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THE CONDITION  
OF BRITAIN  
BRIEFING 1:

# RAISING A FAMILY

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT IPPR

IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research, is the UK's leading progressive thinktank. We are an independent charitable organisation with more than 40 staff members, paid interns and visiting fellows. Our main office is in London, with IPPR North, IPPR's dedicated thinktank for the North of England, operating out of offices in Newcastle and Manchester.

The purpose of our work is to assist all those who want to create a society where every citizen lives a decent and fulfilled life, in reciprocal relationships with the people they care about. We believe that a society of this sort cannot be legislated for or guaranteed by the state. And it certainly won't be achieved by markets alone. It requires people to act together and take responsibility for themselves and each other.

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## ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

IPPR's flagship Condition of Britain programme is examining the state of British society in order to understand how politics, institutions and policies need to change in response to the major social pressures facing post-crash Britain.

As part of this programme, IPPR is talking to people across the country about their everyday experiences, the stresses and strains they encounter, and what is needed to help them to live more fulfilling and less pressured lives. Combined with rigorous analysis of the latest data and trends, we hope to generate new insights into the condition of British society, and define the central challenges for social policy over the coming decade.

The Voices of Britain website is a vital part of the Condition of Britain project: through it, and with the help of People's Voice Media reporting from across the country, we are inviting everyone to inform and shape our work by sharing their experiences.

We would love to hear your story:

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# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	2
<b>Ziadah's experience .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. What are the pressures of raising a family in Britain? .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Family finances are under pressure across most of society .....	5
Families struggle to have the time for each other .....	6
Relationships are under strain, and some families face breakdown .....	7
The vast majority of parents do a good job, but none can succeed on their own .....	8
Certain markets intrude too far into childhood and family life .....	8
<b>2. How can we help Britain's families to thrive? .....</b>	<b>10</b>
A decent income matters – but that means more than just benefits .....	10
Strong relationships matter – but that means more than a tax break .....	11
Great parenting matters – but that means practical help, not isolation or blame .....	13
Protecting childhood matters – but that means strong families standing up to markets ..	14
<b>References .....</b>	<b>16</b>

# INTRODUCTION

Families in Britain embody love and commitment, but many are under strain as the cost of living rises and parents struggle to balance family time and work. While parents have primary responsibility for raising children, the state and wider society create the environment in which families live. This briefing paper explores the pressures on Britain's families, and reflects on recent attempts to craft a more supportive environment for them. The goal is to understand how we can help families thrive in an era of limited public budgets, uncertain growth and shifting pressures on family life.

## **The Condition of Britain programme**

This is the first in a series of briefing papers to be published as part of IPPR's Condition of Britain programme. This programme is examining the state of British society in order to understand how politics, institutions and policies need to change in response to the major social pressures facing post-crash Britain. Subsequent briefing papers will consider the central challenges in social security and employment, housing and neighbourhoods, and the specific problems facing young people and older people. The focus of this paper is on families with primary and pre-school age children (although we are not looking at primary school education itself as part of the Condition of Britain programme). Issues facing teenagers and young people will be addressed in a separate briefing paper.

In each briefing paper we will draw on a range of sources to identify the central pressures on the social fabric of Britain. To ensure that our thinking is rooted in the everyday experiences of people around the country, our analysis is informed by a series of visits to neighbourhoods across Britain. To hear more about the pressures on families and the sources of support to which they turn, we visited Wythenshawe in South Manchester in May 2013 to speak to parents and staff at Benchill Sure Start Children's Centre. We also met with staff, volunteers and parents at Woodhouse Park Family Centre, a local charity running family contact and play services, and discussed children's policy with councillors, policy experts and practitioners in Greater Manchester. These visits are complemented by an ongoing community media project called Voices of Britain<sup>1</sup>, which is gathering short film-essays from people across Britain in which they discuss the sources of strain and strength in their lives.

