

The Politics of Parenting

Pondero talk by Claire Paye, Vice Chair, Mothers at Home Matter

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What politicians agree on

In a world full of uncertainty and change, with hard working families under pressure from all sides, it is good to know that some solutions are very simple and obvious. There are solutions to the financial and time pressures working families face, which politicians from all parties can agree on.

- Families are finding it hard to make ends meet because of the rising cost of housing. They obviously need more, cheaper childcare.
- All mothers, especially mothers of babies and toddlers, want to work. They therefore need more, cheaper childcare.
- Childcare is very expensive and the cost of it is holding women back from fulfilling their potential. The solution to this is more, cheaper childcare.
- Children from poorer families are at a disadvantage in life from the start. They should go into childcare as soon as possible to improve their life chances.
- Women don't earn as much as men. This is because they have had to take a whole six or even nine months of maternity leave. We should make men share this burden of caring for their babies through shared parental leave so women are liberated to return to work as soon as possible.
- Mental health in children is deteriorating. We aren't quite as sure why this is, it's probably just something to do with social media, but the answer is that we need more intervention from schools and mental health practitioners.

The problems are real but the solution always seems to be to separate children from their parents for longer hours so parents can be unshackled from the burden of childcare and liberated to return to their fulfilling careers and so that children can be looked after by proper professionals.

There are a few more subtle messages that politicians from across the political spectrum have taken on board.

- Soon after having a baby, a mother will be keen to return to work. It doesn't matter if she has to give her baby to someone else to look after, because her work is more fulfilling and important than the boring work of caring for her baby. Or, if it isn't, she needs the money so it's worth the sacrifice.
- Politicians know that babies don't much mind who looks after them, they just want their mothers to be happy and fulfilled, which they will only be if they are able to be paid to work.
- Politicians also know that mothers who aren't doing paid work but are at home caring for their children are either very rich or are wishing they could be out at work. They must be helped to fulfil their potential, which is clearly wasted on their children.
- The only families who are hard-working are those where both parents do paid work. A family with only one income is not hard-working and does not deserve to be helped.
- Unless a mother goes back to work within a year of having a baby, her career is ruined and she will never achieve the level of income tax contribution which all women aspire to.
- The only valid measurement of contribution to society is really how much income tax you pay.

Today I'm going to cover not just the political zeitgeist regarding childcare or, so-called 'family policies', but also what children and babies need, how we can give them what they need and some of the issues around outsourced childcare. I'll also look at possible solutions and real help for families. I'm hoping to leave lots of time for questions at the end but I'm also hoping to answer them as I go along.

Why do MPs think this way?

Why are these views so widely held in politics when they are clearly, she says, somewhat arrogantly, wrong?

Firstly, these are the official views of MPs, the ones they think their constituents want them to hold. MPs, who I respect greatly, having met several, have to get elected and stay elected. It is very difficult for them to come out with a pro-choice for mothers line. Male MPs can sound sexist if they suggest that babies might benefit from being cared for by their mothers at home. Several male MPs are married to a wife who is at home full time caring for their children but they can't open themselves up to an accusation of 'privilege' where they are seen to criticise families who can't afford to have a parent at home.

Where female MPs are concerned, some are working mothers and are not going to be wildly enthusiastic about looking into the impact of long hours in childcare on children, and a higher than normal proportion seem to be childless. All of the female MPs are doing a job which is significant, fairly well paid and largely fulfilling. They are not doing it just to get money to feed their families. There are much easier jobs to do to earn money but being an MP can be a very fulfilling and worthwhile job. Some female MPs have gone into politics when their children were older. It is much easier just to throw money into childcare to be seen to be doing something for so called 'working families'.

Some MPs genuinely believe that any mother who isn't in paid work either would like to get a job or is so wealthy they don't need to work and have chosen not to work just because they don't fancy it rather than that they believe it is best for their children if they are at home to care for them themselves. I also believe many MPs think it's a neutral decision whether children are in childcare, or are at home on their own after school, and that the presence of a parent makes no difference to their well-being. Or, more cynically, that the contribution to GDP that mothers make is worth any sacrifice in terms of time spent with their children that this entails.

