

Responsibility and parenting: society's role?

Report on a consultation held at
St George's House
Windsor Castle
May 2-3, 2002

This report has been prepared by Sheila Bloom and Frances Caluori
Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust



The Institute for Global Ethics gratefully acknowledges the generous funding for this consultation by the Comino and Gordon Cook Foundations

CONTENTS

Page 3 Executive summary

The Report

Page 6 The Convenors

Page 6 The Participants

Page 6 The Process

Page 7 The Questions

Page 7-14 The Findings

Page 14 Next steps

Page 17 Full Participants List

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2002 participants representing parenting NGO's, local parenting groups and universities, as well as the House of Lords and Commons, the media, the police, and government met to discuss the nurture of the nation's children. Opening the consultation, Lord Northbourne said that any nation or community which ignores the nurture of its children is potentially in deep trouble. The main facilitators of childhood nurture are the family, the extended family, the community and the state. This consultation sought to answer the question how best can this essential task be shared between these groups? And how can effective partnerships be forged, and duplication of effort avoided?

The event was convened by the Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust, in a partnership with the National Family and Parenting Institute and the Parenting Education and Support Forum, and comprised a mix of plenary and small group sessions. Three major questions arose from the first day's deliberations, which were then explored in more depth. These were:

What universal offers of support for families do we know are currently being developed, or could/should be developed?

- The importance of parents as a "child's first educator" was stressed. More support needs to be offered at the key transition points for both children and parents – the transition to parenthood (pregnancy and birth), the first two years, nursery, primary,

secondary, and finally from young adult to parenthood – in order to better provide that support.

- An effort must be made to normalise family support. There is currently a stigma attached to asking for help, which is both unhelpful and unproductive for parent and child alike, as many feel it is an admission of failure.
- Family policy needs to be pushed to the top of the political agenda. Alongside this need, is the necessity for better communication within government departments dealing either directly or indirectly with such support.

What is our collective responsibility, and how might we bring this idea more into the public discourse by shifting language from 'feckless parents' to the consideration of the responsibility of society, as a whole, for the nurture and care of young people?

- Work/life balance needs endorsement from both the government, and from all society.
- Pressure should be taken off children academically, to allow them to grow and develop as individuals.
- Unconditional support needs to be put in place for families, that will be there for them even if the family unit breaks down, and *especially* if the family unit breaks down.
- The perception of families as being separate from the rest of the community needs to be addressed.
- Increased use of school premises as a community resource (e.g. language or art classes, sports facilities).
- More children enabled to take an active part in the community, both

inside and outside of school hours, and similarly, more adults (and not just parents) to being encouraged to go into schools and become involved.

- Implementation of a policy/directive whereby public service workers are given time each week to interact with young people (this is already happening in the business community, but the model should be more widespread).
- More facilities for young people, preferably at their own direction, that allow them greater ownership of schemes which exist for their specific benefit.
- Recruitment of parents locally to consult, recruit and deliver provision at local level, and pay them for their services.

Media: how do we play the story? How do we work with the media? How do we use the media, or work with advocates within the media, to have the public discourse represent more what we need to do?

- The media is inextricably linked to the cultural attitudes that permeate society. There is a need to change the perception current in Britain today of seeing the child as the *problem*, rather than part of the *solution*.
- Those working within the field of family support need to make links with journalists of like minds. Rather than viewing certain newspapers in a negative way, they should try and interact with them, talk with them, and feed them stories.
- Training for those individuals interacting with the media must also be readily available, as an informed awareness of how the industry operates is essential in order to get the

message across in the most productive way.

Next Steps

Although there is benefit in each of us taking the ideas that appealed to us most and acting on them either individually, or within our organisations, it was agreed that there is also a collective momentum which ought to be kept going. Several ideas were put forward including:

- Setting up a public forum: for parents to share difficulties with one another in a constructive way;
- A phone in programme, either on television or radio: where people can discuss problems anonymously, and others can phone in and comment (including children);
- An advertising campaign: to celebrate parenting – perhaps initially just to raise awareness, and to counteract some of the negative images that we often hear about;
- Revitalising local councils on parenting issues: illustrating to them that there are votes to be won on this issue;
- Galvanising parent power: empowering small groups at local level, and enabling them to ask the local council “what are you going to do for us?”