*This series of briefing papers is designed to stimulate a debate about the best way forward for policy and action. Each of the policy lessons set out in chapter 2 concludes with a set of questions to which we will seek answers in the next stage of the Condition of Britain programme. We welcome responses to all aspects of this briefing paper from anyone with experiences or expertise to share. Please send your thoughts to [conditionofbritain@ippr.org](mailto:conditionofbritain@ippr.org). We cannot guarantee a personal response to everyone, but we will do our best to reflect all of the comments we receive in the next stage of our work.*

<sup>1</sup> <http://voicesofbritain.com/>

## ZIADAH'S EXPERIENCE

### ISOLATION, WORKLESSNESS AND FAMILY LIFE IN WYTHENSHAW

Ziadah is a single mum with two children aged four and nine.<sup>2</sup> The family lives in Wythenshawe, South Manchester. Ziadah gained a degree in youth and community work in 2010 but has struggled to find paid work, and currently volunteers for a local charity. She feels she has not had enough support to get back into work, and the lack of affordable childcare has made her situation particularly difficult.

**'I've been volunteering now for seven months. But before that, I had to go to the jobcentre so many times to ask if there is any help that I can get to go back into work or to do voluntary work. But they say there is nothing they can give you, so you have to stay at home and wait until your children are in school. There is nothing for people who are on benefits, even if they want to do something about it, and it shouldn't be like that.'**

It wasn't just the practical difficulties of finding a job that troubled Ziadah, but the feeling that, as a single parent, she had to choose between work and family.

**'I'm so desperate, I'm ready to do anything that gives me money, but what do I do with my kids? If you have children, that's the end of your life – you can't do anything else. You either choose your career and work without your family or, if you have a family, that's the end of you, and that's not right.'**

Not being in paid work means that Ziadah has to rely on benefits, which she finds really difficult. Some of the recent changes to the benefits regime could have a significant effect on the family's income.

**'I'm living on benefits and it is really, really hard to make ends meet. You have to live day by day just to find enough to eat. On top of that, we've got to pay council tax, so I'll probably have to go without a meal in the day and save up to be able to afford dinner with the kids. It is really hard that you cannot afford to give your kids what they are asking for. That is not good for a parent.'**

But it isn't just money that worries Ziadah. She feels isolated because she has few friends living nearby, and it is difficult to travel into town. Wythenshawe is one of Europe's largest housing estates, built in the 1930s to relieve the overcrowding and deprivation of inner city Manchester. The area is about eight miles from the city centre, and transport connections can be poor.

**'I live in an isolated area in Wythenshawe. All the friends I have are far away in the city – for me to be able to get support, I've got to take a bus into town for 45 minutes. If it was easier for people to move around, it would be different because I could live closer to someone who could give me a hand, who could look after my children and I would be able to work.'**

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<sup>2</sup> We interviewed Ziadah in May 2013 when we visited Benchill Sure Start Children's Centre.

<sup>3</sup> IPPR | The Condition of Britain: Raising a family

Taking her youngest child to the local children's centre enables Ziadah to talk to other parents and the centre staff, and she says this has been a big help. But what she really wants is a job so that she can give her children more of the things they need, and feel that she is living her own life too. She hopes to be able to find work once her youngest child is in school, but even then it will be hard because of the lack of jobs in the local area and the difficulty of finding work that fits with school hours.



# 1. WHAT ARE THE PRESSURES OF RAISING A FAMILY IN BRITAIN?

Ziadah's story illustrates the pressures facing many families in Britain. Finding time to work and take care of young children is a major challenge for many, particularly when the cost of childcare can be high. Low incomes and unemployment, either temporary or more long-term, put extra strain on family relationships and wellbeing. Some parents also experience periods of isolation and loneliness, missing out on local support networks.

But Ziadah's experiences also exemplify the strengths of families in Britain. The vast majority of parents put their children first and take their responsibilities as parents seriously – and, like Ziadah, many families can also draw on the mutual support of other parents, and turn to trusted public services for help and advice.

Nevertheless, most parents would welcome more help to cope with the twin pressures of time and money, to support relationships at times of stress, and to ensure that their children have the time and space to enjoy childhood. A minority of parents behave irresponsibly or cannot cope, and need to be challenged to do better. In this section, we explore the central problems and anxieties affecting families in Britain today.

