

July 2009



The
Children's
Society

A Manifesto for a Good Childhood

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The state of modern childhood affects us all – young and old alike. The publication of the report of *The Good Childhood® Inquiry*, ‘*A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age*’ has opened up the debate on children’s lives and childhood.

Society owes it to children and young people to make a commitment to make their lives better now and to improve childhood for future generations. The Children’s Society is therefore calling on all political parties to make a new commitment to childhood in any new administration they form. This manifesto identifies three key areas where political change and leadership are needed to realise such a commitment.



Manifesto Commitment:

To put children's well-being at the heart of UK public policy

The litmus test for a society that aspires to demonstrate values of fairness, freedom and respect is how it treats its children. For the UK to attain the highest levels of childhood well-being it is imperative that the Government systematically assesses all its policies to determine their impact on children's lives and consider how they can be designed to improve them. Some examples of how this could be done are outlined below:

- In their evidence to *The Good Childhood® Inquiry* children and young people told us that love and relationships with family and friends are the most important factors in determining a good childhood. This is corroborated by the research findings which identifies them as the cornerstones of healthy development from birth and leads us to conclude that **a primary policy objective for the next Government must be to enhance respect, allow time and build support for children's personal relationships**. A wide range of policies including those on family and parenting support, involving fathers, safeguarding, looked after children, school reform and child care should all be aligned to contribute to this goal.
- It is not only policies that explicitly target children that need to be considered. **All policy areas including healthcare, transport, the environment and housing must be examined through the prism of childhood well-being**. For example the potential impact on children's health and development should be an important consideration when housing policies are being developed.
- **Where policies pose a direct threat to childhood well-being the best interests of children must take precedence over other considerations**. So, for example, the current situation in which refugee children and their families experience destitution or detention in the name of immigration control must be ended.
- While childhood-proofing policy must be a priority across Government, we feel strongly that **one Cabinet Minister should be given lead responsibility for all children and young people**. This will provide essential accountability and an additional guarantee that all children are subject to the same standards of service, care and protection. This is particularly vital for children who are currently outside the remit of the department with responsibility for children, such as refugee children and those for whom responsibility remains shared, such as children in trouble with the law.
- Finally looking beyond the confines of Government to wider society we seek **political leadership to promote greater personal and collective responsibility towards children**. A great deal of concern has been expressed from various quarters over the behaviours, attitudes and values of children today. Rather than perpetuating a blame culture that vilifies children and families we should see it as our collective responsibility to do more to support them. If we wish children to understand and show respect towards other people, it is first and foremost our respectful conduct towards them and towards each other that will encourage them to do so.



Manifesto Commitment: *To prioritise the interests of children who face the greatest disadvantage*

Some children face significantly greater barriers than others to experiencing a Good Childhood. The current economic situation undoubtedly means that over the coming years public spending will be severely restricted and difficult decisions will need to be made about where to focus resources. We argue that as a society we have a duty to ensure that those children who face the greatest disadvantage are prioritised. Below are some examples of areas that we believe warrant urgent attention:

- Safety and stability are essential features of a Good Childhood. Recent tragic events have highlighted that for too many children these continue to be missing. One significant barrier to good safeguarding practice is the lack of attention paid to children and young people's views and experiences. **Investment in training in listening to children at all levels of the children's workforce is urgently needed to bring about the necessary culture shift.**
- When children and young people exhibit problematic or risky behaviours all too often we respond to these as symptoms rather than seeking to understand and address their underlying causes. **Children who are in trouble with the law, misuse drugs and alcohol or run away from home need solutions that are constructive not punitive.** Intervening as early as possible to identify and meet underlying needs (for example in relation to mental health, education or material deprivation) should be the guiding principle across all services who work with children but they should also never give up on a child who continues to need ongoing support.
- Many children continue to experience discrimination in their daily lives **at both an individual and institutional level.**



These include disabled children who are too often still not being heard and taken seriously or Gypsy and Traveller children who face harassment and ignorance particularly in seeking to access services and schools. **Discrimination leads to entrenched inequalities that result in poor outcomes for these children. It must not be tolerated.**

- **Even in difficult economic times no child should suffer the indignity and damage of living in poverty.** The Children's Society is a founding member of the Campaign to End Child Poverty and calls on the incoming Government to renew the commitment to eradicating child poverty by 2020.

Manifesto Commitment:

To include children as valued citizens in reforms for democratic renewal

Children do not have the right to vote and therefore, unlike most adults, do not have a direct political relationship with those who seek to renew and reform our democratic institutions. However children's voices must be heard in this debate if we are to avoid creating a system that is perceived to be irrelevant and unresponsive to the interests of the generation who will ultimately be relied upon to carry it forward. Some ways in which this might be achieved are set out below.

- There is a growing consensus for the need to re-evaluate the fundamental relationships between the state and the people in this country. A Bill of Rights has been suggested as one means of articulating this. We seek a commitment that any such Bill will recognise children as integral members of society of equal value and worth to others. The Children's Society believes that the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** embodies the legal and practical standards that would make this aspiration real and recommends that it should be fully incorporated into domestic legislation.
- For children to participate as active citizens in our democracy more **effective mechanisms must be developed to enable them to exercise choice and control both in their individual lives and in the wider realms of politics and society.** For example all children need to be supported to take up issues about the treatment and services they receive through accessible complaints and representations processes.
- Children's equality and significance as members of society has been significantly undermined in recent years by widespread negative attitudes towards and stereotyping of children and young people. Those who submitted evidence to *The Good Childhood® Inquiry*, told us that such attitudes profoundly affected them and alienated them from wider society. **Outlawing negative age discrimination against children would send a strong and unequivocal message to children and young people that their views are taken seriously.**



The Children's Society

The Children's Society is a leading children's charity committed to making childhood better for all children in the UK. We take action to prevent, rescue and support children facing violence, neglect, poverty and discrimination in their daily lives. We give children the hope and confidence they need to face the future with optimism. We never turn away.

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