

FAMILY EDUCATION TRUST

RESPONSE TO THE *YOUTH MATTERS* GREEN PAPER

The *Youth Matters* Green Paper may be accessed at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1325>

For the past thirty years, Family Education Trust has been conducting research into the causes and consequences of family breakdown. By means of its publications, videos and conferences, and through its media profile, the Trust seeks to stimulate informed public debate on matters affecting the family and the welfare of children and young people, based on reputable research findings.

Summary

We welcome the government's recognition of the key influence of parents on young people's lives and that both parents and teenagers want greater parental involvement. We also welcome the acknowledgement that too often services fail to take proper account of the role of parents. However, we are concerned that statements about the importance of parents are not always reflected in public policy and that the authority and responsibilities of parents are being undermined in a number of areas.

We are also concerned that the Green Paper's proposals to offer incentives to young people to behave well trespass on the responsibility of parents to reward good behaviour and punish bad behaviour.

The Green Paper states that:

For most teenagers, the five Every Child Matters outcomes can be met through universal services such as schools and colleges, childcare provision, primary healthcare, the police and high quality youth and leisure provision.¹

However, without the active involvement of parents in the lives and decision-making of their teenagers, the contribution of the universal services mentioned will be limited in the contribution they are able to make to the health, safety, enjoyment and achievement of young people. The example and support of parents is crucial if young people are to make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing.

The Green Paper also tends to regard young people as a homogenous group rather than recognising them as individuals, each with his or her own needs, interests and abilities. Parents are best placed to identify and meet the needs of the children and young people in their care.

We are not persuaded that the positive outcomes sought by the Green Paper are achievable in isolation from the recovery of a proper respect for the institution of

¹ *Youth Matters*, HMSO July 2005, p.56.

marriage and the family. No amount of public investment in youth projects and initiatives can ever serve as an adequate substitute for a stable family upbringing.

Consultation Question 1(a)

What do you think are the most important issues facing young people now?

Public policy is sending out mixed messages in relation to parental authority and responsibilities. On the one hand, parents can have a Parenting Order imposed on them if their children offend or truant, while on the other hand young people can obtain contraception and have an abortion under the age of 16 without the knowledge and consent of their parents. Such double standards are confusing for young people. To effectively facilitate sexual activity under the legal age of consent by means of the confidential provision of contraception is likely to prove counterproductive in that it encourages young people to respect neither their parents nor the law.

In order to encourage proper respect for the law, it is necessary to be consistent in upholding the primacy of parental authority for children and young people and not assist them in keeping their parents in the dark when they are breaking the law. It is in the family that children learn to respect authority. If they despise authority in the home, there is little hope that they will grow up to be responsible citizens in the wider society. It is therefore of vital importance for legislation and public policy to recognise the authority of parents and not to undermine it either by disempowering parents or by excluding them from certain areas of their children's lives.

We are also concerned that young people are not being well served by the teenage pregnancy strategy, with its two-pronged emphasis on more sex education and easier availability of contraception. This approach has been pursued by successive governments and yet the UK remains in the unenviable position of having the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Western Europe and it is universally recognised that we are facing a crisis in the nation's sexual health. Children as young as eleven are being diagnosed with gonorrhoea, genital warts and other sexually transmitted infections in growing numbers, and among sexually active teenagers, as many as one in ten may be infected with chlamydia.²

The Department of Health has already conceded that it is extremely unlikely to achieve the objectives of the strategy by 2010 and yet in spite of this admission of failure, it persists with the same flawed approach and continues to resist the teaching of sexual abstinence which has made such a positive impact in the USA and Uganda.³ In the UK, young people are frequently taught that condom usage is the mark of sexual responsibility. However, as many are finding to their personal cost, while condoms are 85-95 per cent effective in preventing HIV transmission when used

² Creighton S, Edwards S, Welch J, and Miller R, 'News from the frontline: Sexually transmitted infections in teenagers attending a genitourinary clinic in south east London', *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 2002, 78:349-351;
British Medical Association, *Adolescent Health*, December 2003.