In conclusion it was agreed that, in order to start from a positive standpoint, it needs to be made clearer to the general public the good things the government has already undertaken in this field. The government has, in fact, already contributed to changing what it is like to be a parent in Britain today. The first steps have already been taken towards recognising how valuable our parents and their children are. It is important that this report doesn't simply become a 'wish list' of every good thing we can think of doing. To be of practical use, we need to recognise that resources are severely limited, and be prepared to take some

difficult choices that will be required
between competing priorities.

THE REPORT

THE CONVENORS

Comino Foundation is an educational charity whose vision is that people in Britain should live more fulfilled lives within a prosperous and responsible society. The Foundation recognises the importance of parental influence and formal education in building the values and capacities of individuals and the quality of civil society.

Gordon Cook Foundation is dedicated to the advancement and promotion of all aspects of education which are likely to promote “character development” and “citizenship”. In recent years, the Foundation has adopted the term *Values Education* to denote the wide range of educational activity it seeks to support.

Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust is the British entity of the Institute for Global Ethics, which was founded in the US in 1990 as non-sectarian, non-partisan, global research and educational membership organisation. The Institute’s mission is “to promote ethical behaviour in individuals, institutions and nations through research, public discourse, and practical action”. The IGE UK Trust convenes consultations and conferences on values and citizenship education; and facilitates ethics training for individuals, and for education, public and private sectors, and other organisations.

National Family and Parenting Institute is an independent charity which was set up to provide a strong national focus on parenting and families in the 21st century. The Institute’s role is to bring together organisations, knowledge and know-how to enhance the value and quality of family life, to make sure that parents are supported in

bringing up their children and in finding the help and information they need.

Parenting Education and Support Forum is the national umbrella organisation for those who work in parenting education and support. Founded in 1995, it brings together all those working or interested in this field, and has over 850 individual and corporate members across the UK and overseas. It works in partnership with other statutory and voluntary bodies.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants were invited from a variety of sectors within the UK, all of whom have links with young people, direct or otherwise. Included were representatives from parenting NGO’s, local parenting groups and universities, as well as the House of Lords and Commons, the media, the police, and government. See page 13 for a full list of participants.

THE PROCESS

Having been approached by Lord Northbourne about the possibility of facilitating an event, or a series of events, on parenting concerns, IGE UK Director Sheila Bloom then met with Mary McCleod of the National Family and Parenting Institute, Mary Crowley of the Parenting Education and Support Forum, Jose Chambers of the Comino Centre (Winchester) and Anna Comino James, a trustee of the Comino Foundation. It was agreed that the most useful and practical way forward would be to facilitate a consultation as part of IGE UK’s *Personal Responsibility* project, specifically to discuss society’s responsibility towards children and young people.

In advance of the consultation those invited were presented with a list of questions to consider, the details of which are laid out on page 1 of this report. The consultation began with small working group discussions, to tackle the broader question, ‘what are we doing *as a society* – collectively and individually, to support parents and families?’ This question was further explored in subsequent small and plenary group sessions.

THE QUESTIONS

Three questions arose:

1. What universal offers of support for families do we know are currently being developed, or could/should be developed?
2. What is our collective responsibility, and how might we bring this idea more into the public discourse by shifting language from ‘feckless parents’ to the consideration of the responsibility of society, as a whole, for the nurture and care of young people.
3. Media: how do we play the story? How do we work with the media? How do we use the media, or work with advocates within the media, to have the public discourse represent more what we need to do?

These were to form the basis of the following day’s discussions.

THE FINDINGS

What universal offers of support for families do we know are currently

being developed, or could/should be developed?

