Other people's children

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Contents

Acknowledgements 7

1. Introduction 9
2. The new childhood 17
3. Quality of life for children – a new vision 37
4. How are children doing? 43
5. Government and governance 58
6. A children's decade 78

Appendix 106

Notes 109

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Gillian Thomas and Gina Hocking
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1. Introduction

People think that children have never had it so good. They're wrong. Inequality of wealth has affected children more than any other group and one in three children live in poverty. A quarter of children will experience the stress of a family breakdown during the course of their childhood. The new diseases of childhood such as asthma, mental illness, obesity and eating disorders continue to perplex medical professionals. The school system and pupils are the subject of unprecedented expectations and pressure. Children are sought out and targeted by increasingly influential commercial interests. They are at the centre of some of the most disturbing controversies of our age: genetics and designer babies, paedophilia and abuse in the home. Our emotional connection with children means that they will always be the subject of passionate debate.

We are not suggesting that children's lives are universally worse than they were a generation ago. This report examines how children's quality of life is changing, and how we could improve it, for all children, over the next generation. It draws on many different sources, and does not seek to produce either a comprehensive review of evidence or a detailed policy blueprint. Instead, we aim to help move the debate on by challenging some of the current discourses surrounding children, showing how issues treated separately are connected and setting out a long-term framework for tracking and improving children's quality of life.

The first question arising from this aim is: what kind of quality of life do children in the UK currently enjoy? British children are among the most measured in the world, and there are innumerable sources of evidence regarding their well-being – from hard facts depicting their health, wealth, academic achievement, criminal behaviour and family circumstances, to softer impressions of how they are portrayed in the media, and the anecdotal evidence we all carry with us about how we respond to, interact with and observe our own and other people's

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children. Rarely do these sources collate to form a broad or balanced view of how good, or bad, children's lives are today. Nor do they help to dispel the three major stereotypes of our time: the angel, the devil and the spoilt child. The challenge for this piece of research was to create an analytical framework through which to view some of the evidence and then depict, in a balanced way, the lives of children today.

The concept of quality of life is the foundation for this framework. As an idea, quality of life is growing in influence. Its origins derive from dissatisfaction with conventional measures of economic growth and income as a proxy for well-being. Alongside the sustainability of common social and environmental resources, it also seeks to capture and reflect subjective experiences and states, including belonging, happiness and love, as components of good lives. Quality of life is especially apt for thinking about children because of their innate need for care and attention from others and their special dependence on common resources such as safe streets, education, clean air and informal community-based norms of goodwill and social control.

Quality-of-life measures have made some inroads into adult institutions such as medicine, business and local government. However, this cluster of ideas has rarely translated into new ways of thinking about children's quality of life – until now.

Our framework is constructed by identifying a range of 'goods' according to where they fall on two axes: individual–collective and tangible–intangible. In the report, we define children's quality of life as a balanced combination of complementary states in four core areas:

- individual standard of living
- shared resources
- happiness and emotional well-being
- trust and inclusion.

Using this framework, our analysis shows significant trends. First, most children's life chances in terms of medical health, financial well-being, educational achievement and personal safety have risen enormously. But although there has been huge progress for millions of children over the last generation, the process of change has also created casualties.

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Improvements in material living standards have occurred against a backdrop of rising individualism: quality of life is more directly linked to parental earning power and household income. For poor families, the wider costs are clear. Not all families can afford childcare when mothers are at work, transport to keep in touch with dispersed family members, or a PlayStation in the bedroom to compensate for a lack of play facilities nearby. This is why, in the context of rising living standards for most, the life chances of vulnerable and disadvantaged children are as bad as ever and, in many cases, worse.

The second major issue concerns children's psychological development, mental health and emotional resilience. Here the evidence is mixed, but we argue that several factors, including a greater likelihood of major change during childhood (divorce, house moves, changes in childcare circumstances) and greater exposure to different kinds of media, have made life for children more emotionally demanding. In many ways, families have adapted in an under-recognised way by developing more open and communicative relationships with children. But other institutions have generally not matched this adaptation. In fact, trends in education and commerce have meant that children are under immense pressure to perform in line with ever-higher academic and consumer expectations. Eliminating this pressure is too simplistic a response to some of children's worst emotional problems – such as depression, eating disorders and bullying – but we argue that more widespread appreciation of the issues and more effective management of risk and pressure are needed.

The third area is children's dependence on social capital and informal networks of gift and exchange. This is poorly researched, but work by sociologist Robert Sampson in Chicago has established a clear link between specific measures of 'neighbourliness' in communities and children's health outcomes. While children are undoubtedly at the centre of many local communities, in others the decline of shared norms and expectations for their behaviour and development impacts negatively on the opportunities and support available to them. We argue that, with demographic trends shifting the emphasis of politics towards the needs of an ageing population, and escalating fear of risks such as abduction and traffic accidents, children are in danger of becoming segregated from other aspects of community life. This threatens not just the quality of

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their childhood experience, but also their profile and influence in wider society.

Our analysis emphasises the importance of holism for children – promoting social and emotional development, independent play and civic participation alongside material wealth and academic attainment. In this context, how is it possible to improve children's quality of life?

The analysis shows that, overall, the societal response to change has encouraged fragmentation: different sectors have pocketed specific responsibilities for different areas of children's lives. Thus retailers and corporations seek to 'give children what they want', government focuses on minimising harm to children and promoting their achievement at school, children's charities campaign for legally enforceable rights for children and the media consistently report and amplify a catalogue of risks and dangers facing today's children. The combined impact of this fragmentation is to foster deep contradictions and inconsistencies in children's lives and to neglect certain aspects of their quality of life. Children doing paid work is frowned upon, yet British children complete 35 million test papers every year. Corporations spend millions of pounds researching and perfecting the 'child appeal' of products, while families struggle with both time and money. Parents are increasingly fearful of allowing their children to be unsupervised in public, but obesity goes effectively unchecked.

Ironing out some of these inconsistencies and creating pathways for children and their parents to access easily what they need could be the task of government. But government itself struggles against low trust amid rising expectations. In the public sector, staff retention rates in children's services such as social work and teaching are reaching crisis point. Public engagement with parenting programmes and local community projects is often low. But the public and media pressure for government somehow to eliminate risk – from accidents on school trips to paedophiles – can create impossible pressures.

In this confusing climate, the government's agenda for children has launched an impressive array of programmes and policies including the Children's Fund, Quality Protects, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, Youth Offending Teams, Children's National Service Framework, Sure Start and Connexions. Most of this agenda has marched towards ever-

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higher, safer and more stringent standards for individual children while attempting to recoup the deficit for 'children at risk'. Most fundamentally, the anti-poverty strategy seeks better outcomes for deprived children in health, crime and education. The government has established a Children and Young People's Unit, reviewed spending on children at risk and launched numerous participation exercises at local and national level. It has set out to create local children's trusts and centres and reform the way that services for children at risk are coordinated. Through much of this, government policy has emphasised the logic of prevention and early investment.

Government policies have produced many improvements and positive outcomes. But fiscal transfers and higher educational performance do not address the 'intangible' resources such as emotional resilience, more responsive community-based institutions, or the availability of mentoring and informal care that are also fundamentally important. Much of the children's policy agenda relies on establishing collaborative relationships with children, parents and communities – but as Sure Start has shown, these methods are expensive, slow to develop and reach relatively small numbers of children. Inadvertently, the pressure to improve formal educational attainment may also be undermining some of these other social goods.

Consequently, whole swathes of society (who may know very little about the specifics of the government's record or policies on children) are left feeling that the things that really matter for children – bullying, unsafe public spaces, 'falling in with the wrong crowd' or simply the isolation that parenthood can sometimes bring – are not being effectively tackled and may no longer be anybody's responsibility.

A prominent alternative approach to improving children's life chances is the children's rights movement. Its leading advocates argue that a national children's rights commissioner and a set of enforceable individual rights would ensure that children can access the resources they deserve. However, we argue that drawing up individual entitlements could easily entrench compartmentalised responsibilities for children's lives and encourage a blame-and-compensation culture. Legal and quasi-legal rights do not necessarily build shared commitment to children or strengthen collective capacity for adapting to wider social and economic change.

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However, it is true that, without direct political or economic power, children will be unable to prevent encroachment on the collective resources, or 'commons', that their quality of life depends on. Rather than trying to write a detailed list of rights that the state should somehow be able to guarantee, granting one central right would give children a clearer, more powerful place in the political process – in other words, it should give them the vote.

The final chapter of the report sets out a broad, long-term agenda for improving children's quality of life. Its main recommendations are:

- The vote for children should be granted. Align the age of majority with the age of criminal responsibility, and move both to 14. Reinforce the importance of families with children as an electoral constituency by issuing voting rights for children at birth. The family could then decide who would exercise their votes with the default going to the mother or other primary carer.
- Strengthen cross-cutting government structures for children by establishing three ministerial portfolios: for very young children; for children aged 5–14; and for young people.
- Create a new framework for quality-of-life information and inspection, including:
  - Ofsted, the Social Services Inspectorate and the Audit Commission, together with the newly established Commission for Health Improvement (CHI), to form a network to produce joint reviews of the quality and impact of public services to children in different areas
  - 'child-impact' statements to be produced for all major national policy decisions likely to affect children's quality of life
  - a comprehensive and regularly published review of children's quality of life.
- The Treasury should introduce 'generational accounting', publishing a comprehensive assessment every two to three years on how the benefit and burden of existing spending, borrowing and investment will impact on different generations.
- Over the next decade, government should create a national child development service drawn from social work, health and education.

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All children should have access to a community-based professional capable of identifying and procuring appropriate services and resources, as well as helping to link children and families to informal networks of information and support.

- Alongside the child development service, government should create an integrated 'children's passport' linked to a range of benefits and supportive institutions and, potentially, to a capital sum invested in each child's future and available for spending on intensive support if necessary.
- A national children's service programme should be instituted for school leavers to undertake community-based mentoring work with children. Young people would gain accreditation to work in such supportive roles as learning mentor, organising sports and other activities, reading to children, or providing parenting support, and would be coordinated by schools and by the child development service. Working for the programme could build up future entitlements to children's and family services, and might be linked to other benefits such as reduced university fees or free transport.
- A national play strategy would prioritise an increase in active, independent play, link it to public health and educational objectives, and build a commitment from public, private and voluntary sectors to increasing the accessibility of play and learning opportunities for children in all communities.
- Radically recast the role of schools so that, over the next five to ten years, they become directly involved in helping to deliver well-being, not just academic attainment, for their students. Criteria for performance league tables, Ofsted inspections and school funding should be adjusted to reflect the impact of a school on the social and emotional development of pupils and its contribution to improving social outcomes in the wider area. The governance of schools should be changed to reflect this shift. Schools should become more directly involved in driving forward community-based partnerships.
- Advertising to children should be reviewed through Ofcom, the newly established communications regulator, to establish whether certain kinds of advertising could be taxed or banned at specific times.

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- All major broadcasters and media outlets should establish structures for user feedback and representation on children's issues in the same way that growing numbers of newspapers appoint 'reader's editors' and use new forms of consultation to guide editorial policy.
- Government should support the creation of an independent, national children's news agency, perhaps created by expanding and networking the relatively small number of children's media organisations that already exist, to support representations of children and their views that are more grounded in their direct experience.
- An annual risk survey from the leading children's charities should review the range of risks to children's well-being. From this, joint strategies for communicating and reducing these risks could be developed, and some of the newer threats to children's quality of life could be prioritised.
- A tax in kind would have to be paid by companies profiting from high-risk areas of children's lives. These companies would be required to contribute positively to quality of life through employee volunteering, corporate community investment or financial payments.

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2. The new childhood

The last 30 years has seen a steady increase in the power and influence of individualism. Group characteristics and social class are less powerful determinants of identity. Many collective institutions and forms of representation have weakened. Most people have moved towards multiple identities, and the role of personal choice in shaping behaviour and collective outcomes has grown. This does not mean that people are becoming isolated from each other – in fact, we are probably as social in our instincts and activities as ever before – but social arrangements have become personalised to an unprecedented degree.

The broad effects of these changes for children are positive, because they are accompanied by wealth, choice and a wider range of experience and opportunity. But apart from parents, who mostly extend the boundaries of their identities and senses of self to include the child, this trend implicitly encourages exclusion from the mainstream of those with the least economic, social and political power – a group that includes children.

One effect of the new individualisation is to push responsibility for children back towards the immediate family and household, and to reduce community responsibility. Privatisation is linked to the long-term impact of safe, reliable contraception; children are an active lifestyle choice rather than a given social phenomenon. As a result, their welfare is increasingly understood as a parent's direct responsibility.

The experience of caring for children is diminishing. Only 28% of households are actively involved in raising children (though many more have been and will be). About 16% of women born in 1924 were childless by the age of 45, while it is projected than 23% of women born in 1974 will be childless at 45. The mean age of women at childbirth rose to 29 in 1999.[2]

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Children playing freely in open space has become less acceptable. Far fewer children walk to school – a decline from 67% in 1985 to 53% in 1997–9.[3] Fifty-seven per cent of the public think that children are more at risk from paedophiles than they used to be, a misconception that places further barriers – physical and emotional – between children and mainstream adult life .[4]

As childhood has become more privatised, contributions from others are expressed in contractual terms – paid-for childcare, an increasingly explicit agreement with schools to provide certain formal outcomes in return for parents guaranteeing their children's attendance, use of commercial services and so on. In many cases, there has been a substitution of professional services and care contracts for informal community arrangements. In 1991, there were 18,000 voluntarily run sessional playgroups in England. The most recent figures – for 1998 – show a fall to 15,700.[5]

Alongside this retreat of responsibility into families and contracts, private consumption has grown in scope and influence. 'Private toys' such as the PlayStation and the PC are used within the home, whereas the bicycle and roller skates were street and park toys. Even within the home, the television set in the bedroom – in 2001, nearly two-fifths (36%) of children under four years old watched TV in their rooms, compared to one-fifth (20%) two years before[6] – makes watching TV a private, rather than a family, experience for a child.

Privatisation may also be increasing the pressure on children to perform by reinforcing the sense that parents will be judged by their children's individual progress. Children are starting school earlier, and the pressure to achieve at every stage of education continues to grow.[7]

Risk aversion

One effect of this privatisation of responsibility is that families appear to be becoming more risk averse. For example, the debate over childhood immunisation has shifted dramatically in character. Thirty years ago, there was a consensus that children should be vaccinated to create group immunity to childhood diseases. Parents were not unaware of the risks – there were agonising stories at the time of the possible effects of the whooping cough vaccine on some children – but the risk was accepted as part of a community responsibility for the safety of all children. The

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campaigns at the time were for compensation for the unlucky families, not for a completely safe vaccine. As parents are held responsible for their children's behaviour and prospects in increasingly direct ways, they respond by demanding certainty about what their children will experience in return.

Four out of five adults believe that life for children in Britain is more dangerous that it used to be.[8] So, even though the risk of abduction or murder of children is no greater than it was, and the likelihood of children dying from injury has been falling steadily since the 1970s,[9] parents have become much more reluctant to let children play outside unaccompanied.

> *She's kind and she's happy and she lets us do most things. But not dangerous things like going round the block because people could come and take us.*
>
> Zainab (age 8) talking to Libby Brooks about her grandmother, *Guardian*, 2 July 2002

To make risk assessments, parents need to know what their children are doing and where they are at all times. They also need information, fuelling the appetite for research and opinion on children's safety, intellectual development, health in the womb and so on. However, this information is inevitably contradictory and potentially overwhelming. It is impossible to eliminate risk entirely from a child's upbringing, so the result is that parents use what information they can manage to reduce risk to a minimum.

However, our general understanding of risk is often skewed. According to international league tables, the UK's injury death record for children is among the lowest of the 15 most populous OECD countries.[10] The mortality rates for the under-5s in the UK have declined steadily since the 1960s: 27 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1960 compared to 7 in 2000.[11] Only four in every million children are murdered each year, and mainly at the hands of parents and relatives, not by the strangers who are more feared.[12]

It is not the children who are frightened of risks. In fact, some would suggest that adults' fear relates to children's lack of it. For example, children argue that they would enjoy themselves more in commercial playgrounds if the equipment were more challenging, whereas adults are more concerned

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with making playgrounds safer.[13] The conflict between adults' 'guardian' mentality and the desire to give children freedom in which to learn their own lessons runs through every aspect of children's lives.

Risk minimisation does not bring universal safety. The cost of compliance drives up the cost of many services – for example, making childcare less accessible. The children of poorer families – with less control of their environment and less able to afford organised activities – are much more likely to have accidents than children in other social groups. Children with parents in unskilled manual jobs are three or four times more likely to die than those whose parents are in skilled non-manual work.[14] There are also increased risks for children who break away from adult controls. The accident rate among 12-year-old girls – starting secondary school and crossing roads unaccompanied for the first time – is an example of this.[15]

Overall, children face far fewer and less grave risks than in the past. Some risks may have increased or new ones may have been created, but they often do not compare with the gravity and scale of the risks that children encountered in the past. But perhaps because things have become safer, our perceptions and standards have also changed. As a result, social perception is often completely out of step with reality.

Cause of death (under 19 years old)	Average number per year in the UK	Source
Suicide (age: 15–24)	96 per 100,000 boys and 20 per 100,000 girls 1999: an annual total of approximately 1,000	Jonathan Bradshaw (ed), The Well-being of Children in the UK (Save the Children, 2002)
Road traffic accidents	260 killed, 6,600 seriously injured (average 1994–8)	Department for Transport
Cot death	190	Office for National Statistics, 2001

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Suffocation	139	*Injury Prevention* (London: British Medical Association, 1998)
Poisoning	124	*Injury Prevention* (London: British Medical Association, 1998)
Drowning	92	*Injury Prevention* (London: British Medical Association, 1998)
Murder (age: 0–15; in England and Wales) (usually by known person)	81 (average 1995–2000)	Criminal Statistics: England and Wales, Home Office
Leukaemia (age: 5–14)	76	Office for National Statistics, 2001
Killed on railway lines – trespassing/suicide (age: under 16)	7	Chief Inspector of Railways, Annual Reports on Railway Safety
Abduction and murder by stranger	6	Home Office
Abduction not resulting in death (usually by a family member)	273 (2001)	Julie Bindel, *Guardian*, 16 August 2002
Drowning of under-fives in domestic bath	5	Department for Trade and Industry
Fatalities on school trips	3 (average since 1985)	Adventure Activities Licensing Authority

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Colonisation

Colonisation,[16] a term to describe intensive adult-based supervision, agenda setting, and influence over children's lives, is a trend arising from privatisation, risk aversion and the reach of modern communications.