One reason MPs may not realise the life long harm that long hours in nursery at a young age can entail, is that we are NOT ALLOWED to debate the merits of childcare in the media. I conduct a number of media interview and I have found myself up against the argument that toddlers should be in childcare because it is good for them, which is dangerously untrue in most cases. Above all, tv and radio interviewers know that you MUST NOT EVER criticise any parent's decisions regarding how they bring up their children. You MUST NOT make any mother feel guilty by suggesting that there may be a problem with her baby spending long hours away from her in childcare because she probably didn't have a choice about whether to work or not. If she did choose to work, you must still NOT CRITICISE another mother's decision, even if made in ignorance of the consequences.

Here is the situation as we at Mothers at Home Matter see it:

- Families are really struggling with the cost of housing and it is becoming unaffordable not to do paid work. MPs need to make it possible to choose to do paid work or to choose to care for your children themselves. I'll suggest how they could do this.
- Childcare is very expensive and it needs to be. Babies and toddlers need as much one to one care as possible.
- Not all mothers want to do paid work. Many, if not all, mothers love their children deeply and want to spend as much time as possible caring for them.
- Mothers don't want to go back to work as soon as possible after having a baby. We love doing work that is fulfilling. But we want to prioritise our families. Where Government intervention may help is in helping returnees, mothers who are bringing all their skills to the work table after spending several years raising a family. I'm hopefully preaching to the converted here.

Here are some figures about what mothers really want.

What do mothers want?

From a Department for Education and Childcare Early Years Survey 2014

- * Most mothers (57%) would rather work fewer hours and spend more time with their children.
- * 33% of mothers at work would rather be at home caring for their children full time.

From a Dept for Edn Review of Childcare costs analytical report 2015

- * 77% of parents not using childcare would rather look after their children themselves. Only 18% because they can't afford it.
- * 55% of parents haven't put their 2 year olds into childcare because they feel they are too young.
- * 37% of parents said that nothing would make childcare better suited to their needs.

What do Mothers at Home Matter think should happen?

The solutions Mothers at Home Matter suggest are fairly simple.

- We would like families to be able to choose whether to give up a salary to care full time for their children, or to go out to work and pay others to care for their children, or even to afford to work part time to care for their school age children themselves.
- And perhaps more importantly, we'd like more recognition of the vital importance of children being raised by a loving, available parent or parents, from birth upwards. So many people say that it is even more important to be available when their children are teenagers. Parenting doesn't stop when children start school.

Objections to maternal care

So, having vented my ire, I need to explain why I feel that the line taken by successive governments is not only wrong but potentially quite dangerous. I'm quite good at arguing against myself as these questions come up in media interview regularly. Here are the objections I face:

- Why does it matter if they put more money into childcare? It doesn't hurt those who have chosen to be at home.
- I know lots of children who have been to nursery and they are all fine.
- Surely you're not saying that mothers are better at looking after children than fathers?
- Why should the Government pay mothers to stay at home? They should just get a job.
- And, underneath it all, mothers who work contribute taxes and should be supported. Mothers at home don't have any costs and don't need any help.

To address these points I need to take a step back to look at the research into what children need and what mothers (and fathers) want. I'd then like to look at possible political solutions.

Why does it matter who cares for children?

Have you ever heard someone say, or have said yourself, 'I'm just a stay at home mother'? Being a mother, in almost all cases, is the most important job you can ever do. Unlike other jobs, you are uniquely qualified to be that child's mother and you can't really ever be replaced. We may have certain skills that mean we can contribute to the successful running of a business, or cure people of illnesses or even run the country, but, much as we don't want to admit it, in almost any paid job we do, we can be replaced. But a mother can never be fully replaced. Babies and children need their mothers to thrive. We are learning more and more about how the loving and attentive presence of the mother is vital for a child's well-being and how family time is crucial in the fight against the pressures that teenagers face.