## Family finances are under pressure across most of society

Across Britain, financial pressures are bearing down on many families, and not just those on the lowest incomes. Over half (52 per cent) of people now say they struggle to keep up with bills and loan repayments, up from 35 per cent in 2006, while nearly half (44 per cent) of parents say they have to cut back on spending in the run-up to pay day (Money Advice Service 2013). These pressures have been driven by a toxic mix of stagnating wages, the rising cost of essentials, and changes to the benefits system.

Average wages fell sharply after the 2008–2009 recession. Combined with changes to the benefits system, poor growth in real wages means that average annual household incomes have fallen by £1,200 since the recession, after accounting for inflation (ONS 2013). But the wage squeeze predates the crash: there was very little growth in real wages between 2003 and 2008. This affected people on middle and higher wages as well as the low-paid (Commission on Living Standards 2012).

At the same time, the cost of essentials like food, energy, travel and childcare have shot up. Energy bills and travel fares have risen faster than general prices over the last five years.<sup>3</sup> A part-time nursery place for a child under five now costs over £100 a week, with average childcare costs having risen by 77 per cent over the last decade – more than twice the rate of general price inflation (Daycare Trust and Family and Parenting Institute 2013). One-third of parents find it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to pay for the childcare they use, while high costs prevent some parents from working (Huskinson et al 2013). Although less well-off families will find this combination of price rises particularly hard to cope with, these pressures affect the vast majority of families:

**'The increase in rent, the increase in fares and food and everything else means that there's very little disposable income, so people have very few chances of having a break away from those personal stresses and strains.'**

Joe, 58, Liverpool (via the Voices of Britain project)

Likewise, for the parents we spoke to at Benchill Children's Centre, pressures on family budgets were their biggest concern. They worried about the rising cost of living, but also

3 Average gas bills rose by 55 per cent and electricity bills by 31 per cent between 2007 and 2012, while general price inflation was 21 per cent over the same period (using RPI price inflation). See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/annual-domestic-energy-price-statistics>

about the impact of benefit changes like the ‘bedroom tax’ and changes to council tax benefit, since most were on a low income. This was echoed in the Voices of Britain project:

**‘It’s made me feel a bit depressed because I feel like I’m going to go back to square one again and get back into debt, and I really want to just make a secure life for myself and my children. All the families round my area, we all talk about the same thing, and everyone is worried.’**

Angela, single mother with four children, Leicester

The nationwide explosion of food banks has contributed to a perception that severe deprivation has returned to post-recession Britain. The Trussell Trust, the largest operator of food banks in the UK, says that around half (45 per cent) of people turning to food banks do so because of changes or delays to their benefits rather than crises like homelessness or fleeing a violent partner.<sup>4</sup> In Manchester, staff and volunteers at the Woodhouse Park Family Centre told us about parents who had so little money they were reduced to eating newspaper. Five years ago, the centre received requests for food parcels three or four times a year; now they have eight to ten requests each day.

### Families struggle to have the time for each other

Stagnating living standards are putting pressure on families across the country, but families also worry about a lack of time. Rising employment among mums, and long working hours for dads in particular, means that many families struggle to find time to spend together. A third of parents say they spend too little time with their children, a figure that is considerably higher among both fathers and parents with very young children (Ellison et al 2009).

**‘Having a husband and two children and being self-employed creates a lot of stresses.’**

Tanya, 42, Salford (via the Voices of Britain project)

Average working hours for fathers have fallen over the last 40 years, but nearly half still work more than 45 hours a week – higher than in most other European countries.<sup>5</sup> This makes it hard for dads to get involved in family life as much as they want to. For some fathers, long working hours are made necessary by low hourly pay rates, while fathers in professional and management jobs often find that long hours remain part of workplace culture (TUC 2008). Although parents now have the right to request flexible working arrangements, there has not been a dramatic improvement in the ability of fathers to spend more time with their children.