There are already a number of initiatives aimed at supporting families either in place, or in the pipeline. Models like SureStart, government-controlled or otherwise, are progressive in terms of being locally owned, and in their involvement and inclusion of parents. There has been discussion in the Home Office Family Support Unit recently about the possibility of putting in place a local parenting fund. Various organisations are bringing childcare and family issues to men, and are providing advice and guidance on parenting through the work place, for which there is significant take up.

However, more support needs to be offered at the key transition points in children’s lives – the transition to parenthood (pregnancy and birth), the first two years, nursery, primary, secondary, and finally from young adult to parenthood. Specific needs that were identified are:

- The critical importance of support during the first two years, which is the time when the child’s brain develops most actively.
- The requirement for targeted recruitment of, and provision of, information for parents most in need. Perhaps a central repository for information is needed, or a place/places where people can find out what is available, in a way that meets their particular needs. A library of options and choices, and the freedom to choose.
- One of the major challenges ahead is delivery of the provision of universal support. A step towards this goal may be the identification of places that people can go to for help without feeling embarrassed – such

as schools, health centres, supermarkets, libraries etc.

- The need for a move towards a culture shift which may encourage more relaxed and open atmospheres within schools, enabling teachers to see the child in front of them as a whole person within their family context, and not just as a 'pupil'.
- Tied in with this, is the need for a shift in the attitudes of adults both in and out of schools, from seeing their role as a facilitator of 'academic learning', or of 'physical care', to focusing more on the importance of relationships. If this were happening universally, then one knock-on effect would be a very different approach to parenting support.

"...every child has a right to grow up in an environment which is supportive and enables them to develop properly and to their full potential".

- Although men are involved in childcare, there is a need for even more men to be involved in child-care provision, and the support system surrounding it. This will involve facing down some of society's fears about paedophilia.
- More services are needed for teenagers, and for families with teenagers.
- A concerted effort is required on the part of all those who work in family policy areas to push the question of parent education and support up to the top of the political agenda. Families are affected by so many different types of policy and, if they are to be well served, each and every

policy that touches family life should consider questions of parent support first, rather than last or not at all. For example, when a magistrate decides that a mother of a truant must go to jail, the courts should have a system in place so that they do not lock her up until they are confident that she has been able to make alternative arrangements for her child's care. It is a question of asking common sense questions promptly, so that children don't get left in the lurch.

- One way to promote family policy to the top of the agenda would be to encourage people to imagine family policy from the parent, child and family's point of view. The question of joined-up policy begins to make excellent sense when you begin by putting yourself in a parent's shoes, and ask 'what does this parent need to do his/her job well?' One obvious answer is that he/she needs all the government departments that plan for families to consider how well their various policies work, or do not work, together. Considering policy matters from the parent's point of view yields many practical solutions.

What is our collective responsibility, and how might we bring this idea more into the public discourse by shifting language from 'feckless parents' to the consideration of the responsibility of society, as a whole, for the nurture and care of young people.

We need to respond to this question without interfering with the right of parents to

bring up their child in the way they believe to be right (subject always, of course, to the protection of the child from harm).

In order for society to be effective in its response to the issues that affect the young, it was agreed that the importance of developing a sense of connection between people could not be underestimated. As discussed in the previous section, this process would involve making it okay to talk about child issues and parenting in a non-stigmatised way, from the outset, in order to prevent problems from escalating. The hope is that this would allow parents to feel that it is safe to ask for help, and doing so does *not* mean that they are a bad parent.

- There is a greater need for endorsement of work/life balance, which would be beneficial to the individual and to the family. Support of this kind needs to come from both society as a whole and from the government. Also, people need to accept far more responsibility for, and towards, each other – whether at home or at work.

“Society as a whole needs to stop rewarding ‘laddish’ behaviour, and remove the stigma that is attached to ‘caring’ as a value within the community”.

