



Where now for parenting?

Perspectives on parenting, policy and practice

October 2011

Introduction

*'There may be some doubt as to who are the best people to have charge of children, but there can be no doubt that parents are the worst.'*¹

In the midst of the national soul-searching that followed the disturbances of August 2011, one explanation soon came to dominate: the idea that poor parenting had somehow paved the way for civil unrest. Going even further, some commentators lamented the decline of traditional family values as one of a driver of the social disintegration. Initial polls suggested that the general public concurred with this diagnosis, blaming poor parenting as the driver of the behaviour of looters.²

This divisive debate about the 'causes' of the riots is unlikely to be definitively resolved. Although work is now underway to analyse the triggers that prompted the unrest of the summer, it is unlikely the specific role of parenting and family life will ever be fully disentangled from the other complex factors at work.³ But the public conversation it has generated - while confused in some respects - has served to bring several issues into focus and to pose number of challenges to those of us who work on behalf of families.

In the run up to Parents' Week 2011, The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) invited a range of commentators and organisations to consider the pressures on modern parenting, what can be learnt from the reaction to riots and what these developments might mean for parenting policy. Despite providing people with only a few weeks to contribute, we were delighted to receive an impressive selection of over 30 articles. The collection presented here highlight a number of challenges that we – as policymakers, charities, and families – need to consider as we attempt to build more nuanced policy solutions to supporting families. Four broad themes have emerged from the collection:

Parenting in the Spotlight

There is nothing new in our collective obsession with parenting, and several of our contributors take a historical perspective on this phenomenon. However, in recent years parenting has become a particularly charged political subject and the idea that the state has an active role to play in the domestic sphere has become increasingly accepted. Authors in this section consider the way in which parenting has become professionalised and the extent to which a deficit view of 'problem parents' is now in the ascendance.

¹ George Bernard Shaw (1856 – 1950) is widely reputed to have been in agreement with this view, as expressed by the Victorian poet William Morris, see p92 Henderson, A. *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works, a Critical Biography* (1911)

² 'A survey by YouGov for Channel 4/ITN reveals British people think poor parenting, criminal behaviour and gang culture is causing the unrest in cities across the UK.' (August 2011) <http://www.channel4.com/news/poor-parenting-to-blame-for-uk-riots-says-exclusive-poll>

³ The causes and consequences of the English riots will be examined in a study by LSE and the Guardian newspaper, supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Open Society Foundation <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/news/archives/2011/09/riots.aspx>

Parenting Pressures

While in many respects family life in the 21st Century is easier than ever before, modern society also presents parents with a very unique set of pressures. These include the rise of commercialisation and materialism to the difficulty of enforcing discipline in homes and communities. Contributors in this section take an in-depth look at the challenges faced by working parents in finding affordable and accessible childcare, and the tensions all of these modern pressures give rise to within our domestic relationships.

Understanding the Family

Our shared understanding of the 'family' needs to avoid assumptions and consider the reality of family life as it is lived today. Subjects tackled in these articles include the 'mythology of absent fathers', the 'lazy stereotyping' of single parents, the 'overlooked' role of grandparents, and the 'unheard' voice of children. Authors consider the needs of the most marginalised groups and make the case for a more nuanced understanding of the role of the wider family.

Parenting Policy and Practice

The need for a coherent strategy for parenting support is also explored in several articles, along with the vital role played by professionals. While recent months have seen a group of 'problem families' being placed at the centre of the political debate we need to ensure that we provide a variety of interventions which are appropriate to the different needs within this group as well as a universal offer for all parents. We are also provided with a perspective on how to tackle these challenges at the local level. Finally, contributors point to the wealth of existing evidence on 'what works' in supporting families, and suggest that we should think creatively about ways to engage with parents.

In a section on policy implications we provide an FPI perspective on what these developments might mean for the future direction of parenting policy. FPI has coordinated this collection but the views contained in the articles remain those of the authors. We hope that this is stimulating contribution to the debate and please do contact us if you wish to contribute your own views.

