

# The State of Parenting

David Clements <dave\_clem@hotmail.com>

## Abstract

The publication of the Care Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2006d) has drawn attention to the state's poor record with regards children in the care system. It has also brought renewed emphasis to the state's so-called 'corporate parenting' role. But this is ultimately about much more than just working with families where children are 'on the edge of care'. The new parenting role represents an extension of the reach of the state into the lives of all families. The Every Child Matters agenda of which *Care Matters* is a small part is premised on the notion that children are increasingly vulnerable, and that parents are unable to play the kind of role that the government expects of them in their children's lives. It is argued here that the rise of the corporate parent threatens to undermine the confidence, authority and autonomy of all parents to bring up their own children.

## Introduction

Before the state goes any further in its attempt to make the rest of us better parents, maybe it should take a look at what is going on in its own back yard. (Millar, 2006)

As the government launches *Care Matters*, a reform programme aimed at transforming the lives of children in the care system - the state is a 'rotten parent' say its critics (DfES, 2006d; Millar, 2006; Sergeant, 2006). For all its denunciations of problem parents and anti-social families, this government like those before it has a very poor record when it comes to looking after the children for which *it* has parental responsibility. It is argued that the children supposedly in its care, or who are (to use the official term) *looked after*, are in fact anything but. "Care is failing on a scale that is catastrophic", says the author of one scathing report, as well as "failing society and perpetuating an underclass" of prostitutes, drug addicts and criminals (Sergeant, 2006, p1). Curiously, this is a sentiment echoed by the government itself in relation to children raised in their own families. But before considering the official discourse about the impact of bad parenting on children and in turn society; I want to take a brief look at the discussion around children in care, as it is with regards this group that the state's interventions are generally seen to be most problematic.

## How 'looked after' is the looked after child?

As critics of the care system never tire of pointing out, the 'outcomes' for children are appalling. Many young people spend their 'care careers' moving from one placement to another, sometimes moving between different parts of the country, and consequently attend a number of different schools. This inevitably has an impact on their quality of life and their educational performance. Only 1 in 10 achieves five good GCSEs and many leave without any qualifications at all. Care leavers are more likely to be excluded from school and to be unemployed when they leave. Few go into post-compulsory education, and far fewer (a figure of 1% is sometimes quoted) will go on to higher education. They are more likely to get a caution or criminal conviction, and account for a large minority of young offenders, adult prisoners, and street homeless (DfES, 2006c; CSCI, 2006a; Sergeant, 2006; Millar, 2006; Goddard, 2003; Cabinet Office, 2005).

On the plus side, the proportion of children in care in the UK has reduced from around 7.5 per 1,000 (100,000 children) in the 1970s, to around 5.5 per 1,000 (or 70,000) children today (Bullock et al, 2006). But even this is to overestimate the number of children who spend a prolonged period in care. In England, for instance, there are around 45,000 (DfES, 2006c) children living in the care system for 12 months or more. There has also been a shift from a reliance on residential provision to a care system predominantly made up of foster care arrangements. There is an increasing emphasis on using kinship placements as opposed to, or as a less disruptive way of, accommodating a child (Bullock et al, 2006). In this regard, at least, the situation has arguably improved for 'looked after' children.

### **What is a Corporate Parent?**

The Children Act 1989 represented a shift from 'parental rights' to 'parental responsibilities'. According to critics local authorities' were guilty of employing a 'minimalist interpretation' of their responsibilities under the Act to children in the care system. According to one commentator there has since been an "expansion of the state's direct parenting responsibilities" and an attempt to "replicate the actions of 'good parents'" (Goddard, 2003, p29). This is immediately apparent in *Care Matters* which says that "the State has a special responsibility for their wellbeing. Like any good parent, it should put its own children first" (DfES, 2006d, p31). However, for some the problem of the State as substitute parent is an intrinsic one. It is argued that as a 'corporate' and multifarious entity tied to the young person neither by kinship nor heritage the State has a potentially 'disruptive' influence. The "separation of actual care from formal responsibility" (Bullock et al, 2006, p8) is unavoidable. A lack of security, support and permanence for the 'looked after' child blight the system (Ibid, p15).