Public policy also adds to the pressure on family time, particularly when children are young. Family leave policies in Britain prioritise time off for new mothers, which is good for the health of new mums and helps them build strong bonds with their child. However, paternity leave is very short (just two weeks) and badly paid. Fathers on low wages are less likely to take the full two weeks because of its impact on the family income, whereas fathers in higher-paid jobs often have employers who top up the statutory rate (Chanfreau et al 2011). This makes it hard for some fathers to spend as much time with their new child as they would like. New fathers who take at least two weeks of paternity leave are likely to be more involved in raising children later on, and their child’s early development tends to be stronger (del Carmen Huerta et al 2013). The high cost of childcare can

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4 <http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>

5 <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/43367847.pdf>

6 IPPR | The Condition of Britain: Raising a family



also add to the strain on family life if both parents work but cannot afford the hours of childcare that they need.

In the past, tensions caused by the difficulties of balancing work and childcare led to a higher risk of divorce among married couples in which the mother worked. This is no longer true in Britain because of improvements in access to childcare and paid leave and the drop in working hours among fathers, which have reduced conflicts over the division of domestic tasks and childcare. However, in countries that have the most advanced family policies – notably Finland, Norway and Sweden – women in work have a significantly lower risk of divorce than those who do not work (Cooke 2013). For example, in Norway, the introduction of well-paid non-transferable paternity leave was linked to a reduction in conflicts about household tasks (Kotsadam and Finserras 2011). Fewer conflicts typically means stronger relationships and less family breakdown.

### **Relationships are under strain, and some families face breakdown**

Arguments about money and domestic responsibilities are among the biggest sources of family conflict, and raise the risk of family breakdown. Although the desire to marry and form stable relationships remains strong, divorce and family breakdown are on the rise, causing many to worry about the impact of this on children. The number of children living with just one parent has increased significantly over the last 40 years, and continues to follow an upward trend (ONS 2012). Around one-third of children in lone-parent families have no meaningful relationship with their non-resident parent, typically the father (Lader 2008). This can make parenting much harder for the resident parent, and means that children miss out on forming important relationships.

Legal reforms and advances in the social and economic position of women have made divorce and separation a more realistic option for couples experiencing stressful or unhappy relationships. However, pressures on family incomes and time make it harder to sustain strong relationships – and families with young children experience the greatest strain (Centre for Social Justice 2013). The erosion of family support networks may also have made it harder for parents to share the responsibilities of raising children, and to get help when their relationships come under stress. Increased geographical mobility means that some parents (particularly more affluent ones) are less likely to live near grandparents and other extended family members, or to have strong support networks in their local neighbourhoods. Parents are both working more and spending more time with their children, and so may have less time for each other or to draw on the support of friends (Nuffield Foundation 2012). This can leave parents isolated and lacking other adults to turn to when family relationships come under stress.

Family breakdown is always a difficult experience, and is often traumatic for parents and children. Society should work to prevent it wherever possible. However, divorce and separation is not, for most children, a disaster in the long-term. The poorer outcomes experienced by children who have been through family breakdown are often relatively small, and do not persist into adulthood on a significant scale (Mooney et al 2009). Furthermore, many of the problems that lone-parent families experience stem from the difficulties of taking on paid work and a higher risk of poverty, rather than from the impact of separation itself. Enabling more lone parents to work, through an expansion of affordable childcare and better flexible working opportunities, could help offset many of the negative effects of growing up in a lone-parent family.

## The vast majority of parents do a good job, but none can succeed on their own

Parents have the greatest influence on young children. The vast majority of parents know that raising a child is their responsibility, not that of the state or even their extended family – yet they also think that society has a role in helping them to fulfil their responsibilities (Ellison et al 2009). Today's parents spend more time with their children, have higher expectations of good behaviour, and know more about what their children are doing than in previous generations (Nuffield Foundation 2012).