Colonisation affects the majority of children – those who spend all their non-school time in organised activities as much as those who spend this time in front of the television or PlayStation. The school playground is not exempt from adult control – some US schools are banning 'recess' because of the dangers faced by children playing traditional games. In the UK, breaks are becoming shorter, and there are more rules.

Children are often the focus of the CCTV surveillance industry, with increasing numbers of cameras in schools and other areas where children are. Professor Kevin Warwick of Reading University has recently implanted a micro chip in a child that, in the case of abduction, would enable his or her exact location to be pinpointed. Parents give mobile phones to their children to 'keep them safe' – perhaps unaware that their offspring are now much more likely to become victims of robbery. Even babies' time is becoming increasingly programmed with the help of a multitude of practical guides and educational programmes, including the best-selling American import *Baby Einstein*, a video that exposes infants to classical music, poetry and foreign languages.

One recent survey found that 66% of adults agreed that children spend too much time at home because of safety issues.[17] Research such as that contained in the *Play Survey* indicates that participation in unstructured play has decreased over time.[18]

There are two main reasons why colonisation by parents might reduce children's quality of life. First, it increases the level of pressure and programming applied to children's time and reduces the scope for self-directed time, imagination and exploration. One study in the United States has shown that children who show early signs of extreme timidity are helped by parents who encourage them to broach the object of their fear, rather than by parents who use the opposite tactic of shielding the children from the things that upset them. The timid children who had not been able or encouraged to shake off their fears were more likely, at age 10, to cry easily, be mistrustful, over-react angrily to mild frustrations and be sulky or whiny.[19]

Another reason why parents' colonisation is unhelpful is that parents are likely, for understandable reasons, to focus mainly on those aspects of

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their children's behaviour that are under their control and, apparently, to screen out those that that are not. The result is that parents are unsure of how to manage risk in shared settings, such as in parks or on school trips, and are over-protective about certain perceived risks whose threat has been magnified by the media, by the occurrence of individual cases or by their immediacy.

Ultimately, colonisation reduces the child's opportunities to control his or her own relationship with time and space. It is not just an issue of parents taking direct control over individual children, but also of other forces in the wider society exerting greater influence, intruding more directly into childhood experience. Probably the most important manifestation of this is commercialisation.

Commercialisation

Wealth and living standards have improved hugely for most of the UK population over the last 30 years. Consequently many children have more to spend – and more to spend it on. A study in 2000 found that children in the UK had a total of £73 million at their disposal when gifts, pocket money and earnings from paper rounds and other odd jobs were combined. The boys' mean income per week was £6.08 and the girls' was £6.09 – a overall 61-pence rise in one year.[20]

The fact that children have more money to spend, as well as their role in family spending decisions and as a future generation of adult consumers, make children the targets of commercial pressures. Children are part of a visible 'pay and display' culture, watching and copying their celebrity idols and consuming accordingly. A walk round any large supermarket reveals the explosion of child-targeted (and child-height-merchandised) products, ranging from Bob the Builder yoghurts to glittery toothpaste. Marketeers have devised new categories – for instance, 'kidults', 'middlescents' and 'tweenagers' – to deliver goods and services to children who do not like to be called as such.[21] In the US, 'tweenagers' have their very own gender-specific TV stations: 'Fox Boys' and 'Fox Girls'. Some corporations are now targeting even adult goods at children – from cars to televisions. Children's magazines, such as *Girl Talk*, *Just 17*, *Match* and the *Beano*, and children's literature are flourishing and serve a distinct (strongly gendered) children and young people's culture. Twenty-two per cent of 7- to 10-year-olds still read the *Beano*. [22]

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Children themselves are very aware of the influence of the private sector on their lives: just over half (53%) believe that large companies such as Nike, Coca-Cola and Microsoft have a strong influence on their day-to-day lives, compared with two-fifths (40%) who say that the government has.[23]

Many children living in poverty report anxiety about being different from their peers in terms of what they can afford to buy and the activities they can afford to take part in. There is also evidence that mothers of children living in poverty sacrifice their own welfare to compensate for the material disadvantages that their children would otherwise face.[24]

Commercialisation has been criticised for distorting images of beauty and success and for promoting the unhealthy. Ninety-nine per cent of food and drink products advertised during Saturday morning children's television programmes contain little or no nutritional value; 77 per cent of parents want to see a ban on such adverts.[25] A recent report, published in the *American Journal of Pediatrics*, concluded that 'a TV in the child's bedroom is the strongest marker of increased risk of being overweight'.

The rise of the child consumer has also contributed to the partial blurring of adult and child roles. Pop groups such as S Club, S Club Juniors and Atomic Kitten are followed by younger and younger fans. Make-up, perfume and designer clothes are increasingly bought for and worn by children.

On the adult side, the mushrooming nostalgia industry has created phenomena such as the websites www.friendsreunited.co.uk and www.schooldisco.com. Cartoons and adult toys such as scooters and computer games are easily integrated into our lives. The use of childhood toys and roles as playthings for adult lifestyles is another form of colonisation.

These trends are sometimes exaggerated. Saatchi & Saatchi's estimate of premature ageing in children – so that the target age for buying toys falls by one year in every five – has a logical limit. The popularity among school-age children of the BBC-TV's CBeebies, intended for pre-school children, suggests that children are not always yearning to be older.

> *Twelve sounds nice and 13 sounds horrible. I want to be 12.*
>
> Isabel (age 12) talking to Libby Brooks, *Guardian*, 3 July 2002

But, as Rowan Williams has argued, where children are in the same market commercially and socially there is potential for a kind of rivalry to be

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acted out between generations.[26] Aggressive marketing to children of adult goods shows the same impatience with childhood as fast-track education techniques. However, adult fretting about precocious children wearing sparkly nail varnish and listening to manufactured pop may be misplaced in the face of more damaging forms of colonisation that give children inadequate opportunities to shape and enjoy their own lives.

Although children's greater purchasing is partly a reflection of greater democracy in the family, conflict in families over purchases, bullying and teasing in school over material possessions, and a constant pressure for greater consumption can all easily undermine quality of life. Most importantly, the dominance of commercial products and consumption can arguably produce a fragile, unbalanced sense of belonging to the wider world if other aspects of this relationship – such a sense of belonging to the natural environment, a strong cultural identity and so on – become weaker.

Despite the positive impact on some aspects of quality of life contained in these changes, the overall effect seems to be a diminished space – culturally, psychologically and physically – for children to occupy with confidence, and greater confusion about what, if anything, the distinctive character of childhood is or should be.

Other changes

The broad trends of privatisation, colonisation and commercialisation stand out as new – and partially negative – aspects of the landscape of childhood. But they have taken shape amid a whole series of other changes that also affect children's experience and prospects profoundly.

This next section outlines the major changes – in social diversity, the family, the economy, the environment, health and crime – that have radically altered the landscape of children's lives over the last 30 years.

Social diversity

Nearly 10% of British children come from ethnic minorities,[27] a greater proportion than adults. The concentration of minority ethnic communities in cities has contributed to an ongoing urban/rural split between cosmopolitan cities and a more monocultural rural Britain – a trend that was already recorded in 19th-century London by Henry Mayhew in his *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–62). Disability

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is also disproportionately present in childhood as medical improvements have led to an increase in the number of children who do not die but continue to live, albeit with disabilities.

Diversity in childhood is also about lifestyles. Children now experience greater diversity in the locations in which they spend their time. Nearly one-third of all children use some form of care after school.[28] The range of family types has increased, and more children now live 'transnational childhoods', moving regularly between countries and households.[29]

Amid this landscape, opinions of what is good for children have also become more diverse. Personalised attitudes towards quality of life – parenting, good food, discipline, education – affect not only different family groups, but also individual children whose mother, father, child carer, teacher and siblings may hold different beliefs about the same topic.

Instead of mourning a perceived loss of simplicity and innocence, we need to accept the reality of a new diversity without losing sight of those common resources on which children still depend. The challenge is to forge common well-being out of individual diversity, without imposing a single, monolithic story line about what is good. This means finding new ways to create and strengthen shared commitments and reciprocal obligations.

The family

In 2001, 80% of children lived in a family with two parents (including about 6% in stepfamilies). It is estimated that around one in four children will experience a change in their family structure during the course of their childhood. About 25% of children whose parents divorced in 2000 were under the age of five; about 70% were 10 years old or younger.[30]

The increase in divorce and separation has created much confusion over what is best for the child. It used to be assumed that parents almost always agreed on the interests of the child and that the state would only intervene in cases of neglect or cruelty. When (separated) parents cannot agree, the individual child's interests have to be interpreted by the state, through the law courts.

Approximately 160,000 children a year have their care and parenting decided by the courts. Of these, 60% are under the age of 11. The increase in the number of interpretations of children's interests (and the even more numerous private agreements by separated parents) has established the idea

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of interpreting a child's interests beyond the definitions set down by family relationships – that the interests of *each* child are different and individual. The Family Law Act 1996 introduced the concept of mediation meetings and reinforced the need for children's views to be taken into account. In reality, however, there are very limited circumstances in which the wishes of children are gathered and heard by the court, even though the paramount decision that the court must make is what is in the 'best interests' of the child.

Family restructuring is often a source of considerable stress for children. Around 22% of children living in stepfamilies at the age of 15 have run away from home and stayed away for at least one night, compared to 14% of those in lone-parent families and 2% of those living in two-parent families.[31]

Outcomes for children who live without a parent (usually a father) are worse than for children growing up in two-parent families. Children from lone-parent families are almost twice as likely as children from intact families to have no qualifications by the time they are 33 and are more likely to smoke, to become teenage parents and to score poorly on measures of self esteem.[32]

However, it is certainly not the case that family restructuring is inevitably bad for children. Many researchers agree that divorce cannot be seen as solitary malaise but is better viewed as an event that is often, but not always, accompanied by other factors that can impact negatively on children. So, for example, the fact that lone-parent families are more than twice as likely as couples with children to have no savings is likely to have a deleterious effect on children's future chances.

Newer research has often focused on the pragmatic reality of the 'new family' and the adaptation of children, and other family members, within it. A study conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation of children of separated parents found that over half had some positive feelings about the split, such as having an exciting 'other life' with a different bedroom, new toys and new relationships.[33] Despite this, the emotional effort of keeping co-parenting arrangements 'fair' between households can sometimes take a toll on children.[34]

The decline of the traditional, self-sacrificing maternal role seems to have coincided with an increased tendency to treat children as individuals with more say over their lives.

The family is highly regarded by children. In a MORI poll for the

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National Family and Parenting Institute in 2000, three-quarters of young people aged 11 to 16 years old said that their parents were always there for them when they needed them, and two-thirds said that they felt loved and cared for. Similarly a BMRB survey in 2001[35] of children aged between 7 and 10 showed that the most popular heroes of most children are their parents. Of the 6,000 children surveyed, 38% selected their parents over 33 other choices as the people they most admire. The survey showed that older children were less likely to select teachers as heroes than younger children, but parents remained equally popular with different age groups.

> *The most important person in my life is my mum. She understands me the most.*
>
> Cameron (age 13) in Networks and Neighbourhoods: children's and young people's perspectives (Health Development Agency, 2001)

A recent study by the Future Foundation found that families now work more like a network or team than the traditional hierarchical unit. Just as in modern organisations, the emphasis in the new family is on flexibility and multiple roles.[36]

These changes have accompanied the erosion of traditional, long-term social contracts within and between generations. This is a logical response – a society based on individual freedom and responsibility needs to educate its children as individuals, not as types party to a non-existent social contract. So families consult children more, the parental role is less authoritarian and the private sector responds to children as active consumers rather than communicating primarily through their parents.

Not only is the new family characterised by greater negotiation, but also by practical adaptation to complex circumstances. For parents in paid work, a common approach to the childcare challenges created by dual work is the 'double shift' system whereby parents work at different times. According to a Daycare Trust survey, 61% of families include a parent who works in the early morning, evenings, nights or weekends.[37] Fathers and grandparents are key carers when mothers are at work.

New employment arrangements have given rise to the oft-quoted media-created image of time-poor parents unable to devote proper attention to their children – a failing that is usually twinned with providing children with compensatory treats and toys. In fact, there is

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plenty of evidence to suggest that parents are spending more time with their children than in the recent past. One survey showed that activities including reading, leisure activities, socialising and discussing problems have more than tripled according to the adult respondents' comparisons to their own childhood experiences with their parents. According to this survey, the average parent today spends 85 minutes per child per day as compared to 25 minutes in the 1970s. A greater involvement of fathers in child-rearing and the more than doubling of parents accompanying their children to school were both cited as contributing factors.[38]

Other aspects of family change, such as greater geographical dispersal of family ties, have not led to a breakdown of the extended family, as some commentators predicted. Although extended families are less likely to live nearby, extended family links are still extremely strong. The Future Foundation found a large network of blood (and non-blood) ties, facilitated by new communications technologies.[39]

However, not all families are happy families. The most terrible things that happen to children – abuse, murder, abduction – are much more likely to happen at the hands of a family member, rather than the strangers that are more feared. In the year 2000, around 75,000 children and young people were being looked after by the state because their families were unable to look after them. In England, the rate of children being looked after has fallen over the last 24 years from 7.6 per 1,000 in 1978 to 4.6 per 1,000 in 1993. There has been a slight rise in recent years with 5.1 per 1,000 in 2000, possibly because of a greater number of unaccompanied children arriving in England seeking asylum.[40]

The fall in numbers of children entering care is thought to be due to a wide variety of factors including shorter stays in maternity wards and psychiatric hospitals, more use of home helps in the case of parental illness and a general discouragement of using care as a response to delinquency.[41]

Outcomes for looked-after children in terms of mental health, qualifications and employment prospects are notoriously poor. The aim has been to improve the quality for children through policies such as 'Quality Protects', and to improve links with children after they have turned 18.

The family remains the fundamental social unit and is still the most important thing in children's lives. While understanding children's quality

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of life requires us to view them as individuals with their own interests, none the less childhood is massively influenced by the nature, or absence, of family life.

The new economy

Children are typically seen as separate from economic life, but they are actually an important part of it. The informal economy surrounding family life, childcare and favour exchanges is estimated to be almost as large as the formal economy recorded in economic statistics.[42]

Children also bring adults together in environments where the informal economy grows. A study that looked at adults whose children were attending pre-school found that 24% had joined a local group or organisation since their children started attending pre-school and 17% took part in some form of community activity pressing for changes in the local area.[43]

Children are also active contributors to economic life in their own right. One-third of 10- to 16-year-olds have paid jobs.[44] Some sources estimate that between two-thirds and three-quarters of these are working illegally.[45] There are also an estimated 50,000 young carers in the UK – young people under the age of 18 who are helping to look after a parent with, for example, a physical disability or a mental health problem.[46]

Childcare: It is now the norm for women to have paid working lives. The proportion of those who have returned to work who are mothers of children aged under five has increased from 36% in 1988 to 50% in 1998.[47]

As a result, the size and importance of the childcare sector has grown massively, but the backlog of inadequacies are enormous. The growth of the childcare industry has created recruitment challenges greater than the shortages found in teaching and nursing. There is only one childcare place for every seven children under the age of eight. British parents pay the highest childcare bills in Europe[48] – the typical cost for a family with two children (one pre-school, the other school age) is £6,000 per year. Parents typically bear 93% of the total childcare costs. Yet childcare remains a low-paid, low-status job, with 40% of the existing workforce having little or no training.[49] Only 5% of workplaces offer nursery places[50] and only 4% of employees receive financial help from their employers to pay for childcare.[51]

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Cultural factors can also inhibit the effectiveness of employment policies. In a recent survey by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 50% of employees, including those with care responsibilities, were unaware of the family-friendly policies of their employers.[52] Many others will be unwilling, for a variety of reasons, to take up flexibility when it is offered.

Poverty: Greater wealth has also been accompanied by greater inequality of wealth. As Stein Ringen argues, children have lost out in the process of economic restructuring because of their lack of visibility and political power.[53]

Children are costly. A working mother with two children can lose around £140,000 in earnings over a lifetime.[54] In a world where economic circumstances are more closely related to individual earning power, and income transfers from the state are not automatically linked to average earnings, children are inevitably more likely to be poor than other groups in society.

Measuring child poverty is difficult. The accepted measure – income below 50% of the average – may illustrate a widening income gap rather than deepening absolute poverty. However, Britain performs badly in measures of both relative and absolute poverty when compared against other countries in the developed world. Unicef's league table of poverty in the developed world places Britain fourth from bottom in the relative poverty category (Italy, the US and Mexico are lower) and sixth from bottom in the absolute poverty category (beating only Italy, Spain the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland).[55]

In Britain, 1% of children do not have a bed to themselves and one in 20 mothers say that they sometimes go without food to meet the needs of their child.[56] For the poorest 20% of the population, spending on toys, children's clothing, shoes and fresh fruit was no higher in real terms in 1995/6 than in 1968. Children have now replaced pensioners as the poorest group in UK society.[57]

Within the UK, there are significant regional differences and evidence of regional deprivation. The highest proportion of children living in poverty (35%) is in Wales, and of all of the regions, London has the greatest income inequality.[58]

Poverty impacts on children's quality of life in many more ways than just income. Children living in poverty have poorer physical and mental

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health, poorer educational outcomes, and more injuries than richer children. In addition, they are more dependent than children in wealthier families on the public provision of services and facilities.