³ Genuis S J, Genuis SK, 'Managing the sexually transmitted disease pandemic: A time for reevaluation', *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 2004, 191:1103-12.

correctly every time (a rare feat among young people), they are much less effective in providing protection from other infections.⁴

By our failure to tell young people the truth about the risks associated with sexual activity outside the context of a lifelong, committed marriage, we have contributed to the decline in their sexual health. In some cases this will have lifelong consequences and, where infertility results, future generations will be affected. Until we overcome our current phobia about abstinence and our obsession with sexual expression, we are unlikely to make any positive progress. In the same way that a restoration of respect for parents will contribute to a wider respect for authority and social order in society, so a restoration of respect for marriage as the proper context for sexual intimacy is the only way we can hope to address the crisis in sexual health.

Consultation Question 1(b)

How are these issues different for younger (13-16) compared to older (17-19) teenagers?

A restoration of proper respect for parents among younger teenagers in place of the current mixed messages would strengthen bonds within the family and provide a solid foundation for positive relationships during the older teenage years.

Where relationships of trust have been broken down and communication within the family stifled among 13-16s, a greater sense of alienation and estrangement is likely to result at ages 17-19. However, where parents have been available to help and guide their children during the early teenage years, they will be better placed to assist them with the transition to work and adult life. Where both younger and older teenagers are encouraged to look to their parents for information, advice and guidance in the first instance, not only will family ties be further strengthened, but the burden on government resources will be eased.

Consultation Question 3

Do you know of any projects or initiatives which have been outstandingly successful in tackling the challenges covered in this document? If so, please give details.

In our view, the positive outcomes sought by the Green Paper cannot be achieved in isolation from the recovery of a proper respect for the institution of marriage and the family. No amount of projects or initiatives can serve as an adequate substitute for a stable family upbringing.

Consultation Question 4(a)

How can we encourage young people to take their responsibilities seriously?

⁴ Stammers T, *The Condom Controversy: Safe Sex or Russian Roulette?* Family Education Trust 2002, <http://www.famyouth.org.uk/pdfs/CondomControversy.pdf>

Responsibilities towards others are first learned from parents in the home. Yet as public policy has encouraged both parents to work outside the home and employ carers from outside the family, so parents have tended to spend less time with their children and their influence in the socialisation process has become more limited. Recovering a true respect for parents will involve pursuing policies aimed at assisting those mothers who wish to do so, to stay at home with their children from their earliest years. There is evidence to suggest that growing numbers of mothers are being forced out to work against their will.

For example, research undertaken by Dr Catherine Hakim of the London School of Economics found that women fall into three categories in terms of their choices relating to work and family. There are (i) 'work-centred' women who give first priority to their careers (15-20 per cent of the population); (ii) 'family-centred' women who devote their lives to their home and family (also 15-20 per cent of the population); and (iii) 'adaptive' women whose lives encompass both work and family (60-70 per cent of the population). Those in this third category tend to reduce their hours of employment or leave the workplace completely when their children are young or when they face other family demands.⁵

The Treasury's ten year childcare strategy document also notes the findings of a survey showing that 63 per cent of mothers currently in employment wanted to work fewer hours, and 44 per cent of working mothers would prefer to give up work and stay at home with their children if they could afford to do so.⁶

While the government has placed a strong emphasis on supporting women who wish to return to work and have flexible working arrangements, there has been far less support available to women who would like to give priority to their children. Yet such support is a necessity if we are to see parents exerting a stronger influence on their children and encouraging them to take their responsibilities to the wider community more seriously.

Parents are in the best position to teach their children to act in a responsible manner, and parental example in this regard is a very powerful stimulus to the development of responsible attitudes. When parents are encouraged and enabled to take their own responsibilities seriously, their young people will be far more likely to follow their example.

