break-up but also improve children's wellbeing, it has also been proposed that the state should play a greater role in promoting and subsidising this.

### Recognition of new family forms

The 1998 Green Paper *Supporting families* contained a chapter entitled 'Strengthening Marriage'. "This Government believes that marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships. This does not mean trying to make people marry or criticising or penalising people who choose not to. We do not believe that Government should interfere in people's lives in that way. But we do share the belief of the majority of people that marriage provides the most reliable framework for raising children" (Home Office, 1998, p30).

This support for marriage is partly pragmatic: there are in general strong economic benefits to having two adults in the household, and marriage is seen to last longer than cohabiting partnerships. Driver and Martell (2002) see some aspects of New Labour discourse as drawing causal connections between changing family forms and welfare dependency, social exclusion and criminal and anti-social behaviour.

However, the Labour Government wished to avoid the overt moralising about family forms that had been a feature of the previous administration. With its focus on child poverty, there was a distinct shift in tax and benefits policy where increasing resources were transferred to families with children, particularly low-income families, whatever the adults' partnership status. In April 2000, the married couple's tax allowance was abolished except for couples where at least one person was born before April 1935.

The most notable piece of legislation extending rights to new family forms has been the Civil Partnerships Act 2004. This allows same-sex couples in the UK to register civil partnerships with rights and responsibilities identical to civil marriage. The Act came into force on 5 December 2005, and by the end of 2006, over 18,000 civil partnerships had been formed (Office for National Statistics, 2007b).

Other legislation has given new rights to those wishing to adopt a child or undergo fertility treatment outside marriage. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 allowed an application to adopt a child in England and Wales to be made by either a single person or a couple. The previous condition that the couple be married was dropped, thus allowing a same-sex couple to apply.

The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations came into force in April 2007. They provided a general prohibition of discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the grounds of sexual orientation. Demands by Catholic adoption agencies for an exemption from these rules were rejected, but these agencies were given additional time to comply, until the end of 2008.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 removes from legislation the requirement that clinics consider "the need for a father" in providing fertility treatment, replacing this with "the need for supportive parenting". The Act gives same-sex couples undergoing fertility treatment the right to name both partners on their child's birth certificate from April 2009.

In an attempt to strengthen the bond between biological father and child where the parents are unmarried and may not even be in a relationship, the Children and Adoption Act 2002 provided that from December 2003 if parents who are not married register a child's birth together, the father automatically acquires parental responsibility. Parental responsibility was introduced as a legal concept by the Children Act 1989, defined as "all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property".

The Welfare Reform Bill would implement compulsory joint birth registration for unmarried parents in an attempt to reduce the seven per cent of births that are currently sole registered (Department for Work and Pensions, 2008b). Mothers are obliged to provide information about the father, but can be exempted in certain situations including: where the mother does not know the identity of the father; where the mother has reason to fear for her safety or that of her child if the father is contacted; or where the child was conceived by donor sperm and has no father under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act.

The ministerial foreword to the discussion paper *Families in Britain* states:

*"[...] there is arguably no longer a one size fits all family in Britain today. But this is diversity and not decline. Warm, loving and stable relationships matter more for our happiness and wellbeing than the legal form of a relationship."* (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2008, p4)

## Separation

When relationships break down, the impact on children can be considerable. The adults concerned may not always succeed in placing the children's needs first, and in some cases cannot resolve their differences without recourse to the family courts. This part of the legal system has been the subject of much controversy, with fathers' groups protesting about perceived bias against the non-resident parent and lack of transparency. Several high-profile stunts by the group Fathers 4 Justice attracted media attention during the mid-2000s.

Fathers' groups argue that mothers are too easily able to deny contact to non-resident fathers. However, others contend that unsupervised contact is awarded too often by the courts to perpetrators of domestic abuse, putting children at risk.

In 2005, a review of the system rejected calls by fathers' groups for a legal presumption that children would spend equal time with both parents after separation. Instead, the White Paper, *Parental separation: children's needs and parents' responsibilities. Next steps*, retained the current starting point that both parents are equal and that children should have a meaningful relationship with their parents after adult separation, so long as it is safe and in the child's best interests (HM Government, 2005).

Concerns about unreasonable denial of contact on the one hand, and about the safety of women and children after domestic abuse on the other, were addressed to some extent through plans that included stricter enforcement of contact orders and the piloting of an integrated domestic violence court. The Children and Adoption Act 2002 had already extended the definition of harm in the Children Act 1989 to include "impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another".

The other principles set out in the White Paper were: that collaborative agreements should be favoured; that help, support and advice for parents and children should be readily accessible; and that the wishes and feelings of children, in light of their age and understanding, should be considered and taken fully into account.

