

'The strong get smart while the weak ones fade'¹ *

Secure attachment in its social context

The conditions that promote security are psychological, social and political.

The primary condition for a good childhood is secure attachment². Securely attached children are more eager to play and to learn, more confident and generous, more at ease with the ups and downs of friendship, better able to ask for help when they need it, have more self control, more independence from peer³ and social pressures, and greater resilience to stress. These qualities are desirable provided the prevailing culture also values them. A mutual society, for example, sees tax as a vital social duty, not a private burden. In a state of constant civil war or oppression, on the other hand, fewer people feel obligations to others beyond those that they know, and social generosity may be a hindrance to survival⁴.

Insecurity is often accompanied by anxiety about one or both parents – their physical and mental health and their money problems, their relationship with one another - a hidden source of mental pain in children. Such preoccupations can impede social and learning skills.

Security requires reinforcing throughout development. There is not much social class difference in attachment status of babies, but insecure children are made worse by social disadvantage while higher status reduces the risks.

"They live in a culture that has its own rules and power ratings. The power currency is violence. ..They don't like being on the periphery. But after a while they become immune: emotionally cold. This environment dictates the culture, one of emotional coldness and envy. This kind of kid doesn't happen overnight, they are a while in the making".

Camila Batmanghelidjh on socially excluded youths who seek acceptance in violent gangs⁵

Before endorsing any specific initiatives designed to improve the lives of children a learned report from a leading British children's charity must make a clear and powerful statement about the currently damaging social context for families in this country.

Support for parents in an insecure world

Children experience parents under greater stress than in recent decades. Parents have to work harder to buy or rent more expensive homes⁶, have less job⁷ and pension security, may have to fund childminding, mortgage and student loan repayments all at the same time, are more likely to split up⁸, to start a family later⁹ and to have to care for elderly - i.e. more long lived - parents of their own. We live in a less secure and less familiar society with a more mobile population, both economic migrants and refugees. Racist political parties are growing in many parts of Europe. The only mobility that is reduced is that between social classes. Children see how social insecurity affects their parents and expect that the same could apply to them when they grow up.

Between 1980 and 2000 the UK moved from being one of the most equal to one of the most unequal states in EU¹⁰. High average incomes are irrelevant in such a society. Unlike poverty¹¹, which is exclusion through lack of money, inequality affects

* Submission to *Good childhood Inquiry*

<http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what+we+do/The+good+childhood+inquiry>

most of the population by increasing insecurity and anxiety and decreasing trust and self esteem across the board¹². It corrodes social cohesion and aggravates pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities¹³ and is associated with higher rates of educational failure¹⁴, teenage pregnancy¹⁵, adolescent self harm¹⁶, substance abuse, violence¹⁷, obesity¹⁸, imprisonment, chronic stress and mistrust as well as steep variations in child mortality¹⁹.

A recent study showing increases in adolescent conduct problems in UK²⁰ failed to notice the correlation between this and the massive rise in national income inequality over the same period. A contrasting finding in the Netherlands²¹ showed little change in adolescent problems over this period. Income inequality had not changed significantly there, either²².

Most of the beneficial effects of - for example - better nutrition and interventions to reduce obesity²³ and teenage pregnancy²⁴ safer and more attractive places to play²⁵, greater access and facilities for music²⁶, art, sport and drama, policies and practices to diminish educational disadvantage²⁷, safer and healthier routes to school, robust anti-bullying policies^{28,29}, better resources for children with special needs and for looked after children, a less oppressive school testing regime, a more comprehensive curriculum, more enlightened and regulated media (tv, radio, internet, advertising³⁰) etc. will simply leak away in the gap between the haves and the have-nots³¹. Social incohesion undermines family and school life, and health.

Care of children and adolescents

It is never too late to promote security, but it gets harder to achieve the older the child is. Not all parents have the skills to produce in their children what they themselves have lacked (about a third of us are not secure in attachment terms) so education and support are required. All who care for children and adolescents need that.

Children and adolescents need looking after throughout development, even into early adulthood³². Parents and other relatives, minders, nannies, foster parents, family centre staff, prison staff, residential social workers, religious leaders, sports coaches, nursery nurses, teachers and youth workers all have a part to play. Apart from teaching, none of these roles is properly valued by society.