Consultation Question 4(b)

What should the incentives be for good behaviour?

Incentives and sanctions should remain in the hands of their parents, unless the young person commits a criminal offence. We do not view it as the role of government to offer incentives to young people for good behaviour. Where it attempts to do so, it is

⁵ Hakim, Catherine, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*. (Oxford, 2000).

⁶ *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*, HM Treasury, December 2004, para.2.53

assuming a parental role and trespassing on responsibilities that properly belong within the family.

Consultation Question 4(c)

What sanctions should be applied for poor and disruptive behaviour?

See response to 4(b) above.

Consultation Question 4(d)

Do you know of any examples of schemes which have applied these kinds of incentives and sanctions effectively?

Throughout history, parents have learned to apply incentives and sanctions in an effective manner. However, as the authority of parents has been undermined by policies that have the effect of limiting the amount of time they spend with their children and their influence upon them, so the role of parents as rewarders and punishers of their children has been weakened, with disastrous results both for the families themselves and for society.

Consultation Question 5

What more could be done to divert young people from risk-taking behaviour, like smoking, binge-drinking and volatile substance and illicit drugs misuse?

Young people should be encouraged to talk to their parents. As the consultation document notes:

We know that young people who can talk openly to their parents about issues such as sex, relationships, drugs and alcohol are less likely to engage in risky behaviour.⁷

There is no substitute for strengthening the family unit and recognising the authority and responsibility of parents.

Consultation Question 6

What practical benefits and challenges will there be in developing an integrated youth support service?

There is no integrated youth support service that can equal the family. In the absence of policies aimed at restoring respect for the marriage based family with due recognition of the authority and responsibilities of parents, any practical benefits derived from youth services are likely to be very limited.

⁷ *Youth Matters, op. cit.*, p.54.

Consultation Question 9(a)

What do you think of the emphasis in the proposals on empowering young people themselves to shape local services?

We would suggest that the task of ‘empowering young people’ can be safely left to their parents. It is unnecessary for the government to give pocket money in the form of ‘opportunity cards’. The very concept underlines the extent to which the state is attempting to assume a parental role. Rather than encouraging children and young people to look to their parents to meet their needs, it is encouraging a dependence on the state that may engender attitudes that will not encourage independence and hard work if taken with them into adult life. We would question the necessity of any such scheme when the normal operation of market forces coupled with parental knowledge of their children will shape the provision to fit young people’s needs.

Consultation Question 10(a)

What should be done centrally to support the development and delivery of local opportunity cards?

We do not support the introduction of such government-sponsored incentive schemes for reasons outlined in our responses to questions 4 and 9 above.

Consultation Question 11(a)

Which activities do you think have the most benefits for young people?

Different activities will carry different levels of benefit to young people depending on their personal interests and abilities. Young people are not a homogenous group. Each individual is unique.

Consultation Question 13

What more can we do to recognise and celebrate young people's positive contributions to their communities?

We would question whether it is the role of government to ‘recognise and celebrate’ young people’s positive contributions to their communities.

Consultation Question 14

Would the opportunity to earn rewards motivate young people to get involved in their communities?

It would depend on what the rewards were. Most people are ‘motivated by rewards’ when they work in terms of earning their wages.

Consultation Question 15

How can we ensure that young people from the diverse range of communities that make up today's society are effectively engaged by service providers?

As stated above in our response to question 11(a), young people are not a homogenous group. They are unique individuals and do not possess identical desires, needs, interests and abilities. It is not possible for the government to guarantee that the needs of every young person are taken into consideration. Parents are best placed to identify and meet the needs of the children and young people in their care.

Consultation Question 16

What kind of help and support is most important for young people?

The most important help and support for young people is that received from their parents. As the Green Paper notes:

‘Evidence shows that parents’ influence is key and both parents and teenagers want greater parental involvement.’⁸

Consultation Question 17

How can we ensure that information, advice and guidance provided to young people is comprehensive, impartial and challenges rather than perpetuates traditional stereotypes?