However, almost all parents will find raising children difficult at times:

**'I have a six-year-old son and sometimes communicating with him is really difficult. He doesn't listen to me, so that can be quite stressful. I struggle with how to deal with that, other than shouting and getting quite angry.'**

Sarah, 29, Salford (via the Voices of Britain project)

Overall, levels of stress and poor mental health among parents appear to have risen in recent decades, particularly among lone parents and less well-off parents (Nuffield Foundation 2012). This may be linked to higher levels of family breakdown and increasing pressure on family time, as well as the diminution of extended support networks experienced by some parents. Becoming a parent often encourages stronger connections to family and the wider community through the use of universal services and the need to draw more heavily on the support of others. However, parents – particularly mothers with young children – can also experience periods of isolation and loneliness, and a sense that they do not have other adults to turn to.<sup>6</sup> Mothers who consider themselves socially isolated are at greater risk of postnatal depression, which affects around one in 10 new mothers in the UK (Dennis and Letourneau 2007). Although more fathers now take time off when they have a new baby, this is typically less than two weeks, so new mothers are often left to cope alone.

A minority of parents struggle with a collection of problems that affect their capacities as parents, with children suffering as a result. These challenges can include chaotic relationships, domestic violence, serious mental health problems, drug and alcohol addiction and involvement in crime. While the number of families experiencing these problems (though hard to estimate) is not thought to be large, the impact on children in affected families is likely to be considerable. In many cases, family life can be improved through focused interventions based on strong relationships with a trusted key worker. In some cases, the situation may be too dangerous and children will need to be removed, temporarily or permanently, from the home.

## Certain markets intrude too far into childhood and family life

Beyond the day-to-day stresses of family life, the wider context in which parents raise children has also changed, with growing concerns about the social and cultural pressures on young children. Most adults agree that children today have access to more material goods and better educational opportunities than previous generations, but have fewer safe places to play and are under more pressure from advertising (Clery 2011). Advertisers are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of online and peer-to-peer advertising

<sup>6</sup> See for example [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/media-centre/press-releases/2012/12-05-11-new-mums-struggling/new-mums-struggling\\_wdn89327.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/media-centre/press-releases/2012/12-05-11-new-mums-struggling/new-mums-struggling_wdn89327.html)

to target young children, while the amount of sexual content in mainstream media and advertising has increased in recent decades (Williams 2007, Buckingham et al 2010).

Excessive exposure to advertising and marketing puts children under pressure to participate in commercialised relationships mediated by adults. It risks skewing children's priorities towards material goods and away from other markers of quality of life such as strong relationships. Although products with high fat or sugar content now cannot be advertised on television during children's programmes, children are still exposed to many adverts for unhealthy foods (including online, where there are few restrictions on advertising), which poses potential risks to their long-term health. Children's demands for commercial products also add to the pressures of parenting, especially for those on low incomes. Acting as individuals, it is difficult for parents to protect their children from the pressures of an increasingly sophisticated, multi-billion-pound marketing industry.

## 2. HOW CAN WE HELP BRITAIN'S FAMILIES TO THRIVE?

### LESSONS FOR POLICY AND ACTION

The primary responsibility for raising children unquestionably lies with parents. However, the state – alongside extended families, neighbourhoods and employers – can create conditions that support parents to do a good job. We have identified pressures on family life concerning money, time, relationships, parenting and the intrusion of the market. In this section we set out the lessons from this analysis, reflecting on how recent policy approaches have left gaps in the support available to Britain's families. Each policy lesson ends with a set of questions that we are asking as part of the next stage of the Condition of Britain programme. We welcome comments and answers to these questions from anyone with experience or expertise to share.

#### **A decent income matters – but that means more than just benefits**

Among the parents we have met, money has almost always been foremost among their concerns. Playing a full role in British society requires a certain level of income, and poverty cannot be recast purely as a symptom of personal failings like addiction or family breakdown. However, accepting this basic principle does not imply that the benefits bill has to rise in order to ensure families have enough to get by. Income matters, but it also matters where that income comes from.

Sustainable improvements in family incomes are best achieved through jobs and wages rather than ever-higher cash transfers. While the previous Labour government invested heavily in back-to-work programmes and family services, it increasingly relied on benefits and tax credits to raise family incomes in pursuit of its child poverty target. This spending helped millions of families escape hardship and enjoy a decent standard of living, but improvements in the headline measure of child poverty began to slip as soon as benefit rises became less generous from the mid-2000s. On reflection, Labour's strategy did not do enough to secure the conditions for lower levels of child poverty in the absence of continued rises in benefit spending. It turned poverty reduction into something 'done to' families, rather than mobilising them and wider society in support of a national mission to 'end child poverty within a generation'.