The new environment

For the great majority of children, the world they grow into now has a new and greatly expanded dimension. Not only do they explore their immediate physical environment, but they also have access to virtual and communications worlds that are, in some respects, interactive, are growing rapidly and are increasingly targeted at them.

There have also been major shifts in the way that children's time and space are managed.

Technology: More than half of children under the age of 16 have their own television sets, of which over one-third are pre-school children. One in seven children under the age of four have a video recorder. Young people in the UK spend more time watching television than anywhere in Europe.[59] In 2000, 42% of adults questioned believed that a computer was a necessity for their children, compared to 20% in 1995.[60] One research programme conducted across six cities found that the thumbs of the under-25s – so accustomed to using them to text message and play computer games – have overtaken their fingers as their hands' most muscled and dexterous digits.[61]

Surroundings: Outdoor space remains crucially important to children. A survey of children's usage of 'the street' in Northamptonshire found that young people aged 14–19 used the street as a social venue to meet friends more than five times a week.[62]

There are significant gender and racial differences in how children use public space. Boys typically have greater freedom to play outside, use bicycles and go to parks. In a survey carried out in Tower Hamlets, London, only 37% of Asian girls were allowed to play outside compared to 92% of Asian boys.[63]

Recent years have seen an upsurge in interest in consulting children about their surroundings. Children are now involved in regeneration projects where they are asked about their likes and dislikes of the public spaces they regularly use. One project involving Bangladeshi children in

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Camden[64] found that they ideally wanted separate spaces for boys and girls, and had major concerns about racism, safety and the police.

There have been some measures to combat the lack of space for children out of doors. Playing fields are now protected under Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. There is a new momentum surrounding the regeneration of green spaces sparked by the urban green spaces task force and the cross-cutting review on public spaces.

But the problem is still growing. School playing fields continue to be sold off, and the increase in road traffic is further inhibiting children's space. The British record on child pedestrian accident rates is poor, with 0.87 deaths per 100,000 children compared with 0.65 for Germany and 0.24 for Sweden.[65] It is the poorest children – those who do not have gardens to play in and whose parents do not have the lobbying power to get traffic-calming measures put in place – who are most affected. They are knocked down five times more often than their more affluent counterparts.[66]

Geography is a powerful metaphor for a wider issue – the space within which a child can be is physical, emotional, conceptual, virtual, social and political. Our tendency has been to enclose childhood, corralling it into dedicated spaces and institutions, when, in fact, we need to learn how to integrate it into the whole of society, without losing, ignoring or destroying its unique features and entitlements.

Health

Overall, children's health has improved over the last 30 years. Mortality rates for the under-fives in the UK have declined steadily since the 1960s (27 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1960 compared to 7 in 2000).[67] Rates for all types of childhood mortality have decreased substantially between 1981 and 1999 in England and Wales.[68] Smoking levels have fallen among children, and smoking in pregnancy has declined by almost one-third in the last 15 years. There have also been enormous improvements in dental health.

Traditional childhood illnesses such as measles and whooping cough are much less common, and virtually every child under the age of two is now immunised against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough and polio. Survival rates for cancer and cystic fibrosis have also dramatically improved.[69]

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However, there are new childhood diseases. Environmental health problems are a particular cause for concern. Asthma is now the most common chronic childhood disease in Britain. The reasons for this are unclear but may well be linked to exposure to outdoor and indoor pollution and allergens. The prevalence in other conditions commonly affecting children, such as eczema and allergies, is also worsening.[70]

Children's fitness and diet have deteriorated over the last couple of decades. There have been some moves to improve children's nutrition. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 gives the secretary of state the power to make regulations setting out compulsory minimum standards for school lunches. But despite this, problems with children's diets continue: 22% of children are obese, and there is an upward trend – the percentage of children who are obese doubled between 1974 and 1994.[71]

Mental health problems are also growing among children. According to the Office for National Statistics, 10% of children aged 5–15 had a mental disorder in 1999, and about 2% of 11- to 15-year-olds had tried to harm or kill themselves.[72]

The exact scope and reasons for the increase in mental health problems in children are controversial; some commentators claim that higher awareness – and, therefore, greater reporting – has led to the increase. Others blame factors as diverse as technological overload, lack of parental control, diet and lack of freedom.

Whatever the cause, there is compelling evidence to suggest that attitudes and services have not caught up with children's need for help in this area. There is still a great deal of denial in accepting that children suffer from mental illness. For instance, parents of children with an emotional (as opposed to physical) disorder are the group least likely to have asked family and friends for advice.[73]

This issue is increasingly recognised by government. Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are given special priority status in the NHS Plan. Priorities within CAMHSs include reducing suicide rates, particularly among such high-risk groups as gay male teenagers and Asian girls.[74]

It is significant that many of the new childhood diseases and problems – such as asthma, eczema, eating disorders, obesity, psychological distress, myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) and road injury

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– are either stress-related conditions or linked to poor public resources, such as clean air and safe streets.

Crime

A widespread perception has emerged, fuelled by extreme cases such as the murder of two-year-old James Bulger, that many children are out of control and that anti-social and criminal activity among the young is on the increase. In a poll taken in 2000, more than four out of every five adults (86%) thought that children were experimenting with drugs and sex at a much earlier age than in times past.[75]

However, there is reason to believe that the moral panic associated with youth crime may be an over-reaction. Data on criminal activity by children of 13 and under is quite sparse, which is not surprising since the average age at which offending begins is 13.5 for boys and 14 for girls.[76] However, there is evidence to suggest that there is no strong upward trend in offending. The crime reduction charity Nacro argues that 'the 1990s witnessed a reduction in detected youth crime',[77] and analysis of Home Office data concludes that there was no significant change. This is not to say that criminal activity is not a problem: one in every ten 12- and 13-year-old boys commits violent offences and one in five commits criminal damage. These figures suggest that child crime is a problem for both children and the wider society.[78]

There is some indication that persistent offending is increasing. In Scotland, the number of children under the age of 16 who were reported for 10 or more offences increased by 20% between 1998 and 2000.[79]

In some respects, lifestyle changes have facilitated the perception that crime is worse now than it was previously. At the time of the first British crime survey in 1982, the most widespread crime was the theft of milk bottles from the doorstep – a misdemeanour that has virtually disappeared since so many people now buy their milk from supermarkets. New crimes such as the theft of mobile phones – which disproportionally affect children and young people, in terms of both the perpetrators and the victims – are more serious offences. Similarly, many 999 calls are the result of young people causing a nuisance such as playing football in the street and kicking the ball against cars. Arguably, children have always played football in the street, but 50 years ago, they weren't full of parked cars.

Children are particularly victims of an exaggerated fear of crime. Despite

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the fact that, in 1999, over three-quarter's of total crime was committed by over-18s, there is a widely held belief that the young are responsible for the majority of crime. In fact, 28% of people think that young people are responsible for more than half of all crimes, and a further 55% believe that crime is shared equally by adults and young people .[80]

There is some evidence that there is a rise in the number of children using illegal drugs or buying cigarettes or alcohol before they are legally able to do so. In England, 16% of girls and 19% of boys are using cannabis at the age of 15, with higher levels reported in Scotland and lower levels in Northern Ireland.[81] Around one in five boys and nearly one in four girls are smoking cigarettes regularly by the age of 15. However, some reports show that, in England, the prevalence of smoking in secondary-school children has remained fairly static of the last two decades. [82]

Overall, a clear pattern emerges from this broad survey of change. Many of the historical factors that blighted children's lives were hugely reduced or eliminated over the last generation. Poor children, as a group, are most likely to suffer other forms of deprivation and risk. But the changing contours of British society have almost hemmed children into spaces and roles to which they have trouble adjusting.

Children are increasingly dependent on their own parents to negotiate and access new opportunities in safe, supported ways. New types of experience and patterns of behaviour are generating their own hazards, to which society has not yet generated effective cultural or institutional responses. In particular, children remain particularly dependent on the quality of commons – resources that are not privately owned, that are accessed freely and that are dependent for their upkeep and replenishment on common commitments and public investment. As society has become more individualised, wealth-driven and diverse, the quality of many of these commons has deteriorated.

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3. Quality of life for children – a new vision

Over the past generation, the changes to children's lives have largely taken place without a positive, shared vision of what we adults want for them.

We have viewed children's lives through a narrow and limited lens, often looking into the past. Most often, it is the traditional right who bemoan the loss of a shared view of childhood and family life, or social conservatives who argue that the solution is some form of return to the forms of traditional, hierarchical authority that structured family and community relations in the past. It may be that past periods of social history have been conditioned by a single, dominant idea of the good life, although there has always been more diversity than official accounts allow for. But in any case, that is not the social reality now, and is unlikely to be accepted as legitimate or followed in practice by most people – and for good reasons. Pluralism and diversity confer many different benefits, but they do not release us from shared responsibilities.

Our societal response has encouraged fragmentation – pulling apart different elements to the point where it can be difficult to understand, or live, a fulfilling and productive life as a child, or to take on the challenges of preparation and transition that it also requires.

Is it possible to create a framework, a way of viewing children's interests, that will encompass so many different influences? This is where quality of life may be able to help.

This chapter sets out a framework for analysis, using quality of life as a foundational idea. It begins by establishing the status of quality of life as a concept, and discusses its unique and neglected link to children. It then uses the emerging definition to evaluate how children are really doing in the new context.

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The chapter concludes by highlighting three major areas that should become the central focus for a concerted effort to improve the quality of children's lives.

Quality of life: what is it?

In 1988, a theologian, his son and a World Bank economist – respectively, John and Clifford Cobb and Herman Daly – devised an Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW). The intention was to give a clearer picture of quality of life in the United States than that suggested by conventional GDP (gross domestic product) measures. Their results were dramatic. They showed that, while the US economy had been growing steadily since the 1950s, decline in environmental and social conditions meant that the net gain in terms of quality of life was much less than material living standards implied.[83]

The Cobb–Daly initiative was one strand of a whole host of new indicators, indexes and auditing techniques aiming to give a more balanced picture of living conditions around the world. In 1995, the World Bank Wealth Index redefined the wealth of nations in environmental, social and human terms as well as financial. In 1999, the Dow Jones Sustainability Group Index was launched, closely followed by London's FTSE4Good in 2001. The United Nations Human Development Index, which includes data on poverty gaps and human rights, is now widely used as an indicator on government performance across the globe. In the UK, the academic Andrew Oswald continues to interrogate the relationship between happiness and income.

A recent analysis from the Strategy Unit in the UK Cabinet Office states that life satisfaction is highest among richer countries and those that are historically Protestant, and lowest amongst former Communist states. There is also a relationship in developing countries between national income and levels of life satisfaction, though this appears to break down once countries reach a certain level of development – a turning point that the UK could be said to have reached in the 1950s.

Quality of life, as an idea, has growing political currency. Voluntary quality-of-life indicators for local authorities have been developed, and around 80 authorities began using them in 2001/02. The exercise was prompted by the new powers given to local authorities in the Local

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Government Act 2000 to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their area and their new duty to work with partners to prepare a community strategy. [84]

What quality of life can bring

The overarching goal of a quality-of-life framework for children can be described, partly, as achieving a holism in our understanding of what children need *and* in our capacity to provide it. As we have seen, one of the key characteristics of recent change has been its fragmenting effect on the circumstances and experiences of children and their families. We can be much less confident than our counterparts of even a generation ago that the various supports, resources and institutions that will impact on children's well-being will work in concert to produce a rounded, supportive and fulfilling framework for their development. In fact, parents are today under increasing pressure to produce such a framework themselves, often against the odds.

Part of the key to giving children a good quality of life is people creating their own social networks and co-producing the outcomes. When this happens, an increase in use or demand doesn't only place more pressure on public resources allocated, but actually helps to replenish the stock of trust and legitimacy that such facilities need to maintain themselves.

Quality of life helps us redirect our focus towards the capacity to provide for children. There is more to this than simply having the resources to do so, because 'providing for children' is not exclusively linked to the idea of financial disadvantage. It applies to all children, all of the time. Therefore it has the potential to increase commitment to children more widely, while also helping to solve some of the more complex problems of the neediest children. Although it does not only apply to poorer children, quality of life does embrace the aim for equality between different children, between children and adults, and between current and future opportunities.

Quality of life aims to balance issues of risk against other goods. It values freedom, learning, play and happiness as much as it values the absence of harm. It challenges the colonisation of children's lives, values the state of childhood and views it as a quarter of an average life rather than as a production process for the future.

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The quality-of-life concept places the tangible and the physical on an equal footing with the intangible and the emotional. A quality-of-life measure would include indicators on such factors as the quality of experience and the strength of local trust. It aims to stem some of the negative effects of privatising responsibility for children by promoting and supporting the invisible links and networks that make a difference to their lives. This necessitates a qualitative understanding of what children think and feel as well as raising the importance of the specifics of a localised context.

Finally, quality of life builds on the strengths of the family. It is too easy, in public policy discussions, to focus on what formal public institutions do and to downplay the significance of the family in determining the environment in which children grow up. Not only is the family the most direct and powerful set of influences on children, but it also exemplifies the practical processes of juggling and adaptation that are needed to deal with multiple needs, pressures and opportunities. Families, when they work well, implicitly understand the balance between tangible practical provision for children and the emotional nurturing and encouragement needed for them to grow. Families are also at the crux of balancing between individual and group needs and identities.

Pitfalls

Although quality of life offers a potentially strong framework for thinking about children's lives, there are also unresolved problems with the approach.

There are lots of different interpretations of quality of life. Thinking, data and indicators on quality of life don't fit neatly under one label, let alone into one discipline or accepted set of methods. Relevant work on quality of life uses a plethora of different terms including sustainable development, liveability, happiness, well-being and life satisfaction. It is also closely linked to other ideas such as social capital and community renewal.

Despite much activity around measuring these factors, quality of life has not translated into a radical political idea. Its associated targets do not look that different from other governmental targets. Indicators of quality of life exist alongside a vast range of other targets and measures,

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and are rarely integrated in a way that could have a shaping effect on the behaviour of service providers. They are not grouped into the right kind of 'basket', and the different and disparate agencies producing elements of quality of life for children do not relate to the framework in any direct way.

The aggregation of quality-of-life measures at national level is useful for some purposes, but does not provide a guide for local action. Indicators need to be formative, in the sense that they can prompt adjustments in priorities and allocations, as well as behaviour, and these judgements need to be made at the local level.

Another difficulty with actualising the quality-of-life idea as a framework for change is that it is so difficult to interpret for children.

Quality of life for adults is very often assessed partly in terms of autonomy or independence, such as in the calculation of possible benefits arising from medical treatment. This poses a particular challenge for analysing quality of life in relation to children, because their autonomy and independence should not be automatically maximised. In fact, one of the defining features of childhood as a formal status is dependence on the provision and guidance of others. The other danger, exacerbated by uncertainty about how far to trust the judgement of children themselves, is that external assessments of quality of life often tend to focus too heavily on factors that can be physically identified and counted.

Indicators that might inform a better understanding of quality of life for children are even sparser and less informative. Local authorities' voluntary well-being measures invariably include child measures – but they typically reflect our fears over children and risk, performance and anti-social behaviour (e.g. infant mortality, qualifications, teenage pregnancies and school truancies) rather than being genuinely qualitative.

Children's quality of life may not have been defined because it is seen as an adjunct of adults' quality of life. Of course, children's quality of life is inextricably linked to that of adults and families, but it is also distinctive. Children's quality of life has a special relationship with the future, and children themselves have a greater vested interest in what the future world will be like. They also, when compared to adults, have quite different behaviours and psychological requirements – for instance, their need to

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play, to explore risks and boundaries and to develop personal identities and cultural connections rapidly.

> *Currently the UK does not monitor the well-being of its children adequately.*
>
> J Bradshaw, 'Poverty: the outcomes for children', ESRC Children 5–16 Research Briefing, no 18 (2000)

The final challenge for implementing quality of life for children is that it will mean a difficult gear change in our mentality towards them – it will mean letting go.

For government, it will mean further letting go of the idea that the quality of children's lives and future success can be engineered by a central authority. For parents, it will mean letting go of the tendency to colonise their children's lives. For non-parents, it will mean letting go of the idea that other people's children are someone else's responsibility.

There is a risk that quality of life could fall into an over-romantic idea of a trusting community taking responsibility for all children. However, it can be argued that these drawbacks can be overcome and, as the next chapter will show, need to be to solve some of children's worst problems.

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4. How are children doing?

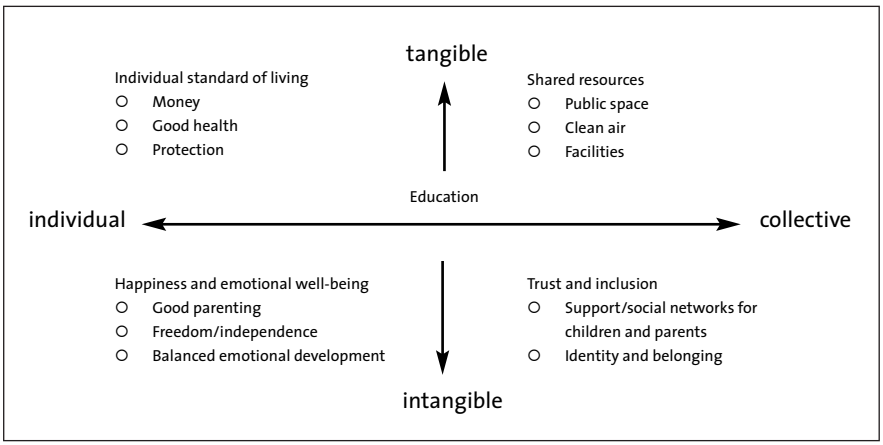
The quality-of-life framework

To achieve an integrated overview of children's quality of life, we have developed a framework for understanding it. Quality of life for children can be mapped along two key dimensions

- Individual → collective
- Tangible (i.e. what is easy to see, measure, describe) → intangible (i.e. diverse, qualitative, emotional)

A good quality of life for children can be seen to be the result of a successful, balanced combination of the four quadrants. Typically, when problems have arisen in children's lives, we have tended to prioritise the individual above the collective, and the tangible above the intangible.

