

Parenting UK response to the consultation on Tackling Child Poverty and Improving Life Chances

February 2011

The Government is undertaking a consultation on its approach to ending child poverty and improving life chances. Developing a long-term strategy to tackle decades of inter-generational disadvantage requires new approaches and depends on everyone working together.

The consultation opened on 21 December 2010 and closed on 15 February 2011. You can see the document here <http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations>

This consultation response has been coordinated by Parenting UK's Communications Team. For more information please contact info@parentinguk.org

Responses to specific consultation questions

Question 1: *What do you think are the key points from the [Frank Field Review](#) which the Government needs to incorporate into the child poverty strategy?*

Key points which need to be incorporated are the recognition that income is only the easiest way of measuring child poverty but not necessarily the only cause nor the only solution. The real causes of 'poverty' are manifold and are not as easily addressed but must be tackled as the policy approach of just raising the income of the poorest families is not working. We must attempt to reduce child poverty by improving child wellbeing – by measuring not just how much income each family has, but each child's social and emotional wellbeing and whether they are starting life with the same chances as everyone else. As Graham Music states in his book *Nurturing Natures*, "The early years are vital...a parent's good emotional and physical contact with its infant is an innoculatory factor in its growing up" (Psychology Press 2010 p92)

There needs to be a multifaceted approach to improving child wellbeing, addressing all the issues which will affect how well that child develops – this includes parental education, health and mental wellbeing, parental awareness of the importance of the early years, support for parents, especially around the birth of their first child and ongoing support for families, especially those in the most vulnerable groups.

We should be focussing on improving child wellbeing to ensure we do not lose sight of the factors that must be addressed including, as in Field's review:

- The importance of the early years: “Most effective and cost-effective way to help and support young families is in the earliest years of a child’s life”
- The role of the family in child development and life chances: “children’s life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life. It is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money, in determining whether their potential is realised in adult life.”
- The need to focus on and support parents: “nothing can be achieved without working with parents”
- The role and benefits of graduate-led childcare: “commitment that all disadvantaged children should have access to affordable full-time, graduate-led childcare from age two. This is essential to support parents returning to work as well as child development”
- New measures of child wellbeing to run alongside the existing financial poverty measures: these indicators will measure annual progress at a national level on a range of factors in young children which we know to be predictive of children’s future outcomes. In our view it is essential that these new ‘Life Chances Indicators’ are used to measure how we improve child wellbeing as they are the most influential factors on a child’s social, emotional and behavioural development and cannot be ignored in favour of merely raising the income levels of the ‘poorest’ families. This includes measuring parenting using tools such as the Pianta child-parent relationship scale – as suggested in Field’s review.
- Using proven early interventions: “there is evidence that interventions can make a difference in improving parenting, the home learning environment, and improving children’s attainment” – all of these things will benefit society now and in the future in terms of improved education, and health and reduced crime
- Ensuring all children have informal/formal contact with professionals: health check at age two should be mandatory
- Emphasis on parenting in school: a Parenting UK roundtable on this concluded that this should be:
 - a universal offer, not one just available to the worst off children
 - that it should not be “experiential” and “reflective” as adult parenting classes are, because these only worked when you had a baby or child at home to practise on
 - wider than just “parenting” and that to be a parent is to have a relationship with a child or children. So teenagers need to know how to form relationships in order to develop emotional literacy, negotiate conflict and set boundaries.
- Ensure parenting support becomes integrated into people’s lives: during ante natal and post natal classes, through children’s centres and at school for both parents and pupils

Question 2: *What are your thoughts on the best way to incorporate early intervention into the child poverty strategy? (Note: We expect that the Graham Allen Review's interim report will be published before our consultation closes on the 15th February 2011. Respondents are welcome to include any reflections on the report in their responses).*

Frank Field's report on preventing poor children from becoming poor adults sets out what society needs to address to improve child wellbeing, to break the intergenerational cycle of poor (disadvantaged) children growing up to be poor (disadvantaged) adults. Field sets out the various factors which influence a child's social, emotional and behavioural development – the key things to ensure they have a good start in life. These factors include:

- The quality of the early years, both in terms of parents' involvement at home through early home learning (reading, singing and playing together) and in formal childcare settings
- Parental and professional awareness of the importance of the early years in building the foundations for a child's development
- The essential role of the parents and good parenting– 'what they do is more important than who they are'
- The importance of providing continued support and education about parenting – through ante natal and post natal classes, in children's centres, and at school

Some of this can be done through changing the way we approach parenting, namely expanding the support offered by health visitors, including more parenting support at different stages for all parents, raising public awareness of the importance of the early years. However, the most effective way of ensuring those children most at risk of not reaching the social, emotional and behavioural developmental levels desired is to intervene early with high-quality support. Field has set out the goal, Allen gives us the method: intervening early. But to ensure that early intervention is successful, we must focus on not only the chosen programme, but also the practitioners and the principles behind the work.