There is little training and poor pay for most people who look after children and young people, the majority of whom are women³³. Parenting support³⁴ is just beginning to be developed as a professional activity. Front line support must always be linked with specialist health and social services, to support the workers themselves and ease referrals in the most serious cases. Under financial pressure, and the demands of 24/7 mental health cover, for example, vital camhs consultative links to primary care, extended schools and children's centres are threatened³⁵.

Early years interventions that can reduce risk to children

Perinatal: From conception onwards the resilience of children is compromised by stress and insecurity in their parents^{36,37}. Both anxiety during pregnancy³⁸ and depression after it³⁹ have serious effects on the health and development of the child. The most socially deprived mothers are far more likely to have very premature births⁴⁰. Despite recommendations from the National Service Frameworks (NSF)⁴¹, there is a woeful lack of services (and poor coordination of what exists) for mothers and fathers between conception and the time of birth. This misses the only opportunity for true early intervention with those most at risk⁴².

Paid parental leave: Fully funded maternal leave is associated with lower child mortality ("a ten week extension in paid leave is predicted to decrease post neonatal mortality rates by 4.1%"⁴³). This remarkable finding should have an immediate impact on policy, and not only to save lives. Death is merely the tip of an iceberg of physical, mental and developmental disorder. (And in the upbringing of infant boys it is useful to know that, despite appearances, they are more vulnerable and immature than girls.⁴⁴) Fathers have to be involved from the beginning and are more likely to do so, and to play an equal role in parenting, if their leave is adequately paid for⁴⁵. Even if he later separates from the mother, a father's devotion to his children is stronger if he has got to know the baby intimately from birth.

Children's Centres and preschool education: After funded leave and supported parental care comes varieties of non-parental care and education⁴⁶. Better training and pay for early years staff would improve outcomes and reduce turnover. UK needs to learn from continental Europe the tradition of pedagogic professions⁴⁷: proper pay, status and training for the job, particularly when the families most in need are hard to engage or to reach. Collaborating with 'difficult' people does not come naturally to anyone. There are now established standards⁴⁸ but these need to be complemented with adequate pay and continuous professional development, in particular by regular facilitated work discussion to promote reflective capacity⁴⁹. Work with young families is a professional skill.

Political courage and conviction is required to keep this ambitious and visionary project – in effect the creation of supportive neighbourhoods – going long enough to show measurable benefits⁵⁰. These will not be seen clearly in the short term. Belsky et al's findings⁵¹ suggest that to be more effective Sure Start needs much closer working links with NHS services, in particular with health visitors and with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The irony that Sure Start has tended to aggravate the disadvantage of the poorest⁵² reinforces the need for targeted services – including home visiting⁵³ – alongside universal ones.

Education

Many submissions will be made to you about education. My plea is to make the teaching of personal social and health education (PSHE) a serious career choice for those with the gifts to do it. It may need to become a statutory part of the curriculum⁵⁴. The syllabus covers many things but not philosophy⁵⁵ where children of all ages can discuss love and hate, god, race, friendship, nationality and culture, honesty, trust, fairness and unfairness, truth, climate change, evolution and, indeed, parenthood (all children know about parenting/caregiving because they observe it every day).

PSHE is clearly not a didactic subject but needs different classroom methods (more guided discussion) and therefore different training for the teacher/facilitator.

Extended school days could be a benefit to children but of course that depends on the quality of staff and opportunities made available.

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² Grossman KE, Grossman K, Waters E. (2005) *Attachment from infancy to adulthood: the major longitudinal studies*. Guilford Press

³ Peer pressure forces young adults to spend, says report
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/retail/story/0,,1970790,00.html>

⁴ "...there is little value in having a generous and open mind if life is primarily a struggle for survival, where there are few or no trusted neighbours, and where it is better not to think about other people's states of mind. If you have to steal from others to survive, for example, it is a hindrance to be bothered about their feelings. Thoughtfulness is not useful in a thoughtless culture." Kraemer, S (1999) Promoting resilience: changing concepts of parenting and child care *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare* **3** : 273-287 <http://childrensproject.co.uk/resilience.asp>

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1962099,00.html>. Street robbers don't only want the items they steal, but also the thrill of causing fear. <http://bjc.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/46/1/1>

⁶ During the second half of the twentieth century the UK house-price-to-earnings ratio never exceeded 5 (major peaks in 1973 and 1990) and averaged less than 4. It is now almost 6.