- As they are growing up, young people often develop their own personal agenda for life, with reference only to their own personal career paths, and with little consideration for the impact this may or may not have on society. This attitude often goes unchallenged, and is in some cases even actively supported. The value of ‘caring’ has become ‘unfashionable’, and the added danger is that this attitude may be carried into adulthood.
- It was considered vital that pressure be taken off children academically, and for there to be more of a recognition and appreciation of children as individuals, and not just pupils in a school. Twinned with this idea, is the value of understanding, and teaching emotional literacy.
- Turning to society in a more general sense, we need to address the issue of making contingencies for parents when things do go wrong in the home, in the family, etc. as they inevitably sometimes do. How do the rest of us make allowances for these problems? For example, if a man or woman turns up in a meeting at work with one of his or her children, or needs time off for childcare issues – do we think it is acceptable?
- Diverse delivery, either through use of groups, or in on-to-one sessions. In the case of group discussions, there is an argument for developing more training and support for facilitators, as it was pointed out that there is a danger of such discussions becoming negative – sometimes the level of skill required to manage such negativity might not be available.

“There seems to be a movement towards abolishing the traditional family, but if we do this, we need to consider what we might put in its place”.

- Unconditional support for families is essential, both from the government, NGO’s, and society at large. It would be hugely helpful to shift the focus from administering blame when families are falling/have fallen apart, to thinking about how we give them support and other options, regardless of whether they are together or not.
- The government have a role to play in filling the void that exists in mental health and emotional health provision, especially for the 12-18 age group.

Barriers

As part of question 2, the groups discussed in detail what the barriers might be to implementing some of these ideas, and how they could be best tackled. The barriers identified were:

1. The perception of families as being separate from the rest of the community, and of the tendency for adults to think ‘if they are not *our* children, they are not our problem’. This is linked with the problem of some adults seeing children as being ‘another species’.
2. Physical barriers, namely the walls around schools, as being key to creating the impression that children are not part of the human race. The contact between adults and children outside of families tends to be

minimal, because children are penned up in schools all day.

3. The need for better and more plentiful resources, both in schools and for families.
4. The contradiction which currently exists between the emphasis placed on how important the attachment between parent and child is, and paying parents to go out to work instead of giving them the opportunity to stay at home.

Solutions

1. The perception of families as being separate from the rest of the community, and of the tendency for adults to think ‘if they are not *our* children, they are not our problem’. This is linked with the problem of some adults seeing children as being ‘another species’.

The first, and favourite idea of the groups, was finding ways to link the generations together more closely. This possibility is already active and being further explored in schemes such as Fostering Grandparents, the Trans-age project, and the Centre for Intergenerational Practice in Stoke on Trent.

So how could this best be achieved? One suggestion was that permanent communal areas be set up, which are modelled on the *passeggiata* and *passeo*, which can be found in

countries such as Spain and Italy. In these, people of all generations can gather to talk, play, eat and communicate with one another. This could be and would be a relaxed and informal way to encourage and promote inter-generational activity. In the UK these could be indoors, perhaps in places such as shopping centres, to overcome the problem of unpredictable weather!

Another thought was that communal gardens could be built into new housing developments, with access from the backs of houses, so that children could play with each other, and adults could play with children safely. This could also bring with it the additional bonus of giving adults with children the opportunity to befriend other adults in their street, whether they have children or not.

2. Physical barriers, namely the walls around schools, as being key to creating the impression that children are not part of the human race. The contact between adults and children outside of families tends to be minimal, because children are penned up in schools all day.

Schools are worried about security and recently even more so – they have a duty to protect children in their care from intruders. For this reason, aiming to bring down these physical barriers does not appear to be a realistic one. However, perhaps one solution would be an increased use of school premises as a community resource – for example, using the building and grounds for, perhaps, a community orchestra, art or language classes, football games, etc. Another positive way of getting around the problem would be to encourage and allow far more children to come out of schools and do something in the community, (both in and out of school hours), and similarly to encourage far more adults (not just parents) to go into schools and get involved.

Tied in with the above could be the implementation of a policy/directive whereby public service workers (i.e. civil servants, NHS employees, local authority workers and so on) are given time by their employer, possibly flexible time

each week, to interact with children and young people. This could also be extended to the corporate sector – the large corporates could foster the same kind of policies to demonstrate more social responsibility. It was recognised that some do already (for example, Business in the Community), but the next step is to make this model more widespread and accepted.