Although ultimate responsibility rests with central government, it is local authorities that have a 'legal and moral duty' to their respective care populations. It is this duty which is usually being referred to when the term corporate parent is used (Dobson, 1998). Corporate parenting is about the cooperation of local services e.g. health, education, housing and social care in looking after a child (DfES, 2003b; DoH, 1989). It is about the social worker co-ordinating the work of each professional involved with a particular child; and monitoring the day-to-day care that the child receives from their carer (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). The social worker – like the local councillor sometimes seen as the personification of the 'corporate parent' – is an inevitably 'inconsistent parent' (DfES, 2006d) given the difficulties that local authorities have with staff retention. However, though each plays their part in undermining the care experience for young people, these are technical arguments that don't begin to tackle the political character of state intervention in the life of children and families.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, for instance, gave legal force to the consensus that post-care arrangements were inadequate (Grover, Stewart and Broadhurst, 2004; Goddard, 2003; Bullock et al, 2006). The conclusion of research conducted in the 1980s-90s was that leaving care was even more problematic than the care experience itself (Goddard, 2003). The argument that "[t]he state also has to accept long-term responsibility for children into early adulthood" (Bullock et al, 2006, p16) was readily accepted. But the extension of post-care support, however justifiable in practical terms, also implied the extension of childhood for the care-leaver to at least the age of 21 in keeping with the experience of their 'stay at home' peers living outside the care system (DfES, 2000a; DfES, 2006d). This resonance with wider cultural trends has nevertheless gone unexamined.

This pragmatic tone of the discussion about the failings of children's social care also means that the wider definition of corporate parenting is largely forgotten. As stated in the government circular that first made explicit elected members responsibilities,

When you were elected as a local Councillor, you took on important responsibilities for the health and well being of *all children* in your area (Dobson, 1998).

Written by Frank Dobson, Minister for Health at the time, it launched the government's Quality Protects initiative, aimed at improving the life chances of 'vulnerable children'. It also made clear that notwithstanding councillors' particular responsibilities to other 'children in need', they also had a responsibility to attend to *every* child in their area. The focus on the dire prospects of the 8,000 young people leaving the care system each year is understandable. But it leaves unexamined the broader implications of the corporate parenting role now assumed by the State.

### **Parenting the Vulnerable Child**

Under New Labour children are seen as constituting 'risk' in their *being* and, therefore, they have to be carefully monitored and controlled (Hendrick, 2003, p253).

[Every Child Matters was] framed in such a way that any child, at some point in their life, could be seen as vulnerable to some form of risk. The government therefore deemed it necessary that all children were potentially covered by its proposals.

Before it became *Every Child Matters* the government's programme of reform for children's services was going to be called *Children at Risk* (Parton, 2006a, p986). It turned a far from unique child tragedy into a far-reaching agenda for change. The reforms, ostensibly the government's response to the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, seemed to have remarkably little to say about how to tackle child abuse. The proposals instead talked about the 'safeguarding' every child in the country (Munro and Calder, 2005), something that was subsequently given legal force as a statutory duty on local authorities and others (DfES, 2004). Despite this incongruity the Green Paper was almost universally well received by academics, lobbyists and practitioners alike.

They did not ask why 'Every Child' and not that particular child, and children like her. Nor did they wonder how an investigation into a child's murder could become a catalyst for the wholesale transformation of children's services. Never before had a government's response to a child's death been so sweeping in its implications for all children and families. The Green Paper is characterized by a constant slippage between material disadvantage and behavioral problems on the one hand, and abuse and neglect on the other. Much of its rhetorical force emanates from wider concerns and anxieties about the welfare of the nation's children. No less than the Archbishop of Canterbury made public his various and extensive worries about the concerning 'state of childhood' (BBC, 2006d) in a widely covered speech last year. The publication of *Freedom's Orphans* (Margo and Dixon, 2006) by the IPPR was billed as a response to the wide-ranging debate on the 'problems of modern youth'.