Conflict has been shown to be one of the key determinants of children's wellbeing and outcomes after parental separation (Mooney et al., 2009). In an attempt to reduce parental conflict, the 2005 White Paper included plans to promote the use of mediation, building on findings from the Family Resolutions Pilot Project, which was running at the time. However, compulsory mediation was not proposed. In-court conciliation was to be promoted and extended and sample 'parenting plans' developed to help separating parents reach agreement. This resulted in a guide for parents, *Putting your children first: a guide for separating parents* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006f).

While only a small proportion of separating parents come before the family courts, policies so far do not seem to have had great success in reducing conflict between parents. Only around a fifth of people who are funded by legal aid for family breakdown cases (excluding those involving domestic violence) currently opt for mediation. In a survey of recipients of legal aid, a third said they had not been made aware by their solicitor or legal adviser that mediation was an option (National Audit Office, 2007).

The Family Resolutions Pilot Project ran between September 2004 and August 2005 in three areas. It included three components: an initial risk assessment at court, two group sessions led by Relate and parent planning meetings with CAFCASS officers. Although it was hoped to get 1,000 couples to participate, only 62 couples were referred to the pilot. However, the group sessions were popular with parents, including the mixed-sex format (with couples split between groups), and most parents wanted more of them (Trinder et al., 2006).

## Ten years of family policy

An evaluation of brief in-court conciliation found it was an effective way of reaching agreements and restoring contact over the short term, but not at improving parental relationships or children's psychological distress (Trinder and Kellett, 2007). The Centre for Separated Families (2008) has emphasised the need for services to address the emotional needs of mothers and fathers during and after separation.

While there is a recognition in principle of the benefits to children of a strong relationship with their father after parental separation, the benefits system continues to be based on the assumption that there is one primary caring parent. Even when children live with their father for up to half of their time, the state does not recognise them as parents for this purpose.

### Child maintenance

For a government concerned with 'rights and responsibilities', ensuring that non-resident parents pay for the upkeep of their children is important. For some families, child maintenance provides additional income; for others, it is deducted from their benefits, thus profiting the state. However, as with the previous administration, creating a fair and efficient system of collecting child maintenance has continued to be one of the more intractable problems for this Government.

The 1999 White Paper *A new contract for welfare: children's rights and parents' responsibilities* (Department for Social Security, 1999) which was implemented through the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000, attempted to remedy ongoing problems with the Child Support Agency (CSA). Since the CSA was set up in 1993 it had suffered from a large backlog of cases and a complex assessment process. Because parents with care who claimed benefits had child maintenance payments deducted from their benefits, neither parent had any incentive to use the system.

The reforms simplified the assessment system; allowed parents with care receiving benefits to keep up to £10 a week from maintenance payments; and introduced tougher enforcement sanctions on non-resident parents who failed to pay. The new system came into force from March 2003, but the performance of the CSA continued to deteriorate, with rising debt and complaints (Child Support Agency, 2008). There were also significant problems with the new computer system. By October 2006, a backlog of a quarter of a million cases was waiting to be processed (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2007).

Following the 2006 White Paper *A new system of child maintenance* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2006b), the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008 established a replacement for the CSA: the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (CMEC). Changes to the system included: removing the compulsion for parents on benefits to use the agency from October 2008, with information provided to encourage parents to make their own child maintenance arrangements; and increasing the amount of child maintenance that parents on benefits can keep to £20 a week, preceding a full disregard, which is planned from 2010. The Welfare Reform Bill will allow passports or driving licences to be confiscated for the non-payment of maintenance.

### Relationship support

Compared to government investment in services to improve the parent-child relationship, the adult couple relationship has had relatively little public policy attention. Sir Graham Hart's report *The funding of marriage support – a review*, published in 1999, concluded that marriage and relationship support was a worthwhile use of public funds (Hart, 1999). The Lord Chancellor's Department, which was then responsible for marriage and relationship support, accepted the report's recommendations and provided around £5 million a year to support service delivery and development through the Marriage and Relationship Support Grant between 2001/02 and 2004/05.

For 2005/06, the Marriage and Relationship Support Grant was combined into the Strengthening Families Grant, with responsibility moved to the Department for Education and Skills and the following year absorbed into the Children, Young People and Families Grant.

It has been argued that in concentrating on the parent-child relationship, the Government has not sufficiently taken into account the importance for children's wellbeing of parents' relationship with each other (e.g. Stanley and Williams, 2005; Social Justice Policy Group, 2007). Neither *Every Child Matters*, nor the *National service framework for children, young people and maternity services* includes this as a priority.