In the following, each quadrant is discussed separately, though clearly there are areas of overlap.



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Standard of living and prospects (tangible/individual)

The child's standard of living and prospects relates to individual circumstances in terms of health, wealth, safety and physical environment. These, in turn, can relate to the standard of housing, the level of safety and protection and a child's current and future financial prospects.

The arena of the individual standard of living is where quality of life for children has most improved. Children now have a good chance of surviving serious disease; the majority of households have goods such as televisions and fridge freezers; and death from accidents and injuries have been falling steadily for decades. The Children's Act 1989 has ensured that quality and safety in public settings for children – such as nurseries and schools – are much improved.

In broad terms, levels of educational achievement have also increased significantly. Early-years and primary education have been the subject of rigorous new standards and higher expectations. SATs and the numeracy and literacy hours aim to equip children with basic skills at an early age. More young people are leaving school with better qualifications and fewer are leaving with none.[85]

Increases in wealth, the use of the law to drive up minimum standards of performance and compliance, and improvements in both public health and medical technology are probably the most important factors in explaining this progress. Government action through social policy, including wealth redistribution, is also very important. But the unremitting focus on individual standards of living and performance may also be producing unwanted side-effects.

First, scrutiny of his or her 'success' increases the stress on the individual child. A study by the Department of Health has shown that it is the 11- to 15-year-olds who do not think they are going to live up to the expectations of others in terms of examination performance who are most likely to use drugs.[86] In addition, the colonisation phenomenon described earlier, where adult supervision reduces children's control of their own time and space, is unlikely to be beneficial to their developing a sense of autonomy.

The ones most affected by the controlling emphasis on tangible needs are middle-class children whose parents have the most resources to direct towards their children's success. This, in turn, creates a 'cycle of affluence' that pressurises the individual child while also turning attention away

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from other, more invisible quality-of-life needs such as emotional balance, trust or belonging. So, for example, eating disorders are more likely to affect the daughters of managerial or professional parents, and children who are always driven about in cars are less likely to develop independent social networks in the local neighbourhood.

Second, when children's quality of life is based so heavily on intensive individual protection, there is a greater danger that, when they fall through the gaps of control, care and protection (e.g. failing at school, getting lost in public places, being neglected by a parent), they will fall more heavily. This is most visible in the poor outcomes for children who are looked after by the state, who play truant and who are financially badly off. For example, children who truant from school are much more likely to go on to economic inactivity and criminal convictions.[87] It is also manifest in cases such as Victoria Climbié's, where maltreatment and abuse can apparently flourish if it takes place at a sufficient distance from public institutions and professions.

In summary, now that quality of life in the areas of education, health, wealth and protection has improved for most, if not all children, we need to shift attention to some of the other aspects of quality of life – such as informal networks of support or collective investment in children's needs. If our energies continue to be directed at higher targets, ever more stringent protection rules and higher expectations, we may exacerbate some of the problems we are already seeing, as well as alienate some of those we seek to help most.

Shared resources (tangible/collective)

Quality of life is not just about individual success. It also depends on the quality of the shared resources, or the 'commons', on which children rely. This quadrant relates to the things that children access that are collective resources. These include local shops, clean air, green space, doctor's surgeries and transport.

Much of children's quality of life rests on the fact that they are more dependent than adults on free resources – such as space to play, education, healthy environments and social safety nets.

There have also been some improvements in this area of children's quality of life, though they have been patchy and, in some cases, the quality of public goods has declined. Some facilities for children have

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improved in quality and quantity. For instance, libraries now have computer access and after-school clubs; theme parks designed for children have sprung up all over the country; and all four-year-olds and a growing number of three-year-olds are entitled to a place at pre-school where they can engage in play and learning.

However, many of those shared goods are under threat. Children's interests in a range of sectors are often overlooked and overridden by more powerful political lobbies. Land-usage patterns have tended to restrict children's access to public space. Transport methods used by children and young people, such as buses, walking and cycling, are often subject to under-investment compared to transport methods used by (wealthier) adults such as trains and cars.[88] Although childcare is a boom industry, childworkers are still among the worst-paid and least-valued workers in the country. Employers rarely contribute to childcare costs, and the prevalent culture of long working hours in many workplaces discriminates against families. The children's commercial sector is thriving, but much of the associated merchandising – cartoon characters on poor-quality food, for example – is manipulative in its aims.

Similarly, long-term sustainability issues – for instance, clean air or sustainable fishing stocks – in which children have a greater interest than adults are often overlooked for more short-term and expedient measures. For example, generational accounting – a term that refers to the financial burden that current fiscal policies are likely to place on future generations – has highlighted how spending patterns tend to neglect the future needs of young children. According to a study by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research, the UK's generational imbalance is low compared to other countries such as the US and Japan. Nevertheless, British children will still face higher lifetime net tax rates than their parents.[89]

Environmental degradation affects children more than it does adults. The UK's Environment Agency has stated that there are clear links between the environment and health, and it seems likely that the prevalence of illnesses commonly affecting children, such as eczema and allergies, are linked to exposure to outdoor and indoor pollution. Children are more sensitive to pollutants than adults for a variety of reasons – they break down chemicals less easily, they breathe and drink more for their weight and they breathe closer to the ground.[90]

Political manoeuvres to improve children's collective lot are not always

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sustainable or popular. Proposals for a 20-miles-per-hour speed limit in residential areas, as suggested in a recent report by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), have been resisted by the motoring lobby. The possibility of new children's centres becoming an extra arm of the welfare state has been only tentatively welcomed at a time when other forms of universal provision, such as health and schools, are encountering serious capacity problems.

While some shared resources used by children have been enriched, there also seems to be a clear pattern here of simultaneous under-investment and appropriation. The allocation and protection of shared resources depends heavily on the political process, and it appears that children, as a group, are under-represented. This issue will be explored further in later chapters.

Happiness and emotional resilience (intangible/individual)

It is increasingly accepted that the intangible and the subjective influence quality of life considerably. This next section deals with happiness and emotional resilience, where some of the most joyful and most painful aspects of children's lives lie. The most important elements of quality of life, they are also subject to some of the most worrying trends.

There is some evidence that emotional well-being among children and young people is worsening. One recent study found that the level of life satisfaction has risen for young people in almost every European country *except* Britain.[91] ChildLine, established in 1986, has just counselled its millionth child. Bullying especially seems to be a key worry: one in ten children are thought to be bullied at school today. Of the children who called ChildLine contemplating suicide in 1999, 48% cited bullying as the main cause. In addition, one in nine young people run away and stay out overnight before the age of 16.[92]

Happiness and emotional resilience in children are difficult to attribute to individual causes, but they are certainly linked to the quality of a child's relationships with parents and other adults, the ability of the child to progress normally through stages of psychological development, and the propensity of those surrounding the child to deal with problems if and when they occur.

We know, of course, that parenting is crucial. A University of Washington team found that when parents are emotionally able –

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especially in their own partnership - their children show a range of positive behaviours such as being better at handling their own emotions, are more effective at soothing themselves when they get upset, and get upset less often. Not only this, but the children were found to be more relaxed biologically, with lower levels of stress hormones.[93] The importance of developing secure attachments early in life has been highlighted in the IPPR's publication on The First Twelve Months, which links early experiences with future opportunities and well-being.

We know, too, that emotional development in childhood is a critical dimension of efficacy and responsibility later in life, as well as – among other things – a contributor to happiness and life satisfaction, and a predictor of success at work.[94]

Although we know emotional development and self-image are crucial to quality of life for children, both in the present and in the future, a lot of our knowledge is comparatively recent and has not been transferred into practice or into life's institutions. Laboratory experiments, as well as other evidence, show that a sense of control is directly linked to well-being ratings. These findings help explain why those in relatively low social or work positions have a lower sense of control in their lives.[93] But although we know the relationship between a sense of control and well-being, the colonisation on children's lives – effectively a curtailing of control – continues in many respects.

Similarly, IQ is still the dominant measuring tool for children, even though we know that it is only one of a range of factors determining life success, and is less important than others in determining overall happiness. As Daniel Goleman argues is his book *Emotional Intelligence*, IQ contributes at best only 20% towards life success, which leaves 80% to other forces.[96] In fact, high levels of education may bring economic success, but in the UK, they are also linked to *lower* ratings of satisfaction.[97]

Part of the problem is that the emotional well-being of children is generally seen as a private matter pertaining to families only. Nevertheless its public implications and costs are increasingly transparent; health, violence, depression and family conflict are all common ill-effects that emerge later in life. For example, the Institute of Child Health estimates that between 30% and 70% of adolescent and adult male sex offenders report that they were sexually victimised as children.

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The reliance on a reduced number – and sometimes even single individuals – to deliver quality of life to children depends far too heavily on those individuals being continually well informed, emotionally well supported, and able to move easily with their children through different stages of development. Yet we know this is not the case.

Even 'good' families go through periods of crisis and change, when there seems to be a reversion to less open forms of communication with children. In a study on communication with children during divorce, only 5% of the children surveyed said that they had been given full explanations and the chance to ask questions.[98] Other crisis points, such as bereavement or ill health, are deeply traumatic for children, but they are not always enabled to express their own thoughts and worries.

Rarely would we expect any other group to have problem-free lifestyles for 18 years at a stretch, but this is what we expect of parents. When there are problems with their children, such as truancy, they are vilified and now may even be given prison sentences.

What is needed is a much more explicit expectation among a wider constituency that children should be able to develop a healthy sense of themselves, their autonomy and independence and a knowledge of their networks of support, in a way that will enhance their quality of lives now, as well as laying the foundations for future resilience. Although this is true for the whole of childhood, it is especially important in the very early years, when all sorts of patterns are established in children's development with permanent effect.

Trust and inclusion (intangible/collective)

The final quadrant refers to trust and inclusion. This is the extent to which a child grows up in a context of collective well-being. Collective well-being is hard to define, but it is certainly linked to the idea of 'social capital' – shared norms, bonds of trust and communication, and networks of informal relationships that extend out from family and friendship networks into a broader community. The New Economics Foundation is currently working on collating a bank of 'social energy' indicators in use, which they define as a mixture of creating hope, trust and belonging.

In much of Britain, people no longer rely on the community for basic material needs and protection. We can make customised personal choices about where to get our food, who to live with and what social roles we

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want to play; the traditional bonds and structures of community are no longer indispensable for organising these things. But children, and the need to nurture, protect and socialise them, comprise one of our few remaining areas of focus that is genuinely communal. The task of supporting childhood is not one that can be carried out entirely alone – it depends on a wider range of role models, social networks, social institutions and goodwill from strangers.

Recent MORI surveys for the Audit Commission found that activities for teenagers and facilities for young children were among the top ten items considered by the British public as determinants of a good place to live. According to the same survey, both were among the top five items considered to need improvement, with activities for teenagers at number one.[99]

A strong community is a crucial part of children's quality of life and something that most parents will actively try to secure for their children. This is manifested in parental behaviours such as moving out of cities into the country where community bonds are perceived to be stronger. In 2000/01, 41,600 children aged 0–15 moved out of London, compared to just 12,600 children moving into the city.[100]

Growing up in a neighbourhood where adults act on these social bonds has been shown to be good for children. The University of Chicago professor, Robert Sampson, has shown that, where his 'collective efficacy' (a combination of high inter-generational contact, reciprocal local exchange and shared expectations for informal social control) is high, children experience better health outcomes and neighbourhoods have less crime.[101] Collective efficacy is influenced by a range of factors, including poverty, housing density, child–adult ratios, levels of violence and proximity to other neighbourhoods. But it is also the product of voluntary commitment among adults, including, crucially, those who are not parents of young children. In other words, general social culture has a direct influence on outcomes for children. In the UK, Perri 6 has shown that the risks of unemployment and social exclusion are powerfully influenced by the configuration of social networks that people can draw on for information, opportunity and support.[102] He argues that we should classify social capital according to six categories, all of which are crucial to children in specific ways:

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1. shared identity
2. networks (that provide bridges into other places, organisations and communities)
3. resources (such as information, opportunity, introductions and so on)
4. affectivity (goodwill, trust and sympathy)
5. norms
6. skills.

But taking part in activities that weave together informal social bonds is not always easy. One Demos study by Ben Jupp, drawing on interviews with over 1,000 residents of ten mixed-tenure (i.e. a mix of privately and socially owned housing) estates, found that only 15% of respondents had got to know any fellow residents at the local shops and 7% at the local pub, despite the widespread use of these facilities.

Of course, this is not to say that parents and children live isolated lives; indeed, they are often at the centre, not the edges, of communities. The school is a significant hub of social connections, stretching well beyond the children in its classrooms, but even then the same Demos survey showed that one-third of parents had not got to know any other estate residents through their children's school.[103]

The traditional institutions that have bound these ties together have declined in importance in children's lives. For example, church attendance has dropped for children. In 1989, 25% of the church-going population was under 15, a percentage that had dropped to 19% in 1998.[104] A study by the Church of England shows that, if present trends in children's church-going continue, almost no children will attend Sunday services in 30 years' time.[105]

Current lifestyles make volunteering in local children's groups difficult. One in four eight-year-old girls is a Brownie, but demand still outstrips supply. An estimated 67,000 children are waiting to join Cub and Brownie packs because there aren't enough adults to run them.[106]

For adults, the impact of community trust, where it is strong, can be enormous. It has been estimated, in the US, that attending club meetings, volunteering or entertaining on a monthly basis or attending church biweekly confers the happiness equivalent of a doubled money income.[107] The equivalent impact of community trust, or the lack of it, on children's

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well-being has not been well documented.

> *Little is known about children's social networks, their views of their neighbourhoods, their levels of trust and community identity, and the implications of these for quality of life or well-being.*[108]

However, a decline in community responsibility for children is contributing to the pressure that parents are under to deliver quality of life to their children almost singlehandedly. This, in turn, contributes to a vicious circle: the compulsion that parents feel to control more and more aspects of their children's lives and safety leads to actions – e.g. the school run – that have the effect of further severing the bonds between communities and children.

As the privatised culture grows, many people are unsure of how to relate to children who are not their own. Consequently we regard other people's children from remote viewpoints, while being in the paradoxical position of thinking that many children are as indulged and privileged as children have ever been, at the same time as we believe that they are not learning to take a responsible or constructive place in a wider community.

Children have become a focus for fear and dislike. British adults describe their acquaintances' children as 'attention-seeking' (57%), 'spoilt' (54%) and 'rude' (43%).[109] In addition, there is strong support (75%) for legally enforceable evening curfews on teenagers.[110]

The overall trend, therefore, is towards a situation in which children and young people are secure only when in functional, supervised environments, which seem in many ways to be increasingly segregated from the rest of society. Children are shunted into specially created 'zones' – of which schools are the most potent example – to gain particular kinds of experience. The exclusion of children from communities extends to the design of buildings: the acceptable venues for children are designed with high walls and locked doors, and are only populated by children and 'authorised' adults.

Children's place in wider community settings – streets, parks, shops, workplaces, among conversing adults – has become more and more difficult to establish. At the same time, the boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood seem increasingly blurred; children are pressured to imitate and perform for the rest of society in a number of influential ways.

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One of the reasons why this aspect of quality of life seems difficult to identify and sustain is that it comes under nobody's exclusive ownership. In some respects, it is associated with voluntary and community organisations, but it is also shaped by patterns of voluntary behaviour and by many different local public institutions. The contrast with the individual/tangible quadrant we described first – which is driven by a variety of forces, from the law to health workers – is clear.

A positive vision for quality of life for children

Under this evaluation, the next stage in improving children's lives focuses on some of the weaknesses that have been identified, such as pressurising children, emotional development and community trust. However, the most successful strategy for promoting quality of life will not stress the elimination of the 'bads' from children's lives, but instead will concentrate on the positives and how these can be joined together.

This section aims to develop in more concrete detail some of the less tangible aspects of quality of life into a robust, practical framework for understanding and organising children's activity, and how it could link ideas about the individual with a wider cultural responsibility.

A coherent framework for improving all children's quality of life needs to focus on three main elements – aspects of children's experience and development that are fundamental to their well-being, and which act as umbrellas for a whole series of more specific strands of experience. They are:

- climbing trees: establishing independence
- running races: learning to perform and growing up
- the dressing-up box: social networks, imagination and play.

Climbing trees

Being good at being a child involves a lot of things that adults don't understand. Climbing trees, chasing mythical monsters and having a new best friend all require a degree of expertise defined exclusively by individual children. A growing sense of self – the reality of the metaphorical concept of tree climbing – is about children's own understanding of what enables them to feel good about their childhood. It incorporates ideas of competency,

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resilience, self-esteem and independence. Exploring how to excel in small areas is about play, understanding risks and boundaries and reaching small but triumphant goals.

Metaphorical tree climbing may be based in dreams and fantasy rather than in real action, and may take place in a virtual context on computer games or through Internet exploration. In older people, climbing trees may translate into paid work or independent journeys that embody the same principles of self-help and control.

Children's sense of self can be expressed through the purchase of favourite toys, characters or brands. While there is, of course, value in this, the commercial expression of autonomy has tended to dominate the concept of climbing trees, whereas other forms of children's control – such as over their own time – have been curtailed.

The problem is that adults have forgotten how to climb trees. As a result, when they interpret how children develop their growing sense of self, they tend to focus on the rational, tangible aspects of becoming a person such as gradually earning and inheriting the various aspects of status: the permission to do various things, the ability to earn money, the presence of one's own place and space, etc. Institutionally, children's autonomy is most likely to be encouraged when it is conducted on pseudo-adult terms – for example, in school councils, peer research schemes or youth parliaments.

But adults shouldn't try to improve children's condition simply by giving them replica versions of the status and obligations of adulthood. Instead, they should create a distinctive set of practices and spaces that reflect what is unique about children – without ghettoising these things into separation from the rest of society.

