

The Fathers Matter Conference

29th June 2006, 11:30-12:00pm

Rt Hon Hilary Armstrong MP

I started my career, as some of you will know, as a social worker, trying to support the most vulnerable among us from the hardships brought on by deprivation. I moved into community work because I wanted to, then moved into politics because I saw how government could be a force to bring about kind of positive changes that would break the cycle of deprivation for good.

Since 1997 the government has acted with conviction to tackle the root causes of deprivation. I'm proud of what has been achieved to help the poorest and most vulnerable in our society, and of the revitalisation of our public services.

Since 1997, the growth in inequality has halted, and 95% of people have seen their incomes grow at between 2 and 3 percent in real terms per year with 800,000 thousand children lifted out of poverty and 1 million pensioners out of poverty. That's a lot of changed lives.

But we are not satisfied and nor should we be.

What I want to focus on this coming year are the very most excluded. As the tide of poverty and disadvantage has been decisively turned back, those who are the most excluded stand out even more starkly. The 60,000 children in care at any given time. The 180,000 seriously mentally ill and on benefits. The 40,000 teenage pregnancies this year. People in deep trouble. In trouble in their own lives, and often in trouble with the community around them.

As unemployment has fallen, employment rates have risen in virtually every part of society, including among the disabled, lone parents and the over 50s. But among those who have no qualifications, employment rates have actually fallen.

The vast majority who leave school today will do so better educated than any generation before, and can look forward to record levels of income and longevity. But the dwindling minority who leave school without qualifications face a much harder time.

This is what I want to tackle head on.

But government can't do it all, and throughout my career I have seen the critical importance of good parenting. And fathers are as crucial a part of this as mothers.

It is an obvious, but profoundly important statement that fathers have a key role to play in caring, loving, guiding and protecting their children.

Research from the National Child Development Study has demonstrated that quality involvement- fathers who read for their child, take interest in their education- is closely linked with the absence of behavioural difficulties, greater academic motivation, and greater psychological resilience. The list of positive outcomes goes on and on.

In short, fathers matter. And this is why fathers – indeed all parents and caregivers - must be considered as part of the vanguard in our drive against persistent social exclusion.

I therefore very much welcome the research that has been done by the Family Rights Group, which provides some vivid illustrations

of the issues that our public services need to be capable of addressing, and what those services feel like to those using them.

In particular, it rightly draws our attention the fact that while our mainstream attack on poverty has helped a lot of people, this has exposed a number of groups that we have not managed to reach.

I welcome this opportunity today to talk about these issues from a government perspective.

While the importance of this role has not changed, as society has evolved so the nature of this role has altered. As work patterns have changed, so social and family patterns have also changed, including fathers becoming more actively involved in the lives of their children. In the 1970's, fathers of young children spent around 15 minutes a day involved in child related activities. Now the figure is around two hours.

We now also have different expectations of fathers, and fathers have different expectations of themselves. Alongside the traditional idea of being the breadwinner, many more fathers believe they

should be involved in the day to day welfare of their children. And we should welcome this.

Greater engagement can generate far-reaching benefits. Indeed, we cannot overestimate the extent to which sustained involvement and quality care from fathers can have profound positive effects for themselves and for their children.

A quite startling statistic involving imprisoned fathers helps illustrate this. Research shows that if imprisoned fathers stay in touch with their families, reoffending drops by up to six times and their children are also less likely to commit crimes. The quality of involvement is also crucial.

Since 1997, we have worked hard to support parents and help facilitate the bond between parent and child. In April 2003, for the first time, British fathers were given a legal paid right to take leave from work, albeit some 30 years after Sweden. The new Work and Families Act will enable fathers to take a maximum of six months additional paternity leave during the first year of a child's life. This can allow fathers to take primary caring responsibility during the first year of a child's life.

We have also worked hard to encourage the development of positive parenting skills, which, I believe, are not just innate, but can be nurtured and learnt. Recently, DfES have worked with Fathers Direct, to produce a “Dad Pack” which offers advice on the multifaceted and often tricky challenges facing fathers. It is a pity that certain sections of the media have ridiculed such advice, for they clearly miss the point that parenting is a very serious matter; it is something which requires serious discussion, learning, and at times, help.

However there are still other areas where there is much to do. Obviously the CSA must be reshaped to ensure that it reinforces parental responsibility without causing further difficulty for struggling families. I know that [Sir] David Henshaw is due to deliver his findings to John Hutton by the beginning of the Summer recess.

We must help those fathers most at risk. It is still a regrettable fact that the higher level of a father’s education, the greater is his likelihood of his involvement with children. We are committed to encouraging greater involvement for fathers in the most difficult of

circumstances. There are some outstanding examples of innovative and forward thinking programmes already. The Storybooks Dads programme, where prisoner fathers prepare CDs of bedtime stories for their children, has had astonishingly positive results for both fathers and children. At the very problematic end, recent changes mean the courts now have more options to facilitate father-child contact at the start of proceedings and more options to enforce this where things go wrong.

Services must also engage better with fathers. The Father Matters project reveals the extent of marginalisation experienced by men, especially young fathers. There has been some good work – for example – some of the Sure Start programmes in engaging fathers as part of the solution to family problems. We need to ensure that problems are actively tackled and addressed, rather than avoided and ignored, because they appear too difficult. More widely, there is a 2005 manifesto commitment to ensure that maternity services are more skilled at addressing the needs of young fathers.

We also will continue to think about how we can pro-actively support- and, when necessary, assertively support- the development of parenting skills. Let me make it clear that we do

not want to produce some government rule-book on how to parent. But it is possible to support and help parents build their parenting skills. A striking result of the evaluations of existing parenting programmes – including from parenting orders - is not only that they improve outcomes for children, but that parents tend to say at the end of them, ‘why didn’t I get this help before’. It is also true that the quality of these programmes matter – a bad programme is worse than no programme at all, so we have to really watch the quality carefully. By March 2008 there will be 2,500 Children centres set up in some of the most deprived areas of the country – we must make sure that each comes with first rate parenting support services.

We know that the benefits of an active, positive and present father can be very great. We must get this balance right – supporting access, but also actively facilitating quality parenting.

Key questions include:

- How can mainstream services deliver better services to fathers, and involve them more?

- How can we improve the delicate balancing act between the benefits of access and rare but devastating risk to a child?
- The research presented today has been very impressive, though we should consider whether we are doing enough to understand the lives of fathers in the most deprived areas?

Government can't help fathers alone. We must work together with parents to support, inspire and encourage their own children and to understand how this might help us break the cycle of the most persistent forms of social exclusion.