The Nordic countries, which have the lowest rates of child poverty in Europe, point the way towards an alternative strategy rooted in raising wages and getting more parents into work. There, paid leave for new parents, particularly for fathers, is more generous, so parents can spend more time at home when their children are very young without taking a major hit to their income. Yet, after the first year of parenthood, more mothers are in paid work, and there are more dual-earning couples, more lone parents in employment and significantly fewer children growing up in workless households. More mothers work full-time, and so bring in higher wages, with the support of a universal and affordable childcare system. Fewer fathers work long hours, so they can take on more responsibility for childcare. Family benefits remain important – as they will continue to be in Britain, where society has long recognised the state's role in helping parents cope with the extra costs of children. But in the Nordic countries, spending on families is more strongly skewed towards early-years services that enable parents to work in decent jobs while ensuring that children get the best start in life.

Some of the current reforms to family benefits and childcare funding in the UK are pushing against this direction of travel. Universal Credit will make it less rewarding for second earners to work, even though having two parents in work is the best protector against poverty (Pareliussen 2013). Although more support for childcare costs will be available under the Universal Credit system for couples who both earn enough to pay income tax, dual-earning families who don't meet this criteria will miss out. The

expansion of tax relief for childcare will be a welcome boost for better-off families, but paying cash for childcare straight to parents could push up prices in the long-term, as it has done in countries like Australia and the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> The Coalition's changes to childcare support also make the system more complex for parents, with a mix of free places, support through Universal Credit (at different levels depending on earnings) and tax relief. Most European countries have found that a simple offer of free or low-cost places subsidised directly by the state is the most cost-effective way to guarantee access to affordable, sustainable and good-quality early education and care.

Alongside a new approach to lifting family incomes, pressures on family budgets would also be eased by tackling the rising cost of living, improving access to affordable credit and ensuring that bureaucracy in the benefits system does not leave families destitute (as it can do when there are long delays in families receiving the benefits they are entitled to). Addressing rapid price rises in essential consumer markets like energy, travel and childcare will require a mix of regulatory reform, consumer empowerment and greater public funding appropriate to each market. Families facing short-term financial pressures need more than a choice between hardship or extortionately expensive loans. This may require tougher regulation of the payday loan industry, alongside new institutions that enable families to borrow small amounts quickly without facing enormous repayment costs. We will return to each of these issues in more detail in further briefing papers in this series.

#### Questions

- *What would it take to raise family incomes through employment and wages in the current economic climate?*
- *How can more affordable, higher-quality early education and care be expanded to give children a great start and enable more parents to work?*
- *Should paid leave be made more generous to enable new parents, particularly dads, to spend more time with their young children?*
- *Would it be better to spend scarce public resources on better childcare and parental leave, rather than maintaining or increasing the value of cash benefits for families?*
- *Should family benefits like child benefit and tax credits be weighted towards families with young children?*
- *How can families and the wider community be mobilised as part of strategies to tackle poverty and disadvantage?*

### Strong relationships matter – but that means more than a tax break

Strong relationships are the bedrock of family life, and enable parents to share the joys and burdens of raising a child. Many of those taking part in the Voices of Britain project told us about the importance of their relationships with partners in dealing with the stresses of everyday life.

**'As soon as I'm home, on the sofa with my husband, we can have a glass of wine and we talk, that's when the stress goes. My relationship is where my sanctuary is from all of that stress.'**

Ian, 53, Salford

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ippr.org/articles/56/10501/the-coalition-risks-following-the-wrong-path-on-childcare-reform->

Most people aspire to raise children within a marriage or stable relationship. Lone parents can also make great parents, but it's usually easier if they can share at least some of their responsibilities with the non-resident parent, and children benefit from having a positive relationship with both parents. Society and the state should do all they can to enable people to fulfil their desire to marry and create stable relationships, help couples stay together (whether married or not), and make the process of family breakdown as painless as possible if it does occur.