The trends we outlined in chapter 2 – such as privatisation, colonisation and risk sensitivity – have limited the opportunities for children to climb trees in mainstream life and the acceptability of actually doing this. So when autonomy is acted out in childish ways – say, in unsupervised chaotic play – adults can lose patience with its value. It can seem pointless because it is not linked to school work. It can seem frightening and risky because it is not directed and supervised by contracted adults. It can seem anti-social because it is noisy and unpredictable.

A sense of control over their own lives is as crucial to children as it is to adults. Indeed, in some ways, the learning, repetition and practice of

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developing routes, strategies, tactics to deal with and enjoy life are *more* crucial to children and their futures. If we are serious about improving children's quality of life and, in particular, their emotional well-being, we need to create time and space – physical, emotional, virtual, psychological – where children can be children in the ways they want to be.

Running races

Children have a distinct relationship with the future because they have more of it than we do. Therefore, part of quality of life for children must be about the learning of skills and knowledge, preparation for adulthood and the instilling in them of a resilience to cope with present and future challenges.

All children spend time preoccupied with the future, with what they might become. In addition, there are those smaller exhilarating ways in which children have a sense of moving forward – such as growing taller, telling the time, being praised and making friends among wider circles of children and adults.

Running races is a metaphor for the journey towards adulthood. It is also partly about competition and measured skills. Children should be able to enjoy the satisfaction of winning a race or the pride of passing a test in the same way that adults do. Children have an overwhelming interest in the competitive elements of running races, and their definitions of what these might be are immense (jumping highest, longest hair, neatest handwriting, etc.).

The problem is that the current definitions of 'competition' and 'success' are too narrow. The way we publicly coach children for the future is basically inaccurate if our goals for them are a fulfilling life and, in turn, the enriching of other people's lives. We know that, beyond a certain level, IQ and economic success are not indicators of fulfilling relationships or fruitful lives, so why do we sort and direct children by these rules?

We need to broaden our definition of success and increase the range of people who are involved in securing it for children. Crucially, we must enable the public institutions that provide services for children to direct themselves towards these broader definitions. Adult praise about learning should be directed at a wide spectrum of skills and attributes, not in an artificial way, but genuinely reflecting what we value in our lives.

Learning the rules of the race – the skills needed to operate in society

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and the cultural understanding of what is and isn't acceptable – is an essential part of childhood. This can be as simple as learning how to queue in a shop or cross a road, or as difficult as learning how to negotiate relationships or keep a secret. It is about enabling individual children to have a sense of connectedness to the world.

The process of learning how to run races is, by definition a social one, and cannot be managed solely by parents. Responsibility for learning involves a wide range of people – from teachers to shopkeepers, relatives to neighbours. In many cases, conflicting interpretations of what is 'good' for children has stifled wider involvement in children's journeys to adulthood. However, in an increasingly pluralistic and diverse society, knowledge about how to interpret the world needs to be increased, not diminished. Where children have retreated into the family, or where society feels estranged from children, quality of life in this area is weakened.

The dressing-up box

We need to find a better way for friends, relatives, neighbours and strangers to invest in their own and other people's children through the exchange of actual and intangible resources. The delivery of these needs to be managed in a way that does not exhaust and deplete those entrusted with this provision, but instead enriches both children and their communities.

This gift economy is crucial to children's quality of life because they discover the world on a miniaturised scale through toys and interactions with others. Today's children have a wide and diverse set of reference points – for example, television, computers, games, festivals and books – through which they can enjoy and interpret the world. However, we need to underpin these with a firm sense of belonging based on relationships and exchanges.

The dressing-up box represents the communal resources, tangible and intangible, that communities provide for children. Hand-me-downs, jumble-sale items, ancient relics and gifts follow a multitude of routes to find their way into the box. Whether the dressing-up box is found in the pre-school, the private home or the drama group, its contents are rarely owned by specific individuals. The shared contents are continually raided for innumerable fantastical purposes, and then returned. The more people

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who use the box, the richer it becomes. Through the dressing-up box, children are able to experiment with a range of role models, toys and activities. Like the other aspects of the intangible element of quality of life, dressing up is essentially childish in nature. Developing a sense of belonging may be more about fancy-dress parties than about citizenship education.

Much of what the dressing-up box represents is intangible: trust, support, beliefs, networks. As children grow, they begin to understand how they can contribute to this invaluable web through formal means, such as art clubs or sports teams, or informally through friendships, visits and favour exchanges.

We could create a much richer and altogether better dressing-up box for children. We are more economically wealthy and culturally diverse than ever. But in many ways, the informal 'social capital' on which the resources in the dressing-up box depend has suffered over the last generation through such factors as greater geographical mobility, privatisation and a general detachment from other people's children.

A better climate for children requires resourcing more systematically and deliberately the networks that already provide the metaphorical dressing-up box.

The next chapter analyses the extent to which the framework of government policy matches this vision of the good life for children.

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5. Government and governance

> *[Childhood is] . . . the most intensively governed sector of personal existence. In different ways, at different times, and by many different routes varying from one section of society to another, the health, welfare, and rearing of children have been linked in thought and practice to the destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the state.*
>
> (Rose 1989: 121)[111]

As our analysis of quality of life shows, the challenge in the long run is to forge institutional arrangements and social norms that produce the right combinations of individual well-being and collective capacity. In a diverse society, allowing people to forge their own identities through their experience of childhood should be a normal expectation. But for all children to do this, and to enjoy a quality of life that is rounded and sustainable, they depend on the adults around them taking collective responsibility. Therefore, aside from the role of specific public services and policies in producing better single outcomes for individual children, we should be paying attention to the conditions that enhance this collective ability by sustaining social resources from which children benefit.

It is all too easy for the cumulative impact of separate policy interventions to become a fragmented, incoherent reality for both children and parents. This chapter looks in more detail at the policy framework that has developed under the New Labour government, and at its strengths and weaknesses in relation to a quality-of-life framework.

New Labour and children's policy

The UK government's efforts towards improving the life chances and opportunities available to children have been significant. The government

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has inherited and extended a long tradition of growing state involvement in children's lives.

Targeted initiatives

The government began in 1997 with a series of targeted initiatives dedicated to reducing or eliminating negative impacts on children in highly focused ways. Many of the targets have focused on improving children's performance at school. Education policy focused initially on introducing literacy and numeracy strategies to drive up the levels of basic attainment of 11-year-olds, on the grounds that, without such basic understanding, accessing the wider, richer curriculum would be impossible. Further performance indicators for the education service, published annually in *Opportunity for All*, set minimum standards based on test performance and attempt to increase average performance over time.

Family learning and basic skills (one in five adults is functionally illiterate) have also been prioritised through policies aiming to reduce the high incidence of poor adult skills. The latter are seen to have a poor knock-on effect on children's academic chances. School truancy, which is much higher in the UK compared to other European countries, has also been subject to ambitious targets for reduction. These have been revised in the light of their apparent conflict with the demand that all schools increase attainment levels across the board, including those pupils most at risk of disengagement from education.

The government has also established a 'Connexions' service, providing personal guidance and advice, including on careers, with a particular focus on young people at risk of disengagement. The aim is that this framework will come to form part of a seamless structure of personalised support, working in conjunction with schools and other public services, to encourage positive transitions through adolescence.

Public service agreements pertaining to looked-after children have aimed to improve the continuity of care, improve the educational attainment of children looked after by local authorities and reduce the proportion of children who are re-registered on the child protection register. Recent measures include a new public service agreement target to increase by 40% (or, if possible, 50%) the number of looked-after children adopted by 2004/05, and an Adoption and Permanence Taskforce to help councils improve their performance and spread best practice.

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A more child-centred health service, partly as a response to the Kennedy Inquiry into children's heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary, has also become a priority. A children's rights director in the Department of Health, created under the Care Standards Act 2000, has begun the implementation of the Children's National Service Framework to set national standards in a similar way to the National Healthy School Standard. There is also a move to set up qualification standards for surgeons operating on children.

Youth justice reform has also been ambitious and ongoing. The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act provided for a range of innovative options to replace the choice between a caution and a custodial sentence for young people. Multiple cautions have been replaced by the Final Warning System. Newly established Youth Offending Teams are able to recommend a variety of orders for reparation, parenting, action plans or supervision. These measures were introduced alongside targets to seriously reduce the time taken from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders and to reduce the rate of re-convictions among the same group.

Over time, the introduction of new targets to improve children's lives has slowed down as the government aims to consolidate its existing commitments. However, there are still regular announcements regarding targeted initiatives as new fears about children's well-being are raised.

One example would be the proposed new measures to reform sex offences relating to children, and especially Internet offences. In addition, more than 100 MPs signed an early-day motion calling for television advertising to be banned during broadcasting hours scheduled for viewing by children under the age of 5. It isn't likely that this will become policy in the near future, even though some countries have already acted on these kinds of concerns. Sweden has the strictest controls in Europe, and in 1991, a ban on all television and radio advertising targeted at children under the age of 12 was introduced. [112]

Anti-poverty strategy

Alongside this series of targeted reforms in key areas of service delivery, a fundamental pillar of the government's commitment to children has taken shape through its anti-poverty strategy.

This set of radical commitments – in particular, the goal of eradicating child poverty within a generation – has achieved significant progress

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through a system of tax credits providing minimum income to the poorest families with children and a concerted effort to encourage people into work. Government figures released in April 2002 show that, in 2000/01, 3.9 million children were in poverty, a fall of 0.5 million since the last year of the Conservative government.

The tax credit system has become a cornerstone of the wider anti-poverty strategy, though its success has been partly mitigated by lower-than-expected take-up. There have also been major increases in income support for non-working households, but these have generally been insufficient to bring households over the 60% line, which, at a time of increasing average incomes, is a moving target.

Encompassing and preventative approaches

Alongside this restructuring of benefits and labour market participation, the government has also developed a range of area-based programmes and policies. These aim to strengthen encompassing and preventative approaches – that is, forms of support and intervention that are intended to change some of the conditions under which children grow up, reduce the risks of their experiencing 'negative outcomes' in later life and increase the capacity of children, families and local communities to thrive.

A National Family and Parenting Institute has been established, and labour market reform has included the introduction and extension of parental leave and time rights – the biggest change in 40 years. A new 'charter' encourages employers to allow flexible working for parents with children under the age of six, although it remains voluntary. A £25 million parenting fund, announced in 2002, is being designed in conjunction with voluntary organisations to provide practical assistance to struggling families.

Alongside the drive to increase labour market participation, the first-ever National Childcare Strategy was launched in 1998, expanding the number and affordability of early-years education and childcare. The 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review includes a commitment to create an additional 250,000 childcare places by 2006 .The management of childcare and early-years programmes within government is also being integrated, creating a combined budget of £1.5 billion by 2005/06.

Perhaps the most widely supported, though still in its early stages, is Sure Start, a programme designed to provide intensive, specialised and

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practical support to families with very young children growing up in extreme disadvantage. Based on evidence – backed by the evaluation of Headstart in the US – that specialised support to parents of children under three can result in higher educational performance, less criminal behaviour and less disrupted personal lives for the children when they become adults, the programme is generally seen as an exemplar of an integrated, flexible and evolving approach to prevention with the potential to affect wider practice and culture in the communities surrounding it.

Building partly on Sure Start's success, the government is now committed to establishing a children's centre (bringing together childcare, early-years education, family support and health services) in the country's most disadvantaged wards. Alongside these efforts, a ten-year programme of Neighbourhood Renewal is investing hundreds of millions of pounds in an effort to revitalise the most disadvantaged local areas, addressing their multiple problems through 'joined-up' strategies to improve public services, create jobs and develop community capacity simultaneously.

The seriousness of this government's commitment to prevention is shown by the fact that, in two separate government spending reviews (in 2000 and 2002), committees looked at interventions and processes to help 'children at risk', and by its initiating a green paper on the same theme in late 2002, seeking to bring together the various ways in which children at risk are identified and supported through public institutions and interventions. This is seen as the priority area of children's policymaking – both from the viewpoint of children's welfare and from a cost-effectiveness standpoint. A Children's Fund, aimed at children aged 5–13, has been established alongside a new Children and Young People's Unit in the Department for Education and Skills. Services funded via the Children's Fund are intended to add to existing mainstream and local authority children's services, through projects that aim to cross existing boundaries between education, health and social service departments.

This list of policy interventions is impressive, and has already made a significant difference to quality of life for many children, especially those in more disadvantaged circumstances. Much of the current debate about policies for children has come to focus on the ways in which different programmes might fit together – how a government infrastructure

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defined by separate services, functions and programmes should be 'joined up' to encourage seamlessness in the experience of users, and cost-effectiveness in the provision of facilities and workers.

One example of this tendency is the government's exploration of the idea of neighbourhood 'children's centres', acting as a hub for information and service coordination related to children. Another is the attempt to establish cross-cutting coherence in central government, through the Children and Young People's Unit, the scope of the 2003 green paper and the establishment of funding streams that aim to bridge departmental boundaries and focus on children as a group.

However, the attempt to establish coherence or genuine 'joining up' is frustrated by a number of factors, and the implicit emphasis of many other policy interventions carries other risks for children's quality of life. The rest of this chapter sets out the major concerns.

Children as children, not performers

> *A society for which the education of children is essentially about pressing the child into adult or pseudo-adult roles as fast as possible is one that has lost patience.*
>
> Rowan Williams, *The Times*, 23 July 2002

The first cause for concern is the government's growing emphasis on performance. Government interventions may be combining with other cultural and social pressures to focus on children's individual performance to an unhealthy extent.

The most obvious example is education, where children are now measured, tested and targeted at virtually every stage. While the idea that all children can achieve at school, not just a select few, is a welcome development, the way that this achievement is being brought about may well be producing perverse outcomes at odds with children's wider quality of life.

In Denmark, seven in every ten children (70%) say that they enjoy school, compared with just over half in France (56%) and in England (54%).[113] Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education, has said that enjoying school should be an expectation for every child. But a major study on pupil motivation found that testing and academic pressure can and do

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have a negative impact on children's self-esteem and motivation to learn.[114]

Both children and adults say that the education system focuses too narrowly on academic achievement and neglects other aspects of children's well-being. One study in Northern Ireland recorded that 17% of pupils experienced difficulties in getting to sleep as a result of pressure on them because of their school work.[115]

But stress is not the only problem. The Prince's Trust found that young offenders and those at risk of turning to crime felt constantly judged and assessed at school and complained that their teachers did not understand their needs.[116]

Truancy in the UK is high compared to other European countries. Secondary schools reported truancy rates that, at 1.0%, were double those of primary schools (at 0.5%) in 1999/2000.[117] While government has invested significantly in trying to reduce truancy and school exclusion, it also found deep tensions between trying to improve the academic attainment of most children and the target of including all children in the same institutions. As a result, it effectively reversed its previous policy on truancy in 2001. Despite the good intentions behind the drive to improve performance across a set of formal attainment measures, it is difficult to see how such an approach can avoid a deepening marginalisation among those still left out. The problem may be not so much in the concept of higher achievement for all, as in the institutionalisation of achievement through a relatively narrow range of measures.

There is also a danger that the emphasis on individual performance can be detrimental to forms of collective trust that, as we have seen, are also crucial to quality of life. Schools have always emphasised socialisation and social skills, and some newer developments, such as the citizenship curriculum, reinforce this. But the dominant message that children receive about the way that they and their schools are judged is that individual academic achievement is paramount.

A performance-based system of intervention is most obvious in education, but it runs through many other aspects of children's policy. Although it can produce results in specific areas, it fits best with a target-setting approach that cannot address the more complex needs of children.

Even where government policies are focused on prevention, they implicitly rest on positive outcomes for children that are manifested in particular kinds of performance. The result is that the key institutions

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working with children are under continuously increasing pressure to perform, and they transfer that pressure directly to the children.

For example, for understandable reasons, the government's child poverty policy framework is framed around the failure of deprived children to 'achieve' in the same ways as their better-off counterparts. The street crime debate has focused on control of the dysfunctional child, rather than seeing society or the street as not functioning effectively for some children. Rather than seeing schools as not functioning properly for some children, we seek to control behaviour even more closely and, in some cases, put police in schools.

Performance-focused policies can also make the relationship with parents more difficult, if they undermines parents' confidence in government as an honest broker of information and opportunity. Policymakers often see more direct partnership with parents as an important goal. However, a sharper focus on contractual relationships, formalised obligations and penalties (such as prison sentences for parents of truants) only represents one strand of the set of relationships that government needs to create to benefit from the input of parents and community members. In the strategy document *Building a Strategy for Children and Young People*, produced by the Children and Young People's Unit, the word 'parent' appears seven times and the word 'communities' appears 52 times.

The rationale for targeted interventions focused on performance can only really work when a single problem can be addressed in isolation. So, for instance, vaccination against specific diseases looks, at first glance, like an example of a well-defined problem. But very few of the problems facing children are so neat (in fact, vaccination also raises a series of other social issues, as the MMR controversy has shown). Teenage pregnancy, mental illness, bullying, lack of play space and independent mobility – these and many other problems cannot be solved simply by identifying the visible 'bad' that is seen to blight children's lives and then insisting on performances that reduce them. Targeted interventions can produce perverse outcomes, such as when policies to increase the number of classroom assistants end up in conflict with the strategy to recruit and sustain more childcare workers.

The reality of children's lives is far more complex; they cannot be neatly compartmentalised into different areas of activity called 'education',

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'crime', 'health' and so on. Parents usually end up negotiating the differing demands and pressures of various institutions and activities into some kind of coherent timetable, and children usually have to deal directly with the contradictions between different aspects of their lives and the institutions with which they come into contact.

The growing concentration on 'evidence-based policy', though welcome overall, can help to compound the problems of institutional rigidity and narrow focus. Many of the goods and resources that children rely on have to be provided and negotiated in 'real time', and adapted and customised to specific individual and local circumstances. Just as busy parents have to make a series of 'real-time' decisions about what their children should eat, which activities are allowable, when they should go to bed, whether to buy them a particular toy or book, government needs to be capable of 'real-time' decision-making, based on the best-available information and intelligence, about how to design pathways and packages of service and support for specific communities and families. Evidence and analysis cannot always keep up with change in a diverse, fluid society. Focusing policy only on the forms of outcome that produce formal, measurable outputs risks undermining a broader, less tangible set of goods that may be more influential to well-being in the long run: adaptive capacity, social and emotional resilience, and the ability to make and learn from intelligent personal decisions.