About 200,000 households in England are homeless. The use of temporary accommodation has more than doubled since 1997, from 40,000 to 100,000. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/1933.asp>

Future house building must ensure a mixed population: JRF (2006) *Attracting and retaining families in new urban mixed income communities* Ref 0026 <http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/housing/0026.asp>

⁷ Sleskova M, Salonna F, Geckova AM, Nagyova I, Stewart RE, van Dijk JP, Groothoff JW (2006) Does parental unemployment affect adolescents' health? *Journal of Adolescent Health* **38**; 527-535

⁸ In spite of disappointing results in trials, skilled intervention with both parents can minimise harm to children when there is conflict between them. Dowling E, Gorell Barnes G. (2000) *Working with Children and Parents through Separation and Divorce*. Macmillan.

Conflict between parents that is chronic and unresolved is harmful to children, whether the couple are together or apart. Booth A, Amato P. (2001) Parental predivorce relations and offspring postdivorce well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family* **63**, 197

See also www.oneplusone.org.uk

⁹ The mean age of UK women at the birth of their first child was 27.4 in 2003 and has been rising steadily. Families are getting smaller and the gap between children wider. *Birth Statistics, 2003*, London: ONS, 2004. Almost one in five of women born in 1960 are childless. *Population Trends, 108*, London: ONS, 2002, p. 42

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gini_coefficient#Correlation_with_per-capita_GDP provides a graphic account of this

¹¹ "under present policies the poverty rate would be fairly stable, and fall substantially short of meeting government targets for reduction". Brewer M, Browne J, Sutherland H. (2006) *Micro-simulating child poverty in 2010 and 2020*. IFS.
http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications.php?publication_id=3656

¹² Wilkinson R (2005) *The Impact of inequality*. Routledge.

Wilkinson R, Pickett K (2006) Income inequality and population health: A review and explanation of the evidence *Social Science & Medicine* **62** (7) 1768-1784.

¹³ "...what really matters about income is where you are in relation to others in your society, i.e. it is a matter of relative income or social status, not whether the population in one rich country is on average

twice as rich as that of another....There is little doubt that insecurities we may carry with us from a difficult early childhood can be exacerbated by the insecurities of low social status. Neither helps confidence or make you feel valued." The Impact of Inequality; the empirical evidence. Wilkinson R. (2006) *Renewal* **14**(1), 20-26

¹⁴ Teese R, Lamb S, Duru-Bellat M (eds) (2006) *Education and Equity: International Perspectives on Theory and Policy*. Springer/Kluwer

¹⁵ Crosby RA, Holtgrave DR (2006) The protective value of social capital against teen pregnancy: a state-level analysis *Journal of Adolescent Health* **38**; 556-559.

¹⁶ Gunnell D, Shepherd M, Evans M. (2000) Are recent increases in deliberate self-harm associated with changes in socio-economic conditions? An ecological analysis of patterns of deliberate self-harm in Bristol 1972-3 and 1995-6. *Psychological Medicine*, **30**: 1197-1203

¹⁷ Fajnzylber P, Lederman D, Loayza N. (2002) Inequality and Violent Crime *The Journal of Law and Economics* **45**; 1-39

¹⁸. Armstrong J, Dorosty AR, Reilly JJ, Emmett P (2003) Coexistence of social inequalities in undernutrition and obesity in preschool children: population based cross sectional study. *Arch Dis Child*. **88**; 671-5. it is not surprising that physical activity alone is not sufficient to prevent obesity, even in preschool children <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/333/7577/1041>

¹⁹ Platt M.J (1998) Child health statistics review, 1998 *Arch Dis Child* **79**, 523-527

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²⁰ Collishaw S, Maughan B, Goodman R, & Pickles A (2004) Time trends in adolescent mental health. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* **45**, 1350

"an increase in non-aggressive conduct problems such as lying, stealing and disobedience rather than aggressive problems such as fighting" *Time trends in adolescent well-being*. The Nuffield Foundation 2004 Seminars On Children And Families: Evidence And Implications.