Peter Grigg
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Figures at a glance:

The riots and convictions

- 4** The number of days over which the riots took place. The public disorder began on 6th August 2011 in Tottenham, North London. On 7th and 8th August there were further outbreaks of disorder mainly in and around London. On 9th August the incidents were mainly outside of London including in Manchester and Birmingham.
- 14%** Increase in web traffic to news and social media sites in the UK
- 3.4m** Visits to Twitter.com on the Tuesday of the riots
- 70%** The number of those accused of riot-related crimes who had travelled from outside their area to participate – or "riot tourism" as Communities secretary Eric Pickles described it
- 1,715** The number of suspects who, by 16th September 2011 had an initial hearing at magistrates' courts.
- 21%** The proportion of these aged 10-17 (364 young people)
- 2%** Number of the 10-17 year old male population who have at least one previous conviction
- 40%** Number of males aged 10-17 brought before the courts for the disorder had at least one previous conviction.
- 11** The age of the youngest known person to be punished for taking part in the riots

Figures at a glance:

Families in Britain

13.8m	Families in England
6.01m	Families in England with dependent children
117,000	Estimated number of families with multiple problems
5.89m	Approximate number of families with dependent children not considered to have multiple problems
£220,000	Estimated minimum cost to state of families with multiple problems
£14,000	Estimated cost of family intervention project per family
£50,000	Estimated saving per family per year of family intervention projects
8,841	Total number of families who worked with a family intervention service between January 2006 to March 2011

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Parenting support – a political quick fix?
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Policy Directions

Drawing on 32 articles from a range of experts, there are so many challenges that we – as policymakers, charities, and families – could consider in an attempt to build more nuanced policy solutions to supporting families. In an attempt to highlight these, FPI has drawn on the perspectives within this collection to summarise five areas for particular attention. We are collating these issues so that they might serve to stimulate a useful discussion about future policy development.

Parenting policy has reached a crossroads and there are set of choices ahead for policymakers. There is a risk that the current debate on ‘problem families’ unhelpfully adds another stereotype to a modern mythology of parenting. Alongside the ‘pushy parent’ who helicopters around their child and respects no boundaries in sharp elbowing others out of the way in their child’s interest, we have the deficit model of a feckless parent, who is in need of corrective intervention. The reality of modern parenting is, of course, more complex and more interesting than these stereotypes suggest but what is clear is that to move forward requires a more positive, sustainable framework for parenting that both offers appropriate support to parents and the conditions in which families can thrive.

1. The government needs to review the impact of austerity measures on families

Income is a critical factor in enabling good parenting. Conversely financial pressures layer pressure on relationships - both between couples and between parent and child. The Coalition Government is passionately committed to a family friendly society and also to a deficit reduction plan - inevitably these two agendas will conflict in places. The nature of changes to taxes and benefits over the past year has meant that families with children have faced a disproportionate impact on their income. We would urge that, when implementing policies, the Government should closely consider the financial consequences for families, for example, the freeze of child benefit rates and the design of a Universal Credit system. Similarly, we need to promote efforts to place affordable, high quality childcare as central to helping parents balance work and care. It is true that supporting families in this way requires public spending, but it should be seen as an investment in future economic growth through enhanced consumer confidence, better outcomes for children and a stronger and more stable society. Austerity measures need to be ‘family proofed’ and should reflect the long-term importance of family friendly working practices, a fair economy for families, the provision of essential services for families, and good quality housing and transport.

2. New approaches need to be designed with families at the heart; if we start with families, then efficiencies will follow

According to the Department for Education it is not uncommon, in the case of families with multiple problems, for up to 20 local agencies to be involved with the same family, including

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health services, schools, Children's Centres, the police, social care, and Job Centre Plus. This has been shown to be expensive and ineffective as agencies' involvement can overlap and even pull in opposite directions. Putting the family at the centre of service design creates real opportunities for efficiencies. We welcome a focus on early intervention and on community budgets as mechanisms that could help to ensure a joined-up approach to families' needs across local services. We also hope that new initiatives will explore ways to utilise the entire existing public sector infrastructure available. For example, we believe that improved support and engagement of parents could be rolled out through the schools network and the best practice embodied in many children's centres needs to be preserved - even during a period of cuts. A similar joining-up needs to happen at a national level. The Family Test should be used as an opportunity to arrive at an overview of how policies work for families across Departments – from the Departments for Education, Communities and Local Government, Health, the Home Office, Work and Pensions, and Innovation and Skills – to name some of the main actors. It is only with this approach that the Government will be able to achieve the best for families in these tough economic times.