However, by the time *The children's plan* was published in December 2007 the significance of the adult couple relationship had come to be recognised.

*"An effective family policy must start with supporting strong couple relationships and stable, positive relationships"*

*within families.” (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007a, p23)*

One of the commitments in the plan is to ensure that outreach workers from Sure Start Children's Centres receive training to give them the confidence to support relationships after the birth of a child. The updated *Child health promotion programme* (Department of Health, 2008) mentions the couple relationship as one of the issues on which health professionals should provide support during pregnancy and children's early years.

In December 2008, Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, announced £5.1 million funding for organisations delivering relationship support services, and £5.5 million to fund pilots of better-coordinated local support for separating couples.

## Conclusion

The past decade has seen many achievements in family policy, with issues such as childcare and support for parents being brought into the policy mainstream for the first time. Even the existence of a 'Department for Children, Schools and Families' is a clear step forward. The importance of parent-child interaction in the early years is recognised and built into services such as Children's Centres. Financial support for families has been increased significantly, with the bold ambition to end child poverty by 2020 now to be enshrined in legislation.

There is clearly still much to do. In some areas, the way forward is relatively clear, while in other cases, the problems are more intractable. For example, the goal of halving child poverty by 2010 seems likely to be missed. This calls for an approach on several fronts, not the least of these being the underlying inequality in UK society in terms of both wages and capital. The national minimum wage, which is taken for granted today, was a significant step forward when it was introduced. Redistribution through tax and benefits is, of course, important (including the ongoing uprating of benefits), but the Government's focus on work as a route out of poverty is also necessary. However, some caution is needed with this latter approach. Potential pitfalls include a 'work first' approach that leads to low-paid work with few prospects and a requirement to work being imposed without taking account of complex family circumstances.

There have been significant advances in 'work-life balance', but this is still generally seen as a woman's problem. Couples who start off with egalitarian views can quickly find themselves in a situation where the man works long hours while the woman's options are limited to lower-status part-time jobs fitted round inflexible childcare. There is more that the Government could do to share the cost of having children between men and women so that couples have a real choice in how they share paid work and care. This may require a rethink of the parental leave system in the UK as a whole, including the options available to parents of older children. Another difficult, and related, issue is how to ensure that childcare provision is of high quality and child centred, while being affordable to parents, and that provision is sustainable in disadvantaged areas.

Despite some recent attention, the relationship between parents has been relatively neglected in government policies for children and families, compared to the parent-child relationship. This includes support for the couple relationship early on, when couples experience difficulty or around the birth of a child, support in crisis and, in particular, when couples are separating to enable them to make the best decisions for their children. Evidence from other countries suggests helpful ways forward here. Also, since separation or divorce is not a one-off event, parents and children may continue to have additional needs for support which should be borne in mind when services are being planned.

The increased integration of children's services has in many ways been successful, increasing communication between professionals in order to meet children's needs. More recently, there have also been moves towards intensive whole-family support such as the Family Intervention Projects. However, a whole-family approach across the whole range of services is still a long way from being realised. In practice, this means that child protection issues still go unrecognised by services such as adult mental health, and that practical support that could enable parents to carry on caring for their children is not provided, leading to a crisis situation later.

The recent review of child protection in response to the death of 'Baby P' emphasised that there may have been too much of a focus on structures and procedures, obscuring the need for professionals working with families to be supported and well trained, with appropriate caseloads, enabling them to fully understand the family situation and use their professional judgement. It is generally accepted that it is important to meet families' needs before they reach crisis point. However, in practice, resource limitations and the need

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to provide help to those families already in crisis limit the provision of early support.

As Henricson (2007) argues, the current system may place too much emphasis on specific targets, and too little on ensuring a consistent national entitlement to services. A recent strategy document, *Building Britain's future*, announced a move "from a system based primarily on targets and central direction to one where individuals have enforceable entitlements over the service they receive" (Prime Minister, 2009, p18). This may be an opportunity, if extended across family services, to put in place a rights-based approach based on a broader understanding of family wellbeing (such as is currently being developed by the Family and Parenting Institute), and to reduce the current 'postcode lottery' for some services.

A policy goal for the next decade should be to extend 'Think Family' as an approach beyond family services: it should rather embrace all aspects of government policy. Across policy areas as diverse as housing, criminal justice, disability, asylum and neighbourhood renewal, government departments should seek to eliminate the factors known to limit families' wellbeing.

With tighter economic circumstances making government investment more difficult, at the same time as new strains are placed on families, it is vital that progress continues in understanding and implementing 'what works' for families. If this is achieved, the benefits will be felt not just now, but also for future generations.

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