Rather than focussing on the very narrow aspect of 'how can we get more mothers into work,' MPs should rephrase the question to ask: 'what do children and, therefore, families, need?'

The needs of babies and toddlers

Usually in media interviews I'm asked to back up why it's so important that babies and toddlers spend as much time as possible with their mothers and as little time as possible separated from their mothers in nurseries. In a nutshell, the main reason is that when babies and children are separated from their mothers they experience this as stress and release the hormone cortisol. Regular high levels of cortisol can affect how brains develop and can lead to aggressive behaviour in boys and heightened anxiety in teenage girls. The other main reason is that babies and children need one to one responsive, loving, consistent care and no one can love a child as his or her parent can. Nursery care is no substitute for time with parents.

Quote studies here [See 'Research summaries']

The needs of older children/all children

However, as most of you are probably past the nursery age, I'd like to focus on the needs of older children. I'd like to recommend Sue Palmer's book 'Toxic Childhood' which is subtitled, 'How the modern world is damaging our children and what we can do about it'. If we start with the problems that Sue identifies, and that the Government is rightly concerned about, then work back to what we could do about it, hopefully you'll see a common thread. As a former teacher herself she is concerned at the rise in bad behaviour and she highlights a number of reasons behind this. They include poor diet, lack of sleep, lack of outdoor play, inadequate attachment or opportunities for real-life communication, the national obsession with 'selfish materialism', exposure to screen-based violence and bullying behaviour. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that having a parent around to cook proper meals, ensure decent, early enough bedtimes, take them out to the park, chat at leisure, enjoy experiences together rather than giving them stuff and monitor and reduce screen time would make a massive difference.

How to meet those needs?

We need time for parenting. Where both parents have been out at work all day, there is very little time left for the sort of inefficiency that comes from looking after children. I have to hold my hands up and say that I am acutely aware of being too busy, even though I am technically at home, albeit largely working from home, whether paid or unpaid, and getting frustrated when bedtime stretches on in a manner I would see as unnecessary.

The narrow Government focus on removing the mother from the home by getting her into paid work is subject to the law of unintended consequences. The overarching effect is to reduce the time that parents have to spend with their children, or, put another way, reduces the amount of time children can spend with their parents in a home environment. This has implications for their mental and physical health and puts incredible pressures on a family just to keep going. Let's look at this through the prism of the family meal.

The family meal

The humble family meal is starting to be recognised as crucial for family well-being. This is due both to what is eaten and the context in which family meals are eaten. Home-made food is almost always healthier (and cheaper) than ready-made food, but it takes time to make it. Perhaps more important than the food is the fact of everyone sitting down together, with no screens at the table, obviously, to take the time to make conversation. One of the best ways to help our children do well at school is to talk to them and listen to them. In a study by Columbia University in 2005, how often families eat dinner together is a powerful indicator of whether a teen is likely to use drugs, smoke or drink and also how well they are likely to perform academically. They say that one factor that does more to reduce teen substance abuse than any other is parental engagement.

These days the debate seems to have moved on from substance abuse to centre on too much screen time and the rise in obesity. Again the family meal seems to be a crucial defence against these problems. A study by Montreal University in 2017 picked up on our current interest in mental health and established a link between regular family meal times and long-term physical and mental health benefits. Eating together combats the rise in obesity as children are more likely to eat the right amount of different foods. They are less likely to eat ready-made meals and, interestingly, to drink soft drinks. They are more likely to focus on what they eat as they aren't distracted by screens. Not having screens at the table is a given for family meals to offer all the benefits which are suggested. This all takes time and logistically, if it is going to happen during the week, needs to happen early enough in the day for children to get to bed in time, which is almost impossible to achieve where both parents only get home at 6pm or later.