The Conservative party plans to signal the state's commitment to marriage by introducing a tax break for some married couples. From 2015, a married person (or a partner in a civil partnership) earning less than the income tax personal allowance will be able to transfer up to £1,000 of their allowance to their spouse, allowing the spouse to earn more before paying tax. This will not be available to couples where one partner pays the higher rate of income tax, even if the other partner pays no income tax. The Conservatives expect around four million married couples to benefit, with a maximum gain of £200 a year per couple. Supporters claim that such a move would encourage couples to marry or stay together, while also signalling the state's preference for marriage over cohabitation.

It is hard to imagine anyone choosing to marry – or stay married – for a financial reward, particularly one so small (under the Conservatives' plans, eligible couples would gain less than £4 a week). But the move also fails to provide the practical support that families need to stay together. The majority of married couples will not be eligible for the tax break because both partners pay income tax. Yet these dual-earning families are likely to face more of the time pressures that put relationships under strain. Transferable tax allowances create disincentives for both parents to work, even though we know that this provides strong protection against poverty for parents on low to middle earnings; they also do nothing to help cohabiting couples with children to stay together. Even worse, the government's flagship 'total benefit cap' policy creates a huge incentive for couples to split up or claim to be living apart.

An alternative strategy for promoting stable relationships, including marriage, would be to offer stronger support to couples (married or not) with young children, where the risk of family breakdown is greatest. This would mean more help to relieve the pressures on time and money that often create family conflict. Informal and formal support networks for parents could also be strengthened to help share the responsibility of raising children and cope with periods of relationship stress. This could include extra support for grandparents and extended families – for example, the option could be made available to transfer paid leave to a grandparent if both parents chose to return to work.

Small antenatal classes in friendly environments, like those run by the National Childbirth Trust and some children's centres, help build support networks among new parents, but need to be made more accessible to parents in poorer neighbourhoods. Paid time off for fathers to attend antenatal classes (which pregnant women are currently entitled to) would promote strong family relationships from before birth and help dads prepare for fatherhood. Protecting Sure Start budgets would enable children's centres to maintain informal sessions where parents can seek mutual support. Stronger public investment in relationship support services offered by charities and specialist therapists would be much more useful than a tax break for married couples who are experiencing relationship problems. Help with the cost of marriage itself, such as ending marriage notice fees for less well-off couples, could help people achieve their aspiration to marry.

### Questions

- *How can grandparents, extended families, friends and neighbours be helped to share the responsibility of raising children, especially for parents bringing up children on their own?*
- *What is the best way to make sure that all parents have access to local support networks beyond their partner from before birth?*
- *How can practical help with emotional pressures in relationships, to keep families together and help them cope with separation, best be provided?*
- *How can we continue to change mainstream workplace culture to enable more parents, particularly fathers, to avoid long working hours and work more flexibly?*

### Great parenting matters – but that means practical help, not isolation or blame

Parents, supported by networks of family, friends and neighbours, shoulder the responsibility of raising children. But it is in society's interest to ensure that they have help to do this well, and to intervene if they are not meeting their responsibilities. Sure Start children's centres are at the heart of family support in Britain, embedded in many communities as popular and valued places that help families to overcome isolation and build supportive relationships. In Manchester, parents at Benchill Children's Centre told us about the relationships they had forged with staff and other parents. One mother explained, 'I don't have a family nearby, so this place is like my family'. Rigorous evaluations have found that parents in Sure Start areas feel less isolated, more valued and more confident about their parenting skills, with many of these effects enduring as children move into primary school (Williams and Churchill 2006, National Evaluation of Sure Start 2012).

The Coalition government has retained the Sure Start programme, but reduced central government funding for it by around one-third since 2010. Just over 400 centres out of total of around 3,000 have closed since 2010, mainly through the merging of centres to cover a larger geographical area. Sure Start was originally intended to be an institution for all families, with a children's centre in every neighbourhood. Funding cuts and shifting policy priorities have seen the mission of Sure Start recast to focus on the most disadvantaged families. Open-access services like 'stay-and-play' are being withdrawn in some centres, and resources redirected to targeted interventions like parenting programmes (Goff et al 2013). This may help parents facing the biggest challenges, but evidence-based parenting programmes are expensive, so relatively few families can benefit from them. Less expensive options, like volunteer-led mentoring and befriending services run by charities like Home Start, could be extended to more families who need extra support. The loss of informal sessions may also cause children's centres to move away from their original role as places where families come together to seek mutual support.