The final problem with having a focus on visible performance is that the failure to achieve it produces a tendency towards ever-greater institutional control over children. As Alan Prout, one of the project's advisers, has argued:

> *The cycle is one in which children as a primary target of prevention seem caught in a system that can respond to its own failure only by ratcheting up control.*
>
> Alan Prout[118]

For instance, England and Wales imprison around 10,000 children and young people every year. This is more than any comparable European country. Children and young people make up 16.3% of their prison population, compared to 10.2% in France and 6.8% in the Netherlands.[119]

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The main conclusions of this analysis are two-fold. First, if 'communities' want children who fit in with social norms, then the 'communities' must recognise the need for active commitment and investment in the task of supporting the positive socialisation – and the quality of life – of children. Second, if government wants to achieve preventive goals in the long run, it must ensure that its various efforts fit into a coherent overall framework that is capable of continuous adaptation and 'real-time learning' and of lateral coordination *across* geographical areas and separate services. In addition, its delivery of services and facilities must have the effect of increasing informal contribution of citizens and community members to other, informal goods that also impact on children's quality of life.

All children, not just poor children

Until now, there has been a strong argument for saying that the most important priority for improving children's lives is to tackle poverty – the form of deprivation that most directly impacts on other aspects of quality of life. Debating 'intangible resources' is irrelevant while so many children continue to grow up in poverty.

The problem with this position is that it is unable to articulate the positive goals of childhood – what a poverty-free childhood should be about. But addressing income inequality for its own sake, while justified, cannot become a long-term vision for children.

Placing attention on reducing poverty, as opposed to increasing quality of life, risks creating services that are stigmatising or unappealing for those they are aimed at, while feeding a detachment from children's quality of life issues among the better-off and non-parents. In the meantime, waiting for poverty to be abolished means that some of the worst problems of today's children are not tackled. This delay affects all children, not just poor or disadvantaged ones.

The problem facing too much of the government's agenda for children at risk is that it ends up trying to compensate for the inadequacies or dangers in the experience of some children by recouping the deficit. Because it is not able to articulate clearly the full range of goods contributing to a good quality of life for children, such an approach cannot necessarily reinforce or support the conditions and common resources that enhance children's quality of life. It may be that government

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simply cannot provide some of these resources, although it could still help mobilise others in society to do so. But it is crucial to recognise that the chances of continuing to improve the lives of *poor* children depend heavily on the ability to prioritise quality of life for *all* children.

Children's lack of voice and power is one of the reasons that they have come to suffer so disproportionately from poverty. But without a common understanding of what children need from their surroundings in order to thrive, and of the importance of such common resources as air, space, trust and consistent expectations, it is difficult to see how ongoing compensation for financial deficit can lead to ongoing improvements in quality of life, or how the effort to tackle disadvantage can be legitimised. Creating a broader framework of quality of life is key to establishing commonality of interests between the middle classes and the rest of society over the next decade.

Basing public policy on a deficit model fails to recognise that quality of life is not a linear process related to the 'gradual actualisation of needs'. In current policy terms, this would mean moving from 'socially excluded' to 'achieving full potential'. Rather, it is a combination of complementary positive states, as described in the earlier chapter on children's quality of life. So many of the problems that children face today are to do with a failure of balance. For example, the child under pressure at school may begin to experience poor self-esteem, and the child kept away from the community will lack the necessary skills to cope with encounters with traffic or strangers.

A deficit mentality that produces policy interventions designed directly to compensate – rather than providing the conditions under which children and families can create their own forms of balance – will always be limited in its effectiveness.

Cultural commitment, not contracts

Since the Children's Act in 1989, the role of contracts and contractual relationships in children's lives has grown steadily. Contracts and formal accountability are some of the main tools available to lever up outcomes. As parents have become more risk averse, so have institutions dealing with children. The growth of a contract culture, of litigation and of claims and counter-claims for compensation mean that, in many areas of children's lives – from food retailing to education, health and safety in play spaces to

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the regulation of childminding – formal rules and requirements are laid down in increasing detail.

High-profile failures – particularly those periodic failures of child protection, of which the latest focus is the Victoria Climbié inquiry – also produce responses that encourage even greater professionalisation and contractualisation of the responsibility for children in different settings. But the use of contracts to specify the terms of relationships with children is not always appropriate to the forms of care and support that the children should be given, or that arise in more natural settings. Perversely, the contractualisation of responsibility may undermine wider cultural support for children's needs, making it 'someone else's problem' most of the time. It often seems to do little to increase the capacity of families, parents or wider communities to provide positive, adaptive responses to the needs or interests of children.

Some policies do attempt to address this issue by seeking to build collective commitment and capacity for children in local community settings. Again, Sure Start is probably the clearest example. But these efforts currently run against the wider grain, and finding ways to spread their reach and increase take-up is proving stubbornly difficult for government.

The task is to build capacity to define and secure quality of life – by definition, a collection of social rather than just individual goals. Further progress in achieving this for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children rests partly on our ability to locate that effort within a wider framework and cultural commitment – the bonds of community and the institutions with which everybody interacts. These interconnected tasks will not be achieved by a government that is reliant on national control, functional separation or fragmented policies. Currently, the Labour government is committed to moving beyond these problems, but is unsure about exactly how to do it.

From policy to governance: why children's rights are not enough

This discussion of public policy interventions and some of their limitations has implicitly highlighted the role of *governance* – the rules, structures and forms of accountability that are used to shape children's entitlements and access to resources and opportunities. One crucial part of this debate focuses on the structure of government itself, and the extent

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to which children's interests and voices are built into it. But governance also includes non-governmental factors, including the role of other institutions in the public realm, and the impact that they have on children's lives.

In the rest of this chapter we examine the specific challenges relating to governance, some of the alternative models on offer and the role of various sectors of society and tiers of government in contributing to solutions. In broad terms, the challenge is to achieve a form of 'joining up' – ensuring that what children need is also what they are entitled to, and that they can access it in ways that reflect the reality of their lives rather a set of formal or institutional structures. The current approach to these issues tends to be highly pragmatic and attempts to use strategic powers and organisational structures to 'bring together' the resources and expertise needed for joining up. This 'what matters is what works' approach has some benefits, but will not deliver sustained, long-term progress.

In contrast, the major alternative currently advocated is a framework based explicitly on *children's rights*. However, while some elements of the children's rights agenda raise major challenges, it does not in itself provide a comprehensive basis for determining children's access to resources, opportunities or power.

What matters is what works: joined-up government for children

The problems of fragmentation and unresponsiveness in children's services are now widely recognised. From children who fall through the cracks of child protection systems to programmes that seek to combine punishment and rehabilitation more effectively with educational and family support, policy has made a priority out of 'joining up'. The fact that most of the costs of not treating children during childhood fall to different fundholders (the courts and prison services) than those who would pay for the treatment in childhood (local social services and education) has been made increasingly clear. The explicit rationale for such restructuring has almost always been that integrating or reshaping services and the structures through which they are delivered can lead to better outcomes – in other words, what matters is what works.

To that extent, the restructuring of governance frameworks has been a pragmatic, ongoing process, in which organisational change and reviews

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of impact and effectiveness become constant elements in the process of service delivery and reform. The 'Best Value' and 'Quality Protects' regimes in local government, the review of the national childcare strategy, the introduction of youth offender teams and Connexions advisers, the creation of various strategic units in central government departments, the Treasury's cross-cutting reviews of children at risk – all these reflect a desire to structure organisational responsibilities, allocate financial responsibilities in more coherent ways, address the needs of children 'holistically' and enable responsiveness at local level to individual and community needs. Hundreds of other initiatives are financed through the Children's Fund and are therefore not filtered through the different agencies but come centrally through the chief executive of the local authority, giving councils a greater role and raising the profile of the projects.

The latest manifestations of this approach are:

- reviews of local governance structures for children
- the piloting of 'Children's Trusts' – single local bodies with commissioning and spending power across a range of local services, charged with planning, shaping and monitoring service delivery for children as a group
- the green paper on children at risk, initiated in late 2002, which seeks to identify how existing systems for dealing with children at risk of social exclusion, persistent offending, neglect, abuse, educational disengagement and so on might be brought together still further so that they work more effectively and more resource-efficiently, rather than duplicating each other's concerns and responsibilities without adding to each other's impact.

In Hertfordshire, the county council has merged its department of education with the children and families staff in the social services department to create the 'Department for Children, Schools and Families'. Brighton and Hove City Council have undertaken a similar integration of children's service staff and budgets previously separated into functional departments.

In central government, the current political interest in better representation for children has been manifested in a cluster of new

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structures designed to strengthen the place of children in policymaking. Consequently, in 2000 the government announced new structures for England – a minister for young people, a cross-cutting Children's Unit and a Cabinet committee chaired by the Chancellor.

The cross-cutting Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) has certainly been one of the most interesting developments and the closest the government has come to defining quality of life for children. It is designed to influence other government departments to take an active stance in improving children's lives. Many children's charities have applauded this political interest and welcome the government's intention to develop England's first inclusive strategy for children. The strategy has a wide and positive definition of children's welfare, including health and well-being, achievement and enjoyment, participation and citizenship, protection, responsibility and inclusion. This definition includes processes such as participation, as well as outcomes such as health or achievement.

These new structures are welcome, but they will not provide lasting improvement on their own. At national level, it has proved difficult to ensure that the high-level focus of new units and strategies has a genuine effect on the wider structure and priorities of other departments and existing service budgets. Creating a holistic overview of children's needs, as the CYPU has set out to do, is one step towards delivering them at ground level. But the allocation of budgets and the priorities of other professions, service delivery organisations and policymakers are still shaped and influenced by a much wider range of pressures and incentives, many of which cannot be redirected from the centre. The creation of a powerful Cabinet committee focused on children, also mooted in recent years, might well act as a focus for more coherent political decision-making, but does not automatically translate into different priorities at other levels of government.

Equally, the perpetual reorganisation of formal structures, while it may have a positive impact, is not sufficient for changing the *quality* of relationships between children, families and service providers. It is possible to restructure quite radically without changing the underlying culture, either of professional ethos and outlook, or of parental and child involvement in decisions over what is best for children. Without a more explicit and positive definition of the kinds of lives children should be living, and the role they should occupy in a wider institutional and

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governance framework, the effort to reshape and join up services will always be liable to being blown off course by competing priorities.

Participation

One response to this problem is the growing emphasis on children's participation.[120] Citizen involvement in consultation and decision-making has grown rapidly in recent years, and young people have been no exception to the trend. A special focus on citizenship education and community involvement has brought democratic participation for young people into the spotlight. Public institutions at all levels are now experimenting widely with new methods of involvement, from consultation panels to youth parliaments, advisory groups to online polling. As Labour MP Hilton Dawson recently put it: 'The participation of children and young people in the work of government is the next big idea'.

The Department of Health social care group has spearheaded children's participation in England; the Department for Culture, Media and Sport consult children in its museums and library sectors; and the Downing Street website runs the '10 out of 10' page for young people. In local authorities, encouraging children's participation is also becoming more mainstream. Young people, families and communities are seen as key stakeholders who should be consulted and involved in developing services. A study conducted by the IPPR in June 2002 found that 90% of councils responding to a survey in conjunction with the Local Government Association valued the involvement of young people.[121] Successful solutions to the challenges include youth forums and councils, outreach work at bus stops and peer research schemes.

A direct example of where children's feedback has affected policymaking can be found in a white paper from the Department for Education and Skills. It proposes new 'pupil learning credits' to ensure that poor children have the same opportunities to go on school trips and take part in school clubs as their more affluent peers.[122]

The argument is that, if children and young people have a right to have their voices heard in the formulation of policy, the decisions are more likely to reflect their needs and interests. But despite the growing range of consultation practice, there are a number of unresolved issues about its status.

First, consultation is not universal, and does not necessarily happen in the most important areas of children's lives. For example, pupil

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participation in education remains a subject with which education policymakers, and many schools, are uncomfortable. Children have no legal right to be treated as equal parties in divorce proceedings – either in court or in mediation. The British system contrasts with other jurisdictions such as Australia where there is a system of separate representation for children in divorce proceedings.

Second, consultation is rarely directly linked to the exercise of power.

> *There seems a real danger these days that involving and listening to children will be seen by policymakers and service providers as an end in itself, rather than the means by which we work with children to get things changed for the better.*[123]

For this reason it tends to be older children, children who are home educated or children who have learned to speak the language of adulthood who are often picked as the champions of their generation.[124]

Participation can easily become a form of symbolic tokenism, or replicate the traditional weaknesses of consultation processes. They provide no real guarantee that institutional decision-making will become genuinely responsive to the evolving needs and interests of young people. The danger is that, in trying to become more responsive, we simply ask children to become mini-adults.

An alternative approach – children's rights?

Rather than waiting for institutions and social norms to adapt on their own, the children's rights model implies that codified status and legal enforcement are needed to ensure that all children get what they deserve. Given the political powerlessness of some groups in society, a rights-based framework seems to offer a protection that would otherwise leave children exposed to disadvantage and discrimination.

Campaigners see the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission in April 2000 as an important precedent for rights-based policy enforcement. In addition, the explicit mention of 'age' in the list of prohibited grounds for discrimination in Article 13 of the treaty establishing the European Community seemed to confirm that children's rights would soon feature much more highly in political debate.

Currently, the campaigning focus of the children's rights movement in

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England is to establish a commissioner or office through which these rights can be reported on. Commissioners and ombudsmen have been appointed in such far-flung places as New Zealand, Sweden, Poland, Iceland, Austria, Spain – and Wales.

The UK government has ratified the United Nation's convention on the rights of the child and is committed to upholding children's rights. However, it has so far resisted calls to create a children's commissioner in England to follow the Welsh example. Ultimately, the Human Rights Act means that children, like adults, can seek redress from the European legal system to defend their essential rights. But the argument of children's rights campaigners – primarily based on the idea that children have a right to be involved in decisions affecting them – goes much further.

However, it is difficult to see how children's rights could be the organising framework for all issues affecting them. Not only is the issue of power over and responsibility for children more complex, but translating rights into workable community institutions and patterns of service provision is not straightforward. The campaign to establish commissions and commissioners for children's rights risks creating a bureaucratic infrastructure that may raise the profile of some children's issues but do little to equip us further to solve them.

The problem that children face is that their relationship with the rest of society is more complex than most of the other groups that have used the rights-based frameworks with varying success. Differing interpretations of rights, and the conflict between different kinds of rights, mean that whoever holds the power of interpretation becomes *a*, if not *the*, central issue. One recent example is the debate over child labour in developing countries. The wave of child unions being started to create rights and expectations at work for children and campaign for better pay and conditions is in direct contradiction to a different interpretation of the right to a childhood free of exploitation, or the right to a decent education. Working out the correct set of solutions in each context requires judgement, power and negotiating skills that cannot be extrapolated automatically from the existence of an abstract right.

A further complication is the issue of responsibility. While the last decade has seen voluminous debate on matching rights and responsibilities, the alignment between children's various responsibilities and the age at which they access formal rights and entitlements is, to say

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the least, uneven. For instance, children are not fully responsible for themselves before they reach 18, but can be made criminally responsible much earlier. It is currently unclear how a campaign to entrench their social, economic, political and cultural rights relates to a coherent account of the growth of their responsibilities.

The strengths of a rights-based approach would be in identifying discrimination and clarifying responsibility in cases of failure. It would focus on campaigning against obvious 'bads' – for example, suing schools or parents who fail to fulfil their obligations. But it is far from clear that the route to better outcomes for all children is to give them access to formal dispute and arbitration systems and encourage them to defend and articulate their rights in every situation, including sometimes against their parents. There is a delicate balance to strike here. Children are regularly neglected, ignored or exploited because of their lack of power, voice and status. But whether or nor they have more comprehensive formal rights, they remain dependent in practice on others for their well-being; dependence is one of the central characteristics of childhood.

Partly because of their dependence, children's judgements over what is good for them are only ever partially authoritative; parents, the state and other institutions also have to play a role. Some rights are clearly necessary as a minimum foundation for children's participation in wider society, but in reality, they tell us little about how to structure public institutions, services and communities so that they create and improve quality of life for children.

As we have argued, much of what children depend on to thrive rests on a set of collective and cultural resources. In this context, it may be more productive and more influential to strengthen the conditions and commitments on which children depend, rather than their ability to demand their rights from those around them, and seek compensation if they are not met. In particular, we should be learning more from the institutional model of the family, in which children occupy a central position and are increasingly involved in a process of negotiation and informal adaptation, designed to serve their interests in a wider environment subject to continuous change. In short, rights prove a valuable starting point for advocacy and campaigning, but they do not provide a working model of the good society for children.

Beyond these dimensions of governance, which are primarily

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concerned with legal rights and the structure of administrative institutions, there are broader factors that are equally influential. At local level, government and the public sector have a crucial role to play in encouraging and reinforcing voluntary commitment to children. The media are also a major influence, and the role of civil society, including voluntary organisations dedicated to children's issues, can also be critical. These issues are addressed in the final chapter, as part of a long-term agenda for improving children's quality of life.

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6. A children's decade

A cross-sector agenda for improving children's quality of life

Given the analysis presented in this report, a single question clearly stands out from any discussion of the changes that might be needed.

How can children's quality of life and well-being, expressed in broad and balanced terms, become more of a priority for the whole of society, as well as for those people and institutions who have a direct interest in children?

The danger with any recommendations is that they inevitably lean towards those areas of action that can be most easily affected through simple changes. We have argued that quality of life for children is enhanced or undermined by the workings of complex, overlapping systems in which the whole of society is implicated. We cannot improve children's well-being only by making public services work better or by sharpening the responsibilities of parents.

