



## **Briefing**

### **Parenting across Scotland**

**briefing for the Parliamentary debate on the  
National Parenting Strategy**

**16th May 2012**

#### **Parenting across Scotland**

Parenting across Scotland is a partnership of voluntary organisations working together to provide a focus on issues affecting parents and families in Scotland. Together our organisations work with tens of thousands of families throughout Scotland.

The PAS partners are:

Aberlour Childcare Trust

CHILDREN 1<sup>st</sup>

Capability Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland

Relationships Scotland

SMC

Scottish Adoption

## Parliamentary briefing

Parenting across Scotland welcomes the debate on the National Parenting Strategy and believes that a National Parenting Strategy provides the opportunity to provide the support that parents in Scotland need.

When Parenting across Scotland (with Ipsos MORI) asked parents about their support needs in 2010, 72% told us that they wouldn't know where to go for advice and support in bringing up children; the figure rises to 82% in the most deprived areas of the country.

PAS believes a national parenting strategy needs to:

- Value the importance of parenting and the important work parents do
- Ensure that parents get the help they need when they need it through the principle of 'progressive universalism'
- Invest in the early years, and in particular, reinvigorate the crucial profession of health visiting
- Support families out of poverty, and protect them from the adverse effects of the recession and welfare reform
- Improve work-life balance by making workplaces more family-friendly and childcare more affordable and accessible
- Support parents to build their own support through family centres and by investing in communities

Last year the Scottish Government stated its intention to make Scotland "the best place in the world to bring up children" and to introduce a national parenting strategy to make this a reality.

So how close are we to that target and what is needed to bring us closer?

In 2007, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) placed the UK 16th out of 24 countries for children's wellbeing. Analysis by Barnardo's placed Scotland even further behind – 23rd out of 24. So the bad news is there is a long way to go. The good news is that there is much we can do to improve children's lives and opportunities.

### **The importance of parenting**

All too often, parents feel under attack by the media and judged by other people. While the headlines paint a bleak picture of parenting in Scotland, they do not tell the whole story. The vast majority of parents love and want to do the best for their children. Many are already doing so, and with the right help and support so could many more. Constant negative publicity about parenting is debilitating and undermines parents' best efforts. Building a

culture which values them and the important work they do needs to be grounded in positivity and celebration, so parents feel supported and valued rather than under attack. A national strategy that believes in the strength of parents is far more likely both to engage parents, and create the conditions for them to succeed.

### **Help for parents when they need it**

All parents need support at times, and some more than others. Some families may need ongoing help, while for others, circumstances such as separation, bereavement or child health may create additional need on an occasional basis.

When resources are scarce it is tempting to say concentrating on families with additional needs will save money. However, this is fallacious. We need universal services – health in the earliest years, then education – that support families and prevent problems turning into crises; make asking for help routine for all families; and monitor children's wellbeing and health so problems are picked up early and specialist help offered. There is no tension between universal and targeted services – we need both, based on the principle of progressive universalism that identifies need, responds as early as possible, and provides additional help where necessary.

Families are not created equal. Many face extra pressure, for example because of mental health, domestic abuse or substance abuse problems. With punitive welfare reforms imminent, helping parents on low incomes is especially critical. Evidence shows parents surviving on low incomes are not poorer parents, but they do struggle against greater odds. No amount of parenting classes or other support can make up for lack of money. Naomi Eisenstadt, first director of the SureStart programme in England, said of the focus on parenting programmes: "I would rather put the food on the table. In the absence of any talk about paying the bills, this focus is disrespectful because it assumes that these are the problems poor people have, and does not recognise that the main problem poor people have is not having enough money". These structural inequalities need to be at the forefront of policymakers' minds.

### **Investing in early years**

There is substantial evidence that investing in early years yields rich savings in years to come: the Scottish Parliament's Finance Committee and the Scottish Government's own economic modelling have shown the value of early intervention in the early years. This is also a significant time for brain development. But beyond the justification of economics and neuroscience, surely it is simply wrong that, by 3 years old, large numbers of Scottish children are already at a disadvantage compared to their peers?

Making sure families have help around them in the early years is crucial. Health provides universal contact, initially through GPs and midwifery services and then through health visiting. Polls for Parenting across Scotland show families greatly trust health visitors and GPs. But with health visitor numbers falling and 45% of the health visiting workforce aged 50 or above, the

profession is in crisis. Unless action is taken soon, it will cease to exist. To be serious about improving early years, pivotal professions need investment and reinvigoration.

### **Enabling parents to work and have home lives**

Parenting does not take place in a vacuum: the external environment has a considerable impact and family life is often a juggling act between home and work. The stresses of combining work and home life, coupled with soaring childcare costs, are barriers to good parenting. While employment and parental leave are reserved to Westminster, much could be done in Scotland to make work a more family-friendly experience. A national parenting strategy needs to work with employers to encourage family-friendly policies, and must accompany a new childcare strategy that enables parents to work and offers children high quality early education.

### **Communities of support for parents**

A national parenting strategy isn't the bludgeon of a nanny state: it is a tool to help parents to be the best they can be. Every family is unique, and parents generally know what's best for their own children. While health and education provide the all-important universal services, research consistently shows parents rely most on informal networks. These need to be supported to flourish. Opportunities to meet, support for local groups and training from community organisers to build parental capacity are all important for building communities of support for parents.

### **Making Scotland the best place for children**

There is a long way to go to make Scotland the best place in the world to bring up children; the Scottish Government needs to invest in families. It needs to work across departments and ministerial briefs to create an environment in which families can thrive. Scotland's families deserve no less.

## Facts about families in Scotland

- 5.2 million people live in Scotland.
- Around 1,037,839 are under 18.
- 4% of households contain children (approx. 604,000 households).
- The number of households containing two or more adults with children is projected to decline from 19% to 11% of all households by 2031.
- In 2011, there were 29,135 marriages, the highest for four years, although low compared to a generation ago.
- In the same year, there were 9,814 divorces, the fewest in 30 years.
- More people are cohabiting than before.
- In 2011, more children were born to unmarried than to married parents for the first time.
- There are over 163,000 lone parents with 295,000 children (almost one in four families).
- Over half of lone parents were previously married.
- At July 2011, there were 16,171 children looked after by local authorities. This number has increased every year since 2001, and is at its highest since 1981.
- During 2009, there were 455 adoptions. This is 37 more than in 2008, but half that of the late 1980s, and around a quarter of the early 1970s.
- In 2006, it was predicted that by 2010, stepfamilies would be the dominant family form.
- One in four children (250,000) is growing up in a family whose income is below the poverty line.
- 27% of lone parents have a long-standing health problem or disability as do 19% of children living with a lone parent.
- Around 16,500 children a year experience a parent's imprisonment.
- The teenage pregnancy rate has been fairly steady for the past decade but Scotland has a higher rate of teenage pregnancy than most other western European countries.
- Teenage pregnancy is linked to deprivation with the rates of teenage pregnancy in deprived areas more than treble those of the least deprived areas.
- The average age of becoming a mother increased from 27.4 in 1991 to 29.6 in 2010 and becoming a father from 30 to 32.4.