A possible correlation between adolescents and political/business leaders who are also not honest cannot be ignored.

²¹ Verhulst, F.C., van der Ende, J., & Rietbergen, A. (1997). Ten-year time trends of psychopathology in Dutch children and adolescents: No evidence for strong trends. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, **96**, 7-13.

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²³ eg Gortmaker SL, Peterson K, Wiecha J, Sobol AM, Dixit S, Fox MK, Laird N. (1999) Reducing Obesity via a School-Based Interdisciplinary Intervention Among Youth: Planet Health. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*, **153**: 409 - 418. <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/153/4/409>

²⁴ see *Reaching out: an action plan on social exclusion* (p65-6). This is an impressive document but its technocratic terms of reference do not permit recommendations that would reduce inequalities nationally http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/

²⁵ children and adults do not always want to be together, so requiring supervision for outdoor play can become a persecutory activity for both parties. *Neighbourhood play and community action* is an innovative project using local groups. See www.jrf.org.uk, and also <http://www.demos.co.uk/projects/childrenmakeplaces//bookmarks/>

²⁶ <http://education.guardian.co.uk/artinschools/story/0,,1929204,00.html>

²⁷ eg the inspiring work of Dr Tony Sewell with black boys www.generatinggenius.com

²⁸ Twemlow SW, Fonagy P, Sacco FC, Gies ML, Evans R, Ewbank R. (2001) Creating a peaceful school learning environment: a controlled study of an elementary school intervention to reduce violence. *Am J Psychiatry* **158**, 808-10.

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<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6177470.stm>

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http://www.which.co.uk/reports_and_campaigns/food_and_drink/campaigns/kids_food/Food%20Fables%20report/Food_fables_campaign_560_100488.jsp

Compass (2006) *Commercialisation of childhood* <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/campaigns.asp>

³¹ 'We've forgotten to teach social skills, and our children are stagnating'
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1941915,00.html>

³² I do not know of any systematic evidence for this, but my impression is that teenagers are quite particular about having their parents in person to talk to before or after school. Younger children require more adult care generally but it does not always have to be parental.

³³ The average gross pay of a child care worker is £7,800 while a nursery or primary school teacher brings in £22,662 (Daycare Trust).

³⁴ See www.parentinguk.org and www.familyandparenting.org

³⁵ <http://www.childrennow.co.uk/news/index.cfm?fuseaction=details&UID=d7293b46-8729-4759-8341-2ddfd5df9fa5>

³⁶ Field T, Hernandez-Reif M, Diego M, Figueiredo B, Schanberg S, Kuhn C. (2006) Prenatal cortisol, prematurity and low birthweight, *Infant Behavior and Development*. **29**, 268-275
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⁴¹ 40492/Child and Adolescent Mental Health - National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services, 2004, section 3, standards 2, 9.

29433/Women's Mental Health, *Into the Mainstream*. (s12) DoH 2002, section 12

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- ⁴⁸ eg http://www.lifelonglearninguk.org/standards/fl_standards.html 306, 310, and www.cwdcouncil.org.uk
- ⁴⁹ "The moral development of children is not, as was formerly believed, dependent simply on obedience to adult authority, though that is often necessary on the way. It requires years of negotiations between caregivers and children, beginning with the apparently simple conversations we have with our babies. Parents should play the major part in this, but they cannot do it alone. Childminders, nannies, teachers, and others all need the reflective skills that make all the difference between power which is abused, and authority which is necessary." Kraemer S (1999) Promoting resilience: changing concepts of parenting and child care *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare* **3**, 273-287.
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see also <http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/resource.php?s30> and
<http://www.jnpartnership.co.uk/main.php/232/497/85> I am not endorsing these, but they look relevant and up to date.
This is the Stanford encyclopedia entry <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/children/>