In this final chapter, we set out an alternative approach that places the reshaping of government and governance for children in the broader context of cultural and community support for children. Our recommendations include structural changes in political and administrative institutions, primarily designed to give children greater power and visibility in certain kinds of decision-making. But the bulk of our recommendations focus on creating the conditions under which all kinds of institutions can provide more effective support to parents and to children in securing quality of life for all.

In part, what we need is a framework of institutions, priorities and relationships that helps to mediate and resolve conflicts and contradictions in real time. So we need to develop a vision for children that maximises their quality of life but also enables flexibility and adaptation in relating multiple demands and pressures in a given setting.

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We also have the inherent tension in approaches to children's interests between control and guardianship and empowerment and autonomy.

We are not saying that a child's life experiences should be perfectly coherent. Diversity of experience is crucial, but it is the capacity to fit them together, relate them to each other and count on some kinds of basic security that is also necessary if a child is to thrive on diversity. However, at the moment, we have many different institutions pulling in different directions, and children (mostly with their families) trying to find a way of holding them together in order to negotiate a safe passage through young adulthood.

Here we offer a broad, long-term agenda for children's quality of life. Not all of the issues we have raised are susceptible to immediate solution. However, it is possible to imagine a process through which children come to occupy a more central place in our cultural priorities, and through which various institutions combine to produce better outcomes, more enjoyment and richer life experience for children, which is understood and valued for its own sake, as well as for its contribution to their future lives.

Votes: why children need political power

The starting point, however, should be politics and government. Children, who have no political power of their own, will not automatically find their interests defended in the ongoing process of political change unless they are understood as a constituency in their own right. While individual policy areas such as education will retain high profile and widespread support, it is unrealistic to expect that children's interests will become explicit in other forms of decision-making, such as planning and transport policies, while they remain invisible citizens.

One function of the state has always been to regulate in ways that protect children from abuses of adult power. These forms of protection remain vital, but in a quality-of-life framework, government also needs strong incentives to act in ways that positively promote children's interests and well-being.

But when children represent a steadily declining proportion of the population, the pressure for political priorities to go elsewhere will be strong. Fifty years ago, 60% of the population was under the age of 20. By 2020, the proportion will be less than 25%. Children are almost the only group in society not to have benefited from the extension of the franchise

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that occurred over the last two centuries. As Stein Ringen has argued, this structural imbalance helps to explain why children have been so disadvantaged by the last two decades of economic change.

Rather than trying to write a detailed list of rights that the state should somehow be able to guarantee, granting children one central right would give them a clearer, more powerful place in the political process: the right to vote.

Most debate over voting age currently focuses on reducing it to 16. This could have some positive impact, but does not go far enough. **A bolder step would be to align the age of majority with the age of criminal responsibility, and move both to 14**. This is not an age at which young people should be expected to operate as adults in every respect. The process of establishing independent adulthood now extends, for a growing number, well into the 20s, as people spend longer in education and getting established in the job and housing markets. There is no reason why voting should be seen as an important staging post, coinciding with a change in the phase of education towards a new five-year 'pathway' in which the individual takes a more active and responsible role in shaping their own learning. This is already envisaged by the government's proposals for reshaping education for 14- to 19-year-olds.

Many will argue that raising the age of criminal responsibility, after it has been reduced to cope with the prevalence of offending by very young children, is unrealistic and irresponsible. But the formal age of responsibility is not an exclusive precondition of effective punishment, prevention or rehabilitation. The debate over criminal justice interventions for children should be focused in any case on their family, community and personal circumstances as well as their social development and ability to tell right from wrong. Punishment before 14 could still be swift and, if necessary, severe. But it should be accompanied by a stronger focus on what other agencies – and the wider community – can contribute to prevent future offending. There is something troubling about imposing legal responsibilities on children when their own legal status as citizens is non-existent.

A reduced voting age would be one step, but still does not address the interests of most children: those under 14. **Here we reiterate the suggestion put forward by Stein Ringen in hs Demos pamphlet of 1997, that all children should be issued with votes at birth.**[125] Their families

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could then decide who would exercise this vote, with the default going to the mothers or any other primary carers, until the children reach the age of 14. Parents could be encouraged to cast the "baby ballot" in consultation with their child, and to think explicitly about the child's interests. But in any case, children's votes would reinforce the importance of families with children as an electoral constituency.

Central government: promoting coherence and transparency

The structural changes to electoral representation recommended above would go a long way, over time, to giving children the weight they deserve in political decision-making. But there are also several changes that could give them a more consistent place in the priorities and implementation methods of central government.

There is no perfectly designed institutional structure that can provide automatic solutions. **But the changes put in motion over recent years could be consolidated and strengthened by a commitment to make 'holistic decision-making' for children a priority of central government**. The Cabinet Committee on Children, chaired by the Chancellor and including secretaries of state from all the main spending departments, should become a more frequent and explicit focus for setting priorities and reviewing progress across government. Long-term targets and public service agreements concerned with children should be reviewed to establish cross-cutting responsibilities, such as reducing obesity in children, improving their independent mobility and attacking the increase in depression and psycho-social disorders among children and young people.

Ministerial portfolios should be restructured to create a single, powerful focus for different age groups, with ministers' job descriptions designed explicitly to make their responsibilities cross-departmental. Policy teams and departmental divisions should be given performance targets and reward structures that explicitly emphasise the need to develop policies and strategies that cut across existing departments and policy functions such as health, education and crime.

One option would be to create three distinct ministers: for very young children, for children aged 5–14 and for young people – a shift that would build on existing portfolios. The government should ensure that these ministers' responsibilities include greater leverage over the areas covered by ministers responsible for specific services.

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One idea currently being proposed is the creation of a single, dedicated, national agency for children. This has some attractions – bringing responsibility for children under a single roof, creating explicit lines of accountability and integrating financial resources, and clarifying priorities and responsibilities at national level. But we believe that such an agency would probably be a red herring. Not only would it be expensive and time-consuming to establish, but trying to separate off the implementation of policies for children from other areas would be counter-productive, to say the least. While there are many public service institutions concerned mainly with children's welfare in one way or another, the greater challenge is to embed a concern for children's well-being in the way that most other systems in society – transport, the labour market, environmental protection, the media, and so on – all work. A separate, hived-off agency, however powerful, would struggle to achieve this in practice. Without large amounts of administrative and financial power, such an agency would effectively be marginal.

A different way for central government to influence the workings of governance more widely would be to bring together and redirect the priorities of the inspection and regulation agencies concerned with children. For example, OfSTED, the schools regulator, reports frequently on the standards and quality of education provision, but not on the outcomes for children in wider communities. A separate Social Services Inspectorate reports on the quality of social work, while the Audit Commission reviews the effectiveness of children's services in local authorities.

We therefore recommend that OfSTED, the Social Services Inspectorate and the Audit Commission, together with the newly established Commission for Health Improvement, should form a network to produce integrated priority reviews of quality, of the impact of public services on children and of the role of geographical area-based strategies for children. The reviews' focus should be explicitly directed towards children's quality of life, the contribution of various factors to it and the effectiveness of government and public service providers in working together to achieve it.

One priority for these joint reviews should be identifying the relationship between mainstream, universally available service provision, especially schooling, and services dedicated to children already at risk and on the margins. In particular, the government has an urgent need – one

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that will not be solved by its current policy processes – for a clearer understanding of how the performance pressures on universal systems can exacerbate the problems of under-achievement and marginalisation, and how, in turn, these systems could become more effective contributors to long-term prevention.

Government could also introduce 'child-impact' statements in major policymaking exercises on issues likely to affect children's quality of life. It appears that Sweden and the Flemish community of Belgium are the only jurisdictions in the world to have introduced legislation requiring child-impact analysis, though the Scottish Executive is also committed to introducing systematic 'child-proofing'. Taken too far, such processes just add further layers of bureaucracy, but as an aid to understanding the impact of such decisions as road or airport expansion, food chain restructuring, housing investment and so on, they could become indispensable in making children's interests more central.

Central government, through the Office for National Statistics, could initiate a comprehensive and regularly published review of children's quality of life (as currently advocated by Save the Children) across a range of measures including self-reported happiness and satisfaction levels for key services. Establishing an appropriate spread of indicators that could be used universally and would apply at local level in most neighbourhoods would take time and effort, but could have a major impact on our understanding of how quality of life for children is changing. Responsibility for collection and interpretation of this data should not rest solely at national level, but become a key responsibility for local government and other agencies dealing with children (*see below*).

Finally, in the area of information and transparency, **the Treasury should introduce regular generational accounting – a comprehensive report every two or three years – setting out how the benefit and burden of existing spending, borrowing and investment will impact on different generational groups, now and in the future.**

The law: the role of legislation in improving quality of life

The law has also been an important tool in delivering quality of life to the individual child's tangible needs by promoting good and preventing harm to all children, not just the more affluent ones.

The state and the law have long had a role in protecting children from

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abuse and exploitation by other groups in society. So there are laws limiting the hours of paid work that children and young people can perform, laws limiting their sexual relations and laws protecting them from media intrusion. Children and young people cannot be named in court without the permission of the judge and cannot drive, drink or gamble. (*See* Appendix.)

The most significant piece of legislation in the last generation has been the Children Act 1989, which simplified and rationalised the law and repealed over 50 pieces of legislation relating to children's welfare. Perhaps most significantly, the Act introduced comprehensive responsibilities for local authorities in planning children's services and offering children minimum levels of protection and support. The Children Act introduced the concept of parental responsibility in place of parental rights and encouraged a 'no order principle' which deems it in the best interests of the child for matters to be agreed without a court being involved.

More recently, the increasing frequency of reform in children's services, the high-profile focus on the failures of child protection systems and the new risks posed to children through, for example, the Internet have encouraged the idea that a new Children Act is needed to reintegrate and rationalise the various legislation affecting children's lives, particularly through regulation and control of the public sector. There may well be a case for such legislation following the results of the Victoria Climbié inquiry and the possible restructuring of systems for supporting children at risk. Our argument would be, however, that we should resist the inevitable temptation to legislate for every possible aspect of children's relationships with the state and with adults in authority, for their expectations of service providers and for the regulation of other sectors such as the media.

There is a case for reviewing the coherence of children's legal rights and responsibilities. Despite the significant advances embodied in the Children Act, there are still gaps and inconsistencies in children's legal status. They can participate in war before they can marry without their parent's consent; they are criminally responsible before they can buy cigarettes; they can drive before they can vote; and so on (see Appendix). It probably also makes sense to adjust the definition of governmental responsibilities for services to children to reflect a more coherent strategic role for local authorities (*see below*). But it will never be possible to lay down in law every aspect of how children should relate to society, and

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there is an ever-present danger of further contractualising and over-formalising some of these relationships.

Law can create minimum standards and formal accountability. But our reliance on the law may have worked against trust and shared commitment to informal problem-solving. Think of the hotels whose health and safety policies do not allow them to give a child a plaster, or the school banning the making of daisy chains during playtime. In the summer of 2001, one teachers' union advised its members not to take children out on school trips because of the risk of litigation. Writing ever-more detailed laws is unlikely to ease this growing problem.

If legislation does become a serious possibility, we would recommend following a similar approach to the recent Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, which introduced a positive duty on public sector institutions to target discrimination and promote race equality. **A sensible step would be to make it incumbent on all major public institutions to promote children's quality of life and well-being positively**. However, this would be no more than a foundation for a much broader set of changes, many of which must include voluntary action and cultural change.

Rather than establishing a separate Commissioner for Children's Rights with all its associated bureaucratic infrastructure, **government should incorporate responsibility for preventing discrimination against and exploitation of children into the brief of the new, integrated Equalities Commission** that it is now committed to creating. Age discrimination is likely to become a more visible and hotly contested issue, for young and old, over the coming decades.

Local governance: reviving intermediary institutions?

For citizens, the most important level of 'joining up' is the local. This is especially true of children. So while the central government framework remains important from the perspective of equity and benchmarking, it is direct interaction with service providers, public institutions and the wider environment that makes the most obvious everyday difference to quality of life.

The role of local government in securing outcomes for children has become more ambivalent, not less, in recent years. In statutory terms, the shifts in obligation and structure that local government and other services have gone through reflect a desire for greater strategic coherence.

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Examples of this are the duty to promote community well-being that all local authorities now carry, and the creation of many different cross-agency partnerships, most notably local strategic partnerships, which aim to develop collaborative relationships across sectors and agencies to make services more responsive to citizens.

But these partnerships suffer from two main weaknesses. First, they tend to reflect the overlapping objectives and unequal power distribution of the various institutional systems that feed into them, so that for many organisations, especially voluntary and community-based ones, they seem to represent talking shops dominated by public sector interests. Second, the level of strategic discussion of these partnerships tends to remain abstracted from the operational level of most delivery organisations. They still cover relatively large geographical areas, and it can be difficult to create meaningful connections between joint objectives and ground-level outcomes. As a result, local-authority and other services still suffer from considerable fragmentation.

This problem has been exacerbated by the growing use of alternative means to promote national prescriptions or performance measures. So while the government is increasingly committed to devolution of autonomy to 'the front line' and to decentralisation of decision-making in key services, the stronger use of performance targets, accountability frameworks, dedicated budgets and so on can make it more difficult to enable separate services to work together locally. The most problematic manifestations of this occur when different services compete for resources because of their differing political salience. Many local authorities find that their social services commitments are hard to fund within existing budgets, but also feel strong pressure to find extra money for education, a service much more likely to win votes and approval from the centre.

At a local level, the government needs to change tack, away from creating new funding streams that come into conflict with mainstream structures. It should focus instead on renegotiating the way in which children are viewed in a local context.

One possible solution to these problems is the further reshaping of local government functions to organise budgets, service management and activity more explicitly around children. For example, both Hertfordshire and Brighton and Hove councils have recently restructured by bringing

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together education with the relevant parts of social services, to encourage a more holistic focus on the overall needs of children.

The form that discussion has centred around is the idea of the *children's trust*, which would somehow have both the power and the freedom to concentrate on children's interests across the range of relevant services. Children's trusts might be the focus of strategic service management, or they might become a commissioning body, holding relevant budgets and contracting with other service providers, including those within the relevant local authority, in order to maximise positive outcomes for children.

This idea could have a significant impact. It might encourage joint planning and reviews of services that influence children's lives, and it might strengthen some of the linkages between activities that should be complementary. But as noted earlier, there are great dangers in perpetual restructuring. If the definitions, pressures and incentives acting on children's service providers do not change at a deeper level, it is difficult to see how they would have a radical effect. The argument is that it is not just better delivery of existing objectives that matters, but a broadening and rebalancing of goals and the creation of new relationships between public institutions and informal social resources that can make the most difference.

Nevertheless, we recommend that, whether it takes place through a single reconstituted children's commissioning body or not, **developing a single, cross-agency strategic function at local level, capable of identifying and procuring the appropriate resources to support individual children in different circumstances, should be a priority**. It is relatively easy to see how such a role for older children might grow out of recent changes to the youth and careers service. The new Connexions personal advisers potentially form the core of a service that could offer advocacy and advice to young people and their families, and play a powerful 'brokerage' role in accessing services and designing pathways for teenagers. For younger age groups, such a role might also emerge quite naturally from some existing responsibilities among social workers and health visitors, as Lisa Harker of the IPPR has argued.[126]

The long-term goal should be that all children have access to a community-based professional whose responsibility it is to ensure that their development is supported as actively as possible by public services, community institutions and informal sources of support and information.

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In effect, a new kind of infrastructure would emerge from this relationship, whereby the individual child (and his or her family) can use their link with a 'child development' service as a passport to access a much wider range of resources.

Two questions arise from this idea, however. One is whether such a link between children and community workers could ever be strong enough to bring about real change in the institutional options available to children and families. The second is whether such workers could ever generate the trust needed to work effectively with the children and families most in need of support.

Building local trust, local space and children's assets

The answer to the second question above relates partly to the forms of intervention that child development workers would be responsible for. As Lisa Harker has also argued,[127] while social workers are responsible for making decisions about child protection that could involve taking children away from their parents, there is an inevitable limit on the extent to which they can be trusted by their clients. Equally, while their role is focused only on such marginal cases of children at risk, the relationship is always likely to be a stigmatised one.

There is no easy solution to this, but there are ways in which this crucial link between child and state could be made more productive. The first is for the roles of children and parents in negotiations to be made more explicit and better recognised, so that their roles as co-producers of any solution and as respected participants in the process are understood. This point is argued in greater detail in relation to the child protection system in a forthcoming Demos pamphlet.[128]

The second way is that, rather than the function of the child development professional relating only to the more joyless elements of local public service planning and management, it needs to be connected to a much wider range of strategies for building trust and inclusive social networks for children across local communities.

As we saw in chapter 3, the quality of *cultural space* for children – that is, the strength of adult expectations, availability of supportive social networks and role models, range of informal learning opportunities and safe spaces to play – has an important impact on children's quality of life. These factors are influenced indirectly by such factors as housing mix,

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levels of violence and fear, poverty and so on, as Robert Sampson's work in Chicago makes clear.[129]

However, through the relentless focus on performance management and institutional accountability, it has become all too easy for policy to concentrate only on those aspects of quality of life that come under the direct control of public service institutions. Policies for building trust and community capacity, while recognised as important, in practice receive a far lower priority than the incremental improvement of mainstream, managed services.

One way to address this imbalance would be to make the focus of a new child development service the explicit adding of value to the resources and facilities available for children in a specific community. A useful part of this task would be expanding the *spaces for play and learning* available to children between home and school – in parks, museums, libraries, leisure centres and so on – and ensuring that they are linked together, and to other children's services such as education and crime prevention, in effective ways. Although virtually all local authorities have a leisure strategy, and many are also investing in parks and green spaces, there is relatively little joining up of these activities.