We are not sure what ‘traditional stereotypes’ are in mind here, but we are concerned about policies that measure ‘equality of opportunity’ by ‘equality of outcome’ without considering the possibility that there may be factors at work other than discrimination to account for inequalities of outcome.

For example, in a recent House of Commons debate, an MP noted that while 60 per cent of first-line supervisors in the civil service were female, two promotions higher, 60 per cent were male. The questioner asked whether this reflected the suitability of people for the job or some kind of indirect discrimination. In reply, the Minister considered that the pace of women’s advancement had been less than would have been expected on the basis of their talent, thus necessitating positive action.⁹

However, in view of the research findings noted above in response to question 4(a), we would suggest that it might be possible that the reason for the lower percentage of women occupying more senior positions within the civil service is due neither to their

⁸ *ibid.*, p.17.

⁹ HC Deb (2005-06) 436, cols 1399-1400.

suitability for the job nor to indirect discrimination, but to a change in their scale of priorities once they have children. We fear that there has sometimes been a reluctance to recognise the reality that the majority of mothers do not wish to give priority to their careers while their children are young. This has nothing to do with the availability of childcare; it is simply a choice that most women wish to make: they positively *want* to be at home with their children.

We are therefore uncomfortable with the concept of ‘challenging stereotypes’ if it involves failing to recognise that while men and women are indisputably equal in value and worth, there are nevertheless very real differences between them that go beyond the physical and biological. Such differences are not to be denied and suppressed but rather to be celebrated. Men and women are not exactly the same in every way; rather they complement each other, and any attempt to force mothers to think and act like fathers will not only cut against the grain of the natural maternal instincts of most women, but also deny the fundamental needs of children and young people.

Consultation Question 22

Do you think a 'personal health MoT' for 12-13 year olds would be an effective way of helping young people make a successful transition to the teenage years and to secondary education?

Rather than offering such a service universally, we would suggest that it should be offered to parents to decide whether their children would benefit from it. To maximize its effectiveness, where the parents agree to a consultation for their child, they should be present. There should be no question of a confidential service whereby parents are kept in the dark about the advice offered.

Consultation Question 27

At what stage(s) of their children's lives would parents find it most helpful to receive information about how they can support their teenage children?

The question seems to presuppose that the government has a role in providing parents with information about how they can support their teenage children. We would question this presupposition. For generations, parents were well able to bring up children without the help of the state. By and large they had more confidence in their natural parenting abilities and, in times of particular difficulty, could rely on the support of the extended family and/or informal support networks within the community.

However, government policies aimed at forcing both parents out to work have had the effect of breaking down informal community networks, and the professionalisation of childcare has shaken the confidence of many parents in their natural parental instincts.

Rather than offer information to parents and so attempt to address one of the symptoms of the problem, the government would do better to get to the heart of the

issue and begin to pursue policies that give mothers a genuine choice to stay at home to care for their own children if they wish to do so.

Consultation Question 28(a)

On which issues would parents of teenagers most like support?

Parents of teenagers would like to see government statements affirming their importance matched by policies that show that they are genuinely respected and not marginalised. It is in the interests of society for children to respect their parents, but the government is not setting a very good example when it undermines them by putting growing pressure on mothers to work outside the home, by expressing disapproval of effective methods of discipline and by making contraception and abortions available to young people without the knowledge or consent of parents. In short, the rhetoric about the importance of parental involvement rings somewhat hollow while the government continues to pursue policies that limit parental influence and involvement.

If the government wants young people to take their parents seriously, it must demonstrate by its policies that it genuinely believes in parental authority and responsibility.

Consultation Question 28(b)

How, or through whom, should information be delivered?

The real need is not for more information, but for policies that show greater respect for parents and recognise their authority and responsibility for their children in every area of their lives.

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