Finally, more facilities are needed for young people – suitable places for them to congregate, and a variety of facilities offered, given that the youth service has been diminished and even abolished in some places. It would be especially good to encourage young people to become involved in designing these facilities for themselves, thus giving them the opportunity to influence the kind of service they require, as well as allowing them greater ownership of it.

3. The need for better and more plentiful resources, both in schools and for families.

One way of overcoming this

barrier would be to make it very clear to the government and to the general public, that the problems society is concerned about, i.e. the job culture, failure in schools etc, is a direct outcome of the fact that there is very little support in place for parents.

Perhaps a more practical option would be to recruit parents locally to consult, recruit and deliver provision at local level, and to pay them for their services. This would build a richness of resource within the local community.

4. The contradiction which currently exists between the emphasis placed on how important the attachment between parent and child is, and paying parents to go out to work instead of giving them the opportunity to stay at home.

Many of the participants felt that we need to push for the opportunity for at least one parent to be able to afford to stay at home if they wish. This has considerable implications for the whole Childcare Strategy of this government and would need the input of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships to be addressed.

Media: how do we play the story? How do we work with the media? How do we use the media or work with advocates within the media, to have the public discourse represent more what we need to do?

The media is of course inextricably linked to the cultural attitudes, which permeate society, and there is a need to change the perception Britain currently has of the child as the *problem*, to seeing the child as part of the *solution*.

There is also a tendency for the press to boil everything down to the lowest common denominator – that because one can't present complexity in the space of a news broadcast, sound bite etc., issues need to be simplified, and this can sometimes inadvertently be done in a crass way. The participants discussed various ways of preventing this from being the case, and suggested the following:

- Try to stop seeing certain papers in a negative way, and instead try to interact with them, talk to them, and feed them stories.

- Make links with journalists of like minds.
- Get media training: individuals who are going to interact with journalists need media training, as an awareness of how the industry operates is essential in order to get the message across in the most productive and constructive way.
- Try a more open-ended approach in which a question is raised that requires debate, instead of feeding the press stories designed to promote a particular (public relations) agenda. This positions journalists as people who are trying to come to grips with the moral dilemmas of policy, policy-makers and the people affected by policy. It also puts an emphasis on the fact that while some of our moral dilemmas about families are private and personal, many others are public and political.

“Is it not important to stress in all contacts into the media that parents are a fantastic national resource who nurture the nation's future citizens at a tiny fraction of the cost of public care – and much better?”

- The press are still inclined to view family policy as an area that is not quite as important as other areas of policy. Since Labour came to power, there has been a shift, but family policy is still the poor cousin. All areas of it are under reported, and it was suggested that some are not reported at all because most comments and home affairs editors belong to the old school, and do not see family policy as worthy of steady scrutiny. The solution might be to get high-ranking government people

to make pronouncements signalling that family policy is becoming “ever more important to important people”. This could work wonders overnight!

During a general discussion about the media’s role in this conversation, and ways in which the industry could make a helpful contribution, the following additional points were made:

- Soap operas, which have such wide, diverse and intergenerational audiences, could be used to get positive messages across.
 - Advertising could also be very effective; is it therefore time to run our own campaign? In this, we could spread information about the family services that are already available, and further spread the message that it is okay to talk about parenting – good parents *do* talk about their concerns and any problems that they might be having.
- There needs to be a common message amongst those organisations concerned with the issues discussed at this consultation, because this would be much more powerful from a media point of view.
 - As discussed in question 2, there needs to be a greater sense of connected-ness between government departments. Certain problems involving youth often involve several different ministries and there is not the co-ordination that perhaps there might be between them. Likewise between NGOs – who’s talking to whom? Are we listening to each other? How is this being coordinated? This is especially important, as if we are to create a more cohesive image within the media, we need to achieve greater coordination.

“We need to get the message out into the media about support for parents not just being for when things go wrong, but all the time”.