- The programme should have robust, appropriate evidence of its effectiveness
- The practitioners must be properly trained and supported
- The work must be underpinned by principles (ie the NOS principles and values of Working with Parents)

Whereas the previous approach to reducing child poverty was to increase income, this approach must include a practical aspect of support or intervention that will help to increase child wellbeing. The child poverty strategy needs to set out what we need to achieve, and how we are going to achieve it which means supporting all families but also identifying children who might be at risk – children of teenage parents, children of parents with mental health issues, but also any child who is identified as being potentially at risk of not achieving their full potential.

Question 3: *Do you agree with our working definition of socio-economic disadvantage?*

Yes

Question 4: *Are these the right areas for the child poverty strategy to cover?*

The four areas suggested are very broad and while an element of the child poverty strategy should include ensuring families have enough money, and helping parents to work – giving more emphasis to these aspects than the more fundamental and potentially more effective aspects referred to in question 1 (improving parental wellbeing, mental health education etc) could limit the success of the strategy.. To transform the life chances of children raised in poverty, the strategy should give explicit priority to the first bullet point.

These strategy areas should rather be based around the outcomes society wishes to achieve, with the methodology following on from that. The second and third suggested areas, 'Employment and skills' and 'financial support' are too focused on the old approach to ending child poverty, and if achieved in themselves will not automatically improve the life chances for those children concerned. The approach that must be taken is to tackle those issues which in themselves will improve child wellbeing, with or without more money – there is indeed research to prove that this is possible. Just equipping a family to be financially independent will not guarantee a child no longer experiences disadvantage.

The key area in reducing child 'poverty' is early intervention and the 'foundation years'. You cannot expect to improve a child's wellbeing just by getting a parent back to work, or reforming the benefits system.

Suggested strategy areas:

- **Early intervention and the 'Foundation Years':** intervening early to support every child to fulfil their potential and facilitate true social mobility through education, health and family policies;
- **Parenting support and education:** ensuring all parents receive support and information about good parenting, as soon as they become parents (from pregnancy) and before (through education at school)
- **A joined-up approach to child and family wellbeing:** ensuring all professionals who come into contact with children and parents, whether formally or informally, are aware of the important developmental stages and able to signpost or refer on where necessary (eg maternal mental health)
- **Helping families to be financially independent:** removing barriers to work, ensuring that work pays and improving parental leave

Frank Field's recommendations for new measures of Life Chances Indicators, such as cognitive development at age three, the home learning environment, maternal mental health and positive parenting are the indicators which the child poverty strategy areas need to ensure they are addressing.

Question 5: *Do you agree that the role and the remit of the Child Poverty Commission should be broadened to reflect the new approach?*

Yes, ensuring the new approach does not fall back into the bad habits of the last is essential. We do not want to return to the targets driven approach where merely increasing family income was seen as a panacea for the complex myriad of problems faced by many families. We need to push forward the importance of taking the life chances indicators seriously and help local authorities to do this.

Question 6: *What do you think makes the most difference to the life chances of children?*

The first three years of a child's life, in particular the first relationship they experience with their parent(s) as that is the template for all others. It is essential that greater emphasis is placed on these early years, in particular in supporting parents, helping them to understand their role in their child's development and intervening early where this is needed.

Question 7: *Are there additional measures, compatible with our fiscal approach, which could help us combat poverty and improve life chances?*

Alongside early intervention approaches, we need to ensure that parenting support is seen as a universal offer which all parents can have access to. As Frank Field suggests in his review, "Children's Centres should ensure all new parents are encouraged to take advantage of a parenting course"

Question 8: *What further steps can be taken to help local authorities and partners to reduce poverty and improve life chances?*

As suggested in Field's review, local authorities need to be helped to ensure that they can measure child wellbeing with procedures that are already in place, through a joined- up approach and wider access to data. The Child Poverty Commission should look to provide support and examples of good practice to all local authorities and should hold authorities to account where they are not achieving the aims of the strategy.

Question 9 : *How can the voluntary, community and private sectors contribute most effectively to local approaches to tackling child poverty and improving life chances?*

The private sector should be encouraged, even incentivised, to lead the way in providing support to families through offering parenting support, classes, more flexible working, better parental leave to help parents do the vital role of parenting.

The voluntary and community sectors are well placed to provide this support to families. They have great experience in innovation and delivery of early intervention, and trusted relationships with many vulnerable families. Investment in early intervention must not unfairly discriminate against the vcs because they have not had the financial means or academic capacity to conduct evaluations to the standards suggested by the Allan review. Many vcs organisations have significantly improved the robustness of their evaluation methods, often utilising external evaluators. They can demonstrate the effectiveness of their work, but not to the standards suggested in the Allan review. It would undermine strong, local communities if organisations that have proven the effectiveness of their work were undermined in these challenging times.