But it was a report by UNICEF that caused the greatest media outcry. It placed UK children at the bottom of a 'well-being' league table of 21 countries. For children's lobbyists this seemed to confirm their worst fears especially as it coincided with a bate of shootings in South London. It was, as one Editorial put it, confirmation of a "cultural

malaise in British society” of which our “young are the most miserable, lonely and frightened of any economically affluent nation” (Chandiramani, 2007). Arguably *Every Child Matters* was formulated at a time when the hysteria around the plight of children and the perils of childhood was only just starting. The reforms found their rationale in contemporary attitudes to risk, in the notion of children as particularly vulnerable to those risks, and in a consequently ever expansive definition of child protection. It has become increasingly difficult to distinguish ‘children in need’ from *just* children anymore; such is the all-embracing character of this relentlessly depressing discourse.

### **Supporting the Vulnerable Parent**

A number of commentators have long argued that Climbie was no more than a convenient hook on which to hang initiatives around social exclusion and anti-social behaviour (Dowty, 2004; Munro and Calder, 2005). Parton (2006a) traces *Every Child Matters* back to Treasury and Home Office policies on targeting crime and unemployment. Early intervention, prevention and family support emerged in the mid-1990s, he says, as the premise for a “major strategy for overcoming social exclusion both for children and for avoiding problems later in life” (p978). But there is more to the reforms than this. The new agenda might also be understood as an attempt to manage wider cultural anxieties that have children as their focus.

The language of ‘safeguarding’ for instance goes beyond protecting children from abuse to include “all the problems that may disrupt a child’s health and development – from whatever cause” (Munro and Calder, 2005, p440). Parents are consequently implicated in a shopping list of maladies from youth crime, obesity and truancy to family breakdown and under-achievement at school. Teenage parents, poor parents, unemployed parents and low-income families are all regarded as a problem in as far as their children may be ‘disrupted’. But parents are also regarded as a potential solution.

[Parents] are vital to create a supportive environment in which children and young people can develop; more can be done to build their capacity to fulfil this role. (HM Treasury, 2007, p1)

Their role though is contingent, passive and discussed in purely instrumental terms. The parent typically features as a passive recipient of ‘support’ or as a ‘partner’ alongside all the other agencies involved with their children. A recent study commissioned by the children’s social care inspectorate, though ostensibly concerned with parents who have neglected or abused their children, had a wider remit in mind. It argued for a focus on problems around mental health or substance misuse, for instance, and how they impact on parents’ ability to look after their children. It expressed concern about how ‘high thresholds’ and how many parents are unlikely to come into contact with services. It proposed that public services, from health to housing, recognise their ‘family support’ responsibilities vis-à-vis their clients (CSCI, 2006b).

In guidance issued in 2006(a), the DfES urged local authorities to develop *Parenting Support Strategies*. Again, the emphasis was on prevention and early intervention rather than enforcing sanctions on the minority of known problem parents. This approach goes beyond children who are socially excluded to “monitor and identify children who are at risk of or begin to develop problems” (HM Treasury, 2007, p1). The trajectory from SureStart Centres working only in the most deprived communities, to the 3,500 Children’s Centres planned for 2010 to cater to the needs of *every* parent in ‘*every* community’, gives an indication of the ambitions of the corporate parent.

### **Conclusions**

The notion that children are now subject to innumerable risks in greater numbers and with greater consequence than ever before, can only have a corrosive effect on child-rearing. It is the premise upon which *Every Child Matters* and the extension of corporate parenting is based. As far as the government is concerned, the parent is just another partner in the business of rearing their child. The implication being that parenting is too important and too difficult a job to be left to parents alone. And yet they are charged with solving problems that the corporate parent is failing itself to address with regards the small proportion of the nation's children currently in its care (Goddard, 2003; Sergeant, 2006). Regardless, it seems intent on extending its reach into families' lives and assuming responsibility for the well-being of *all* children. This is a worrying prospect that has long been neglected by critics concentrating too narrowly on the care system.

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