Mental health

The Government is rightly concerned about the mental health of our children. They are spending significant amounts to treat people with mental health issues. However, at the same time, they are removing the key to strong mental health in children, the presence of a parent at home. Strong family relationships are a significant defence against mental health problems. The mental health of children and teenagers is, rightly, a very hot topic at the moment. There is a strong link between inappropriate use of the internet and long hours on screens with the high number of teenagers talking about self-harm, suicide and depression. Over the past ten years there has been a rise of 600% in teenagers struggling with anxiety, depression, self-harm and eating disorders. Some of the reasons for this are, again, excessive use of the internet, the reduced quality of family time and too much focus on academic achievement.

This pressure to succeed is felt particularly badly by girls, who throughout their young lives are much more aware than boys of other people's expectations of them and the need to live up to those expectations. I would suggest it is also due to the commodification of childhood and education, whereby school exists to produce a set of grades which can be changed into well-paid, hard won jobs which no one is going to want to give up just to look after their baby when the state could do this for

them, allowing them to continue to reap the benefits of all the work and effort put in during the teenage years. It is a vicious cycle in which value is only placed on monetary success or status or some other measurable outcome. There is no value placed on unpaid, unmeasured care.

Anyway, back to mental health. There are a range of factors which are contributing to poor mental health in teenagers. However, some of the solutions can be found in the ability of parents to be available in their children's lives when needed.

So what is the Government doing to help families spend more time together?

Nothing. The opposite.

Tax

I'm afraid that to look at what needs to be done to allow parents to choose who cares for their children, we are going to have to look at taxation. Tax policy is one of the most significant factors affecting whether mothers go out to work or not. And is the simplest measure for the Government to tweak to change people's behaviour. I must acknowledge the work of CARE and their fantastic report called The Taxation of Families, from which I have drawn this information.

At the moment the tax system is grossly unfair to single income families and to families where one partner does a very part time job around the children. This is because we have individual taxation which takes no account of family responsibilities.

Family responsibilities have therefore been recognised through what is called benefits, rather than, say, allowances. These so called benefits are being eroded through the universal credit system, or simply removed. For example, Child Benefit used to be called Family Allowance. The removal of this from what are known as higher earners has skewed the system even further towards dual income families. It is called the Higher rate child benefit tax charge, acknowledging that it is actually an extra tax. This charge applies from £50,000 of income. However, if a couple were on £25,000 each they would not only qualify for lots of help with childcare, they would be entitled to other benefits as well. The increase in the personal allowance has compounded the problem. Two people earning are entitled, in 2018, to £23,000 of tax free income between them. An individual on £23,000 would be paying £4,078 in tax so would already be 18% worse off

Additional tax paid by single income family (SIF) vs dual income family (DIF) using 2016/17 figures.

Total household gross income £	Annual tax and NI paid by SIF £	Annual tax & NI paid by DIF – 2 equal earners £	Higher rate child benefit tax charge (2 children) £	Extra tax paid by SIF annually £
20,000	3,118	440		2,678 609% +
27,195	5,421	2,140		3,281 153% more
30,000	6,318	3,036		3,282 100% +
40,000	9,518	6,236		3,282
50,000	13,220	9,436		3,784
60,000	17,420	12,636	1,788	6,572 52% more

Almost 60% of families have incomes which put them in the poorer half of the population. Most families are in the lower half of income distribution in the country.

Not only do single income families with children pay more tax than dual earners, it is very difficult for single income families on below average wages to increase their take home pay by getting a pay rise or a better paying job.

A British one earner family with two children on 75% of the average wage will face a 73% marginal effective tax rate. For every £1 extra they earn, they will only keep 27p after the withdrawal of benefits and additional tax paid and national insurance paid.

If they are in rented accommodation and on housing benefit, the removal of benefits and increase in tax can mean a 90.6% marginal effective tax rate. For every extra pound they make, they keep less than 10p. The reason for this in the UK is that family responsibilities aren't recognised in the tax system, just by means of tax credits, which taper sharply.