- The media could support the government in putting in place more measures that would allow families to have a more comfortable and less stressful existence, or alleviate poverty (although we agreed that our role, and the focus of our campaign, is more to do with getting the debate going about normalising parenting).

NEXT STEPS

The challenge ahead:

So how do we manage the next steps? Whilst there will be benefit in each of us taking ideas which appealed to us most and acting on them either individually or within our organisations, is there also a collective momentum which ought to be kept going? How would we act on it as a group rather than individually, or in small groups? Some ideas follow:

- All parents have difficulties and problems at different times in their

- parenting careers, and it could be productive to share them in a public forum of some kind. Perhaps, as a group, we could illustrate some of those examples – one personal story each – and publicise it. By making the personal a theme, and thereby developing a debate via, for example, a phone-in type programme, people would identify with the stories and want to talk about them.
- The idea of a radio programme where people can discuss problems anonymously, and others (including children) can phone in and comment. (Based on the French model).
 - The possibility of an advertising campaign has already been mentioned, whereby people from many sectors, known and unknown, promote their effect on young people, celebrating parenting, talking about the difficulties of parenting – similar to the ‘good teacher’ campaign of a few years back. Initially, it could just be an awareness-raising campaign to counteract some of the negative images which we have been hearing about.
 - Revitalising local councils on parenting issues – coming together as a collective force, to show that there are votes to be won on this issue.
 - Starting by galvanising “parent power” with small groups at the local level, utilising the opportunity of the recent local government elections to ask, “what are you going to do for us?” (The logical complement to this is “what are we going to do for you?”)
 - Make clearer to the general public the good things the government has already undertaken with regard to changing what it is like to be a parent in the UK – there is a long way to go, but a start has already been made – the first steps have been taken towards recognising how valuable our parents and their children are.
 - It is important that this report doesn’t simply become a ‘wish list’ of every good thing we can think of doing. To be of practical use we need to recognise that resources are severely limited, and be prepared to take some responsibility for making the difficult choices about conflicting priorities.

QUOTATIONS

* All quotations in this report, unless otherwise stated, are taken from comments made by participants in the consultation. Consultations are held under the Chatham House Rule, which states that participants are free to use ideas generated at the event outside the conference setting, while not revealing the identity or affiliation of the speaker(s) without their prior consent. Transcripts, which are made from recordings of the plenary sessions, are unnamed and used purely as an aide-mémoire for producing the conference report after the event.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Peter Atfield

Director of Human Resources
Childline

José Chambers

Director of Comino Centre
King Alfred's College, Winchester

Charles Colchester

Executive Director
CARE

Mary Crowley

Chief Executive
Parenting Education & Support Forum

Hetty Einzig

Research and Development Director
Parenting Education & Support Forum

Ann Fairnington

Director for Wales
Communities that Care

Kate Figes

Journalist and Writer

Maureen Freely

Author
Senior Lecturer at the University of
Warwick

Clem Henricson

Head of Research
National Family and Parenting Institute

Philip Hope

MP
House of Commons

Adrienne Katz

Executive Director
Young Voice

Ivana Klimes

Director
Family Nurturing Network

Mary MacLeod

Chief Executive
National Family and Parenting
Institute

Elizabeth Mascarenhas

Head of Relationship Education
Marriage Care

Sue Miller

Senior Lecturer
University of Northumbria

Lord Northbourne

House of Lords

Clare Roskill

Voluntary Sector Adviser & Family
Support Grant
Programme Manager
Home Office Family Policy Unit

Gordon Thongs-George

Chair
Enfield Parents Forum

In addition, the following attendees
represented the convening
organisations:

Sheila Bloom

Director
Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust

Frances Caluori

Projects Administrator
Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust

John Slater

Chief Superintendent, Metropolitan Police
Trustee Comino Foundation

To obtain copies, please contact:

Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust
3 – 4 Bentinck Street
London W1U 2EE
Tel: 020 7486 1954
Fax: 020 7935 3486
Email: igeuk@globalethics.org.uk

© Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust,
2002

This material should not be reproduced
without permission

Printed on recycled paper