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PARENTS WHO WISH TO STAY AT HOME SHOULD BE HELPED TO LOOK AFTER INFANTS, SAYS NEW REPORT

Too many parents who wish to nurture their children at home for the first few years are being forced back to work by financial pressures when their children are babies, according to a report published today by a think-tank chaired by the former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith.

It calls for a raft of new measures designed to give families “genuine choice” over whether mothers or fathers stay at home when their children are very young and in need of intensive nurturing and attention.

They include front-loading child benefit in the first three years of life and changes to the tax and benefits system to boost family income.

The report warns that much of today’s violent and anti-social behaviour by young people can be traced back to parental neglect when children are very young.

A mounting body of scientific and sociological research shows that the foundations of happy and healthy lives are laid down in the early years of life by the formation of a close bond between parent and child.

But this critical finding is being overlooked by Government and society at large which prioritises paid work over child-rearing.

Opinion polling conducted by YouGov for the Centre for Social Justice also reveals widespread public support for a fundamental rethink of family policy.

A staggering 88 per cent of parents and 82 per cent of adults think that more should be done to help parents who wish to stay at home and bring up their children when they are babies and toddlers.

And 81 per cent of parents said that financial pressures were the main reason why they or their partner returned to work after their children were born.

The survey of nearly 3,000 expectant parents or parents and over 2,000 adults found that around 70 per cent believed that parents were encouraged to put their children into day care and go back to work too soon.

Mr Duncan Smith commented: “We need to level the financial playing field for parents. The current system pressurises mothers – and it is mostly mothers – into going back to work soon after their children are born.

“Yet the research shows clearly that the seeds of later unhappiness and anti-social behaviour by young people are often sown by the failure of parents to form a close and loving relationship with their babies.

“Society is paying a high price for the quick fix of getting mothers back to work so soon after birth.

“We need a fairer system in which the financial sacrifice of giving up work to look after a baby is offset by extra help from the tax and benefits system.”

The findings of “The Next Generation” – a report from a commission on the early years set up by Mr Duncan Smith – represent a direct challenge to Government policy and much accepted thinking and practice about child-rearing.

The report is concerned that Labour’s Sure Start programme, which was set up with the right intentions, has become patchy and in too many parts of the country has moved from being about support for parents in child-rearing into back-to-work child care.

The commission, chaired by family researcher Dr Samantha Callan, calls for an urgent reappraisal of the importance of the first three years of life to the successful psychological and physical development of a child.

Society is storing up trouble for the future by failing to appreciate the importance of the relationship between parent and infant for the child’s future well-being.

The report warns: “A compelling body of research indicates that children’s experiences in the earliest years of their lives strongly influence their futures across a wide range of measures.

“Policy is currently focused on dealing with the consequences of early adversity (neglect, abuse and dysfunction) which are strongly implicated in the dramatic increases in young people’s alcohol and drug use and mental health problems and in youthful knife and gun crime.

“The most effective intervention strategy therefore requires helping parents to get it right at the antenatal, postnatal and infant stages, long before such help is typically available.

“We have been trying to address the issue of troubled children and young people for decades, with little positive change. The problem persists and appears to be growing, as illustrated by rising levels and severity of youth crime.

“Current government initiatives appear to be focused far more on intervention than prevention.

“A key conclusion of our report is that these issues have been so difficult to resolve because, until now, we have never properly understood or acknowledged their root causes.

“We have stuck rigidly to attempts to change behaviour but this is an outcome or product of an individual’s state of emotional and social health and well-being. So for genuine change to take place, it has to occur in these areas.

“This perspective is based on the last decade’s consistent and significant body of psychological and brain science research, which identifies the key component in our capacity to function as emotionally and physically able human beings as the quality of our relationships and specifically those in our earliest years.

“Without sufficient calming, soothing and emotion regulating interactions from parents and other significant adults, the stress response systems in the infant brain, which are extremely sensitive to adverse postnatal experience, can become hypersensitive.

“ An infant can grow up unable to handle stress well and adopt a generally long-term defensive reaction to people and events. He or she can be persistently on the look out for threat, prone to anxiety, depression and anger, both in childhood and later

life.

“In contrast when infants are consistently met with attuned and responsive kindness, calm and compassion, the brain’s pro-social systems, key for capacity for empathy and concern, develop...”

Among the 11 policy recommendations of the report are the following:

- * Genuine choice for families in paid work and childcare, with a change in the rules to allow the use of childcare tax credit to pay un-registered close relatives (albeit at a lower rate) to reflect parents’ preferences, and location, where possible, of childcare outside Children’s Centres. This would free them up to concentrate on delivering family support services and create a more level playing field for private, voluntary and independent sector nurseries.

- * Front-loading child benefit, making it flexible so that a larger proportion of the child's total entitlement would be available during the first three years when parents most want to spend time caring for their children and when attachment and intensive nurture are most important.

This would be linked where necessary to ameliorative services such as intensive parenting support, to greatly improve the life chances of children most likely to experience deficits in parental care.

- * Transferable tax allowances, which reflect the fact that if one spouse is not working outside the home that family requires more, not less, support from the tax system.

Similarly the benefits system should not penalise low income couples who want to live together which requires tackling the 'couple penalty.'

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Note to editors: For media inquiries, please contact Nick Wood of Media Intelligence Partners Ltd on 07889 617003 or 0203 008 8146