Formal childcare and early education in children's centres, nurseries and with childminders supports parents by enabling them to work and taking some of the pressure off family time. Good quality early education also reinforces positive early learning experiences provided by parents, as well as helping to compensate for parents who lack the time, money or skills to invest in their young children's early development. However, the quality of early care and education in Britain is very variable, with too few childcare workers qualified to the right level

(Parker 2013). This means that some young children miss out on the best start, and are not ready to learn when they reach primary school. The Coalition's plans to extend tax relief for parents' childcare costs relies on market mechanisms like parental choice to improve quality, but these were ineffective when relied upon by the previous Labour government (Stewart 2013). Instead, public funding paid directly to nurseries, children's centres and childminders, and support for raising the qualifications of childcare professionals, would help to raise standards in the early years sector.

For the minority of parents who are behaving irresponsibly or not coping, the Coalition has devised the Troubled Families Programme, which focuses on families in which children are regularly truant or involved in antisocial behaviour, and parents are out of work. The programme, led by local authorities, typically involves a dedicated social worker providing intensive and assertive input until the family makes sufficient progress. While similar programmes established by the previous Labour government were successful in reducing antisocial behaviour, they need to be more closely aligned with mainstream employment programmes in order to tackle family worklessness (Lloyd et al 2011, Wilson and Gallagher 2013). Programmes for 'troubled families' also need greater stability so that they have time to bed-in and influence how mainstream services support families experiencing serious problems.

#### Questions

- *What role should community institutions like children's centres play in helping parents to overcome isolation and build relationships of support with one another?*
- *As the Sure Start programme evolves, what is the right balance between open-access and targeted programmes, and between informal support and evidence-based interventions?*
- *How could befriending and mentoring be expanded to help build parental networks and offer practical help and support?*
- *How should the quality of early education be improved so that it supports or compensates for the early learning experiences provided by parents?*
- *How can intensive interventions like the troubled families programme work more closely with mainstream services and develop a more stable footing?*
- *How should society embed and demonstrate the importance of parental responsibility?*

### Protecting childhood matters – but that means strong families standing up to markets

Young children need time and space to enjoy childhood and develop their own understanding of the world around them. That requires parents who have time to dedicate to their children, as well as protection from the pressures of the adult world – including from some markets that invade childhood.

Parents are the first influence on young children, supporting their early development and helping to build their character and moral understanding. Care from parents (or from grandparents and other family members) is particularly important in the first year of life, when children need lots of affection and responsive care in one-to-one relationships. Well-paid family leave in the first year is vital for ensuring that parents have ample time



away from work, lessening the impact of the labour market on family life. More generous family leave would allow new parents to spend more time building strong bonds with their infants. This is particularly important for fathers, who currently get a raw deal from family leave policies. Plans to allow mothers to transfer part of their maternity leave to their partner are unlikely to lead to a substantial increase in the amount of time that fathers take off, since dads typically take leave only if it's offered to them on a 'use-it-or-lose-it' basis, and if it's well paid.

Protecting childhood and supporting early child development also requires a limit on the extent to which certain markets are allowed to intrude into childhood. Advertising rules dictate what kind of 'age-appropriate' material children can see in individual adverts, but there is no strategy for protecting children more generally from the excessive commercial pressures of today's marketing and advertising industry. Countries like Sweden already ban all television advertising aimed at young children, and prevent companies from advertising products using characters from children's television programmes. In Britain, local authorities could also be given more power to restrict outdoor advertising, and parents could be given more say about marketing and corporate sponsorship in schools.

#### **Questions**

- *Should family time be protected from the labour market by more generous paid leave?*
- *Should all television advertising aimed at young (primary and pre-school age) children be banned?*
- *What powers do local authorities and parents need to ensure that advertising and marketing does not encroach into childhood?*
- *How can children be protected from the pressures of online marketing?*

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