So the only way to increase a family's income significantly is for a second earner to go out to work. He or she can keep £11,500 before paying any tax.

Almost every other country in the OECD manages to recognise family responsibilities in the tax system.

The UK single earner married couple with two children pays 70% more income tax than the French family, more than twice as much as the German family and 15 times as much as the German family.

Even two earner families with children pay more in the UK than in Germany, France or the US. Just out of interest, the tax rate for single or married people without children is lower in the UK than in these other countries.

Our taxes per se aren't high, the problem is that the tax system doesn't make allowances for how many people are supported by each earner. In Germany and the USA couples can choose how they are assessed for tax purposes, so they can be assessed on their joint income. They then also receive tax relief for each child.

France has a more complicated system but it takes into account the number of dependents.

Case study

In Germany, childcare for the under threes is a very new thing. It was the norm up till maybe 7 years ago that the mother (or father) would stay at home until the child was three (and then it would be off to Kindergarten). You can get 18 months paid leave and up to three years unpaid leave of work. My husband as sole earner pays far less tax than here and he pays less for every child we have. Everybody gets child benefits for each child they have, regardless of how much you earn. The child gets this paid until they are 18 or up to the end of further education. It is something like 180 euros a month for the first two and 200 odd euros a month for subsequent children. They are a population in decline and they want to encourage people to have more children.

Childcare

When any politicians talk about 'family policy' they really mean subsidies for childcare. When I challenged Damian Hind, my MP and in the Treasury at the time, he said it was too expensive to do anything to help mothers at home. However, the Government is spending a fortune on childcare.

- The Government currently spends about £6.5bn on childcare through the various childcare programmes they offer. All childcare help is now for parents with 2 incomes except for free pre school for 3 and 4 year olds. I'll cover the various party policies later on.
- Tax free childcare. Gov't contributes 20p for every 80p spent on childcare, up to £2,000 p.a. per child. Replaces childcare vouchers – were available to couples where one parent didn't work. And only up to age 12, not 15.
- 30 hours of free childcare costs Government £5,054 for each 3 or 4 year old, or £7,616 per 2 year old. (£3.51 per child per hour, £5.39 for 2 year olds).
- Working tax credits/universal credit will allow up to 85% of childcare costs to be included.
- Many workers in nurseries will be on the minimum wage and will be entitled to their own tax credits/childcare payments/benefits etc.
- The Government are very keen to reduce ratios, ie, allow more children per adult, because this is the only way to save money.

Party policies

Bearing in mind everything I've said about the needs of children, here are the various Parties' considered proposals about how they can help families.

Conservatives – 30 hours 'free' childcare for all 3 and 4 year olds

Labour – A National Education Service described as 'cradle to grave'. 30 hours free childcare to include 2 year olds. Free childcare for one year olds. Improve staff wages for nursery workers.

Liberal Democrats – Shared paternity leave from day one. 15 hours free childcare for all two year olds. 15 hours' free childcare for all from nine months to two years with working parents. 30 hours' free childcare for all two to four year olds and all working parents from end of paid leave to two years.

Conclusion

Mothers at Home Matter lobbies for families to be able to choose how much time they spend caring for their children. That families would be able to meet their children's needs. That they would have time for parenting.

Specifically, the changes that need to take place are financial and rhetorical.

Recognise the family in the tax system - Transferable Tax Allowance

CARE Recommendations – as adopted by MAHM

Change the tax system to treat families fairly. This means taking into account family responsibilities and the number of people being supported by each wage.

A simple method would be to introduce a full transferable tax allowance. Transferring £11,500 of tax allowance would significantly reduce the amount of salary on which tax is payable. For those on 20% income tax, it would allow an extra £2,300 of net income whilst also, significantly, raising the threshold for benefits and allowance

Ring fence entitlement to 15 hours of pre school. Stop erosion of support for single income families through removal of childcare vouchers and prioritisation of long hours at pre school.

Remove focus on mothers back into work as an objective.