3. A local family entitlement should be introduced to enhance parental choice and drive improvement in services

While the localisation agenda could bring real benefits to families, it could also drive a further unevenness in service provision and quality. Developing a consistent entitlement for *all* parents will help us to avoid a postcode lottery of services at local level, and begin not just to tackle the difficult cases, but avoid a family facing a problem becoming a family in crisis. The range of parenting and family interventions available should be coordinated locally with a clear statement of the universal entitlement available to all parents, as well as signposting to support and advice in relation to the intensive options of provision for the most vulnerable groups. We regard the current moment as a real opportunity to place families and parents at the heart of spending decisions at the local level. However, in order for this to provide genuine opportunities for consultation, our current mechanisms need to be recognised as insufficient to engage families. We believe that work is needed to enhance the ability of decision-makers to engage with families at the local and central levels. Too often discussions are led from a top-down perspective (with the starting point the questions that matter to politicians and policy-makers, not families) and too often consultation takes place after decisions have been taken. We should not assume we know what different families need; developing an entitlement would require engaging with parents in a far more robust way in the years ahead.

4. Policy solutions will only work if there is clarity about the problems they are addressing

The desire to speed up delivery for the most vulnerable families requires further refinement if it is to work effectively, and the newly announced 'Unit for Troubled Families' will need to set clear parameters for what success looks like. There are three possible targets here – 1) a drive for volume; 2) a drive to limit anti-social behaviour and 3) a drive to ensure that services intervene in a way that prevent family problems becoming a family crisis. Each would require a different strategy and suggest starkly different measures of success. At first sight, the drive for volume is unlikely to be deliverable – cost and the requirement to develop differentiated interventions that

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would be appropriate across this population and the simple organisational challenges in scaling up would all stand in the way. The second would suggest an extension of FIPs to a tightly defined subset of subset of families who are engaged or at risk of being involved in criminal activity and an implementation plan for roll out to the right scale. The third approach is the one that not only holds more long term promise, but adds together with government's thinking in this area with the early intervention agenda. This approach would bring into sharp focus the further work that needs to be done at a local level to make services work together more effectively for families and highlight the gaps that are undermining parents' ability to parent effectively, with particular strain already identified in the areas of mental health, domestic violence or support for families with children with special educational needs. Such an approach might then, in turn, enable a new look at effective spending at a local level, enabling greater investment in preventative services even in a time of economic constraint.

5. We need to know more about family trends, behaviour and motivations to make a success of initiatives

Families are not homogenous, and we risk stigmatisation of certain groups if we rely too heavily on blunt demographic indicators of potential risk factors. Snap-shot surveys are not sufficient in this respect, segmentation of families' needs to be based on evidence about real parenting behaviour and should inform the targeting of advice, guidance and support. While a group of 'problem families' have been placed at the centre of the political response, the Government needs to specify how a scaled-up intervention will reach across this group and then ensure that a variety of interventions are in place appropriate to the different needs they have. Improved clarity about what is likely to drive changes in parental behaviour will also enhance the impact and reach of proposed policy solutions, including the planned pilot of a system of parenting vouchers.

While parents look set to remain 'under the microscope' for some time to come, we must move forward in a way which supports the confidence of parents rather than undermining them. Ultimately, progress will only be observed if we recognise not only the importance of parenting skills, but the fact that parenting is a 'social good' and for us to parent well, we will require a family friendly society and economy.

There is no such thing as an average family. The Family and Parenting Institute champions families. We are an independent charity working for a family friendly society which recognises the whole family, values families in all their diversity, and promotes conditions which enable families to thrive. We draw on research and evidence to influence policy and offer practical solutions to make society more family friendly.

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