The government recently announced a £200 million investment in improving play spaces and facilities via the New Opportunities Fund. So far, however, this review focuses only on improving the quality and availability of dedicated play schemes and facilities. **Building on this commitment, government should develop a national play strategy, prioritising an increase in active, independent play, linking it to public health and educational objectives, and building the commitment from public, private and voluntary sectors to increase the accessibility of play and learning opportunities for children in all communities. A new national play leader would coordinate and pioneer the strategy.**

One interesting example of a new approach to these issues is Discover, a community learning centre in Stratford, east London. This offers children hands-on, interactive learning opportunities through a dedicated centre that can house various exhibits and activities, and a network of outreach and development activities with local parents, schools and community groups. Such centres provide important clues as to how 'children's centres' might work in practice – building informal social networks, participation and trust across local communities by offering a particular kind of high-quality experience to children themselves.

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A play policy should also make it easier for communities and children to change rules affecting play space – for example, altering traffic routes and parking rules to develop 'home zones', and receiving permission and support for one-off events like street parties and community festivals. Playgrounds and local parks, particularly in urban areas, are two of the few spaces that virtually all children are likely to use in some way. Placing information near playgrounds, as well as children's workers and outreach strategies for a wider range of play and learning opportunities, would also help improve the availability of such networks.

Child development workers could also play a role in developing and 'mutualising' networks of informal support among parents, from pregnancy on. Many existing activities, such as the National Childbirth Trust's antenatal classes for parents-to-be, create huge value for children and parents and, in many areas (not just disadvantaged neighbourhoods), help to compensate for the decline of more traditional forms of community.

To help reinforce such changes, national government and local authorities could introduce a 'children's passport', linked to the range of benefits, including worker support, that are increasingly available to very young children and their parents. This passport could be linked directly to child benefit, for example, and to the allocation of a capital sum as proposed under the government's Child Trust Fund policy. The growth of this financial investment would then be linked from the start to a wider range of institutional and community resources, to information about learning and care opportunities, and to 'progress checks' relating to child development, health, education and so on.

Finally, government should radically increase support for mentoring programmes and other arrangements that increase adult involvement in supportive social arrangements with young people. In the current atmosphere of hysterical anxiety over paedophilia, the difficulty for young people in establishing trusted sources of advice and role models in the wider community is likely to become even greater. But there are huge stocks of potential goodwill and commitment to children and young people that need to be actively facilitated, as well as properly regulated to prevent abuse. Promoting intergeneration exchange and solidarity should become a growing priority.

One idea might be to introduce a mentoring programme that would

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involve 16- to 18-year-old school leavers in a national children's service. Young people would gain accreditation for working as part of the child development service and could become involved as learning mentors – organising sports and other activities, reading to children or providing parenting support. This programme would enable them to 'fast track' into children's services later in life and could be linked to other benefits such as reduced university fees or free transport.

Creating community value: broadening the role of schools

The agenda we have set out could be developed by many different organisations, varying according to local conditions. But local authorities, just like central government, remain relatively remote from individual children and their families.

In discussing structural options for reforming children's services at local authority level, we also argue that substantive change is unlikely to occur for most children unless *education* becomes a more central contributor to local quality of life.

While local authorities now have some clearer priorities and the potential to achieve greater autonomy from Whitehall, there is one major area of policy that remains a vacuum: the role of local education authorities. LEAs now have minimum performance standards and, in a few cases, have been pushed aside in favour of private management companies or other partnership arrangements. As a result, the role of LEAs in coordinating provision, helping to improve standards and building links between education and other areas of policy remains hazy. After a period of strongly imposed national funding priorities, individual schools are now beginning to receive much higher levels of delegated funding. The education department has signalled that it will encourage new forms of collaboration and networking between schools. But both the role of the local intermediary tier in coordinating this range of activity and the definition of educational improvement in relation to broader community need remain seriously confused. Reforming structures for children at risk, therefore, will not become effective in the long run until the role of LEAs is clarified.

Our analysis of quality of life has constantly emphasised the importance of holism for children – promoting social and emotional development, independent play and civic participation alongside material

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wealth and academic attainment. Delivering an agenda locally requires a knitting together of human-scale institutions, so that, between them, they provide balanced support. While local voluntary organisations and civic activity have not necessarily declined in every area, and the evidence for social capital in Britain is mixed, it certainly seems true that the 'civic infrastructure' of relationships, information, trust and mutual concern seems ragged in many parts of the country.

But as was also noted, in chapter 3, the institution that seems to do most to strengthen such capacity, and retains high levels of support and legitimacy, is the school – in particular, the primary school. This points to a new challenge for education policy: to broaden the role of schooling so that it can promote the broader needs of children in communities, alongside the formal standards of attainment that currently dominate education policy.

Education has taken on a new kind of significance in British life over the last decade. While it has always been fundamental to the distribution of opportunity, it has become more 'high stake' as governments have come to rely more heavily on its ability to contribute to other policy objectives, and to tackle social and economic inequality by attaining higher standards of performance and therefore distributing life chances and future opportunities differently. Some argue that, to meet these increased expectations, schools need to be left alone to concentrate on higher achievement, rather than dragged into tackling an even wider range of social problems.

But this ignores the very basic evidence that schools have to deal with what is happening around them because of the direct impact such factors have on pupils. It is well established that the most influential factors in determining educational attainment are environmental, in the sense that they occur outside the school. Quality of teaching and school management play smaller roles than one might guess from the current terms of government policy.

Many schools and school leaders, in fact, regularly argue that it is unbalanced to focus only on formal measures of achievement when they are working in settings where many other factors are in flux – where unemployment, poor housing, community fragmentation, crime and so on are steadily undermining the conditions needed for effective teaching and learning to take place. Others, including those in high-performing

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schools of all kinds, increasingly articulate the concern that an understandable pressure towards formal and academic attainment is compromising the social, emotional and personal development of young people, echoing the evidence on these aspects of quality of life that we have already reviewed. Even in relatively affluent areas, schools are under increasing pressure to deliver results first and deal with other social, emotional and environmental issues second.

Schools and community learning

Our analysis leads to the conclusion that **the answer lies not just in strengthening education's contribution to future life chances through higher attainment, but in giving schools the opportunity to play a more direct role in improving quality of life for those who live around them**. Given the familiar problems of making separate agencies deal with complex human needs, and of engaging citizens in productive, reciprocal relationships, it surely makes sense to maximise the impact of those local institutions that do have an ongoing, trusted relationship with a large part of the community, and are in direct contact with the needs and potential of children as they present themselves in everyday life. As Ben Jupp's study for Demos showed,[130] schools are by far the most widely supported local institution and the richest source of cross-cutting social networks among parents and others. But for many, if not most, in local communities, the school remains a closed institution, serving their pupils mostly behind high walls, dealing with the wider community only in relatively marginal ways.

As an alternative, the concept of the 'community' or 'full-service' school is relatively well established. It implies that school facilities may be more accessible to the wider community, and that a range of other professions and services, such as health and mental health departments, housing, behaviour support, social work, careers guidance and so on would be co-located in the school and available to support the needs of students, particularly so that they can support their ongoing educational progress.

US states such as Florida have introduced legislation to support community services in schools, including nutritional advice, assistance in applying for public benefits and adult education. The full-service concept has had positive results in terms of improved attendance and attainment,

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improved employment prospects, reduced drug abuse, fewer teenage pregnancies, reduction of crime and improved family health. The move towards 'new community schools' in Scotland is closely related to the full-service concept. Launched in 1998, the Scottish model now has 62 pilot projects underway.[131]

Co-location of services is, of course, not an instant provider of an integrated approach. Evaluators in Scotland have identified some problems, such as: professional disputes about leadership in specific areas; differences over salary differentials and status; and areas being stigmatised because they are perceived as requiring special help.[132] But there is a growing body of innovative practice and energy being developed around the idea, particularly in schools looking for creative solutions to serious challenges.

The DfES has established an 'extended schools' policy, in which it supports the development of wider community uses for schools and the growth of 'out of hours' learning. The problem, however, is that the justification for these extended activities is couched solely in terms of their ability to support the existing standards agenda, the justification being that an enriched, extended community level underpins formal learning outcomes. As the original *Schools Plus* report put it:

> *This report does not see Schools Plus activities as a remedy in themselves, but as an important and at present under-exploited element in schools' overall strategy for raising attainment and expectations of both pupils and adults.*[133]

In relation to a school standards agenda, this is true. But more broadly, it risks putting the cart before the horse. Unless education is also contributing to the broader well-being of children and the capacity of communities to support it, the focus on attainment will continue to be skewed in ways that produce perverse outcomes.

In reality, too much of the wider framework of schools policy and regulation and the ways in which the impact of schooling is measured undermine the possibility of schools playing a broader, more proactive role in community life. This usually happens through unintended consequences of policy such as: competition between schools for intake leading to unwillingness to collaborate; growing school-to-work distances

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creating traffic congestion problems and undermining neighbourhood involvement in the local school; narrow performance targets pushing other forms of outcome down the priority list; and so on.

We therefore recommend that government should set a long-term objective: that, over the next five to ten years, effective schools should become directly involved in helping to deliver well-being to their students, not just academic attainment. This means that, as well as adding new layers of activity to what schools already do, the way they are measured, funded and rewarded for success will all need to evolve over time.

For example, schools could become the neighbourhood base for the commissioning and coordination of service packages for individual children, as behaviour support workers and Connexions advisers already try to do. The schools should be encouraged to be open for longer and to develop a range of community activities and learning services that build cooperative relationships with the local community.

Criteria for performance league tables, OfSTED inspections and school funding should be adjusted to reflect the impact of schools on the social and emotional development of pupils, and to reflect their contribution to improving social outcomes in the wider area. Over time, there is no technical obstacle to developing 'value-added' measures that reflect this broader definition of child development.

Schools, often operating in collaborative groups or networks, should be given the opportunity to work more directly in partnership with health service providers, housing associations and others to tackle problems such as estate regeneration, playspace and park improvement, transport and independent mobility for children, jobsearch for parents, family literacy, and so on. Funding streams from central and regional government should be consolidated in ways that encourage these forms of 'civic entrepreneurship' by groups of institutions.

One possibility is that, alongside core per capita funding for education in schools, a supplementary form of funding could reward 'neighbourliness' or the extent to which schools are reinforcing the wider conditions for quality of life – for example, by working with struggling schools in the same area, creating common admissions arrangements in order to offer a wider range of curriculum options to all children, tackling negative factors such as crime, poor housing and so on. As a result,

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accountability frameworks, which currently discourage too much flexibility and joint action across current service functions, would come to reflect more accurately the ways in which different players come together to 'co-produce' common outcomes.

The overall effect would be a much wider range of 'schooling collaboratives' working through a variety of networks and partnerships to provide diverse learning opportunities and social solutions in integrated ways. Such a model is also compatible with a wider diversity of education providers, if government were to take the decision that competition in supply is also desirable.

Such a strategy could be developed, in this five- to ten-year timescale, out of the foundations put in place by recent education policy. High expectations, transparency and performance goals for schools, alongside a growing diversity of curriculum options and organisational structures, provide the potential for a much wider spectrum of roles and strategies for schools in their local communities. The key, however, lies in removing existing structural barriers in the systems of accountability and measurement to the emergence of new roles.

The final dimension of this new role for schools lies in *school governance*. The current model, where a board of governors guides the work of a relatively autonomous headteacher, operating within a wider framework of accountability and intervention from the centre, is hugely unproductive. Membership of a board of governors represents an onerous and impoverished form of involvement for all but the most committed parents and citizens; as a result, successive governments have struggled with the problem of recruiting more governors. Present-day governing bodies also give only limited practical support to headteachers, who are now, in effect, operating as chief executives responsible for significant budgets, operational management and curriculum leadership across quite complex organisations. The final drawback of the current model is that it plays no role in creating shared aspirations and responsibilities between schools, organisations and service providers working in the same neighbourhoods.

We therefore recommend that government, as part of its existing agenda for encouraging collaboration and networking between schools, should make possible a wider range of governance models for restructuring the relationship between schools and the wider community.

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Options include:

- establishing local 'school boards' with stronger powers and responsibilities for improving child well-being and education across a whole local community, and operating closer to street level than existing local authorities.
- shared management boards, in which headteachers can develop teams of directors more akin to the managements of large companies, and bring senior service managers from other areas such as policing and social services into positions of direct responsibility in education governance, developing strategies for neighbourhood improvement as well as the narrower delivery of core curriculum services.
- the more radical option of giving 'ownership' of schools, or clusters of schools, to the community. This could be done by developing models of mutual ownership in which parents and other community members, perhaps through non-profit foundations, could take on strategic responsibility for education and receive support and finance from central government to deliver a range of services.

Schools operating in these ways could also provide the bedrock of data-collection for the national quality of life for children surveys recommended above.

Media and representation – creating space for children in the 'information society'

Children's lack of power is also directly connected to the way they are served by the media. Overall, the media's portrayal of children is highly skewed towards a small number of topics. According to a recent US study, more than 90% of newspaper and TV coverage of children focused on two topics: youth crime and violence, and child abuse and neglect.[134] The growing concern about commercial pressure on children to grow up too fast is matched only by the growing sensationalism of media coverage devoted to the issues of paedophilia and the Internet.

Treatment of children in the media therefore risks overemphasising

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two negative trends at the same time: an unbalanced emphasis on children as objects of desire and participants in a celebrity-fuelled race for consumer satisfaction and social status; and mounting anxiety about the need to control new media and the opportunities it presents to abuse and exploit children.

As children's media become more diversified, during a period of growing competition and diversity in the supply of content and broadcasting services, there is no reason to think that it will automatically become worse in quality. Equally, media convergence and interactivity present new opportunities to link entertainment with learning and to enrich the knowledge and experience available to children through media space. But this process of diversification also risks pushing children's media into a set of niches that further separate their lives from the rest of society in terms of understanding, recognition and respect, while children continue to be bombarded with pressures, expectations and information from the adult world.

The case for new regulation and control of children's media is all too easily made and, if it comes to fruition, will not always be effective. Our analysis suggests that the problems of representation and imbalance in children's media are more likely to be the product of their under-representation in society as a whole and their lack of political power.

But two issues of concern do stand out that might be addressed in part through intelligent regulation. The first is whether or not commercial advertising to children – particularly of products that can undermine their quality of life, such as foods lacking in nutritional value – is becoming unbalanced. **We therefore recommend that OfCom, the newly established communications regulator, should investigate the regulation of advertising to children and whether certain kinds of advertising could be taxed or banned at certain times to redress this balance.**

The second is the lack of children's voice in both children's and adult media. **Here we recommend that all major broadcasters and media outlets should establish structures for user feedback and representation on children's issues** in the same way that growing numbers of newspapers appoint 'reader's editors' and use new forms of consultation to guide editorial policy.

Finally, government should support the creation of an independent, national children's news agency, perhaps created by expanding and

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networking the relatively small number of children's media organisations that already exist, in order to support representations of children and views more grounded in their direct experience.

Civil society and the voluntary sector: the role of children's charities

Much of the market for campaigning on children's issues is currently captured by a small number of large, well-established charities. Barnardos, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), The Children's Society, NCH and Save the Children (SCF) have origins in the nineteenth century and came into being to tackle social problems caused by Industrial Revolution. Several were started by religious organisations, and all are dedicated to improving the lives of disadvantaged children.

Over the last generation, such charities have changed the profile of their activity hugely. Originally providers of charitably funded services, they are increasingly enmeshed in the contract-based provision of public services. They have also become skilled and powerful media-based advocates, and often are formidable operators in parliamentary and political lobbying on children's issues. Recent campaigns initiated by one or more in this group have included those to end youth homelessness, to stop the smacking of children and to stop child sex abuse and prostitution. The big charities are also centrally involved in the campaign to establish a children's rights commissioner.

Clearly, a long-term agenda for change in the treatment of children by the wider society should be led and shaped by many different civil-society institutions. But there are uncomfortable questions to be addressed about the extent to which the recent strategies of these bigger charities have clarified or obscured the true range of issues affecting children. The Victoria Climbié inquiry has focused attention on the NSPCC and the extent to which voluntary organisations can be made accountable for service failures. The failure in that case, while not the central focus here, helps to illuminate the difficulty of achieving joint accountability through contract-based arrangements, when responsibility for child protection is distributed across such a wide range of institutional players.

Some of the reaction to such failures tends towards the hysterical, and the NSPCC and others have been accused of pursuing organisational self-interest in ways that undermine their missions. This is too neat a response

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to failures for which society as a whole should take responsibility. But it is the case that non-profit organisations are experiencing the same pressures of competition, the need for profile and increasing complexity in their operating environment that also beset government and businesses.

The use of expensive, high-profile, high-impact advertising campaigns should be reviewed to find out how effective they are in leading to longer-term change in culture and behaviour towards children, as opposed to their effectiveness in fundraising and lobbying strategies. The apparent increase in intensity of competition between these charities for voice and influence also raises the question of whether or not mergers and reshaping of the sector would lead to a more effective division of labour across the landscape of children's needs, and a lessening of the pressure to achieve profile as a prerequisite to anything else.

Finally, these and many other voluntary organisations are involved in many different efforts to reduce or prevent things that inhibit children's quality of life. But the dominance of high-profile campaigning and the temptation to cement negative, single-focus images of abuse, neglect and exploitation in the public mind may be contributing to a skewed perception of the risks facing all children, and therefore to unrealistic expectations that such risks can be totally eradicated. A more constructive approach to improving quality of life for children would be to review the balance of risks facing different groups of children and develop advocacy strategies and service innovations dedicated to more effective *risk management* by and on behalf of children.

We therefore recommend that the leading children's charities should come together to review the range of risks to children's well-being and develop joint strategies for communicating these risks accurately and reducing them through effective management, as well as prioritising some of the newer threats to children's quality of life. There is no doubt that a powerful advocacy role for children will be needed over the next generation, but it may well be that children's charities could play a more positive role in prevention if they were able to escape from the niche in which they now find themselves.

Children, commerce and work

This report has deliberately not focused on issues of family-friendly employment because, as an area of debate, it is already well covered.

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However, its centrality to quality of life for children should be made clear. Recent strides in the UK in re-regulating aspects of the labour market, extending time leave rights for parents and encouraging flexibility at work to reflect parental commitments should be seen as the beginning of a long-term reform agenda rather than the completion of an older set of commitments to end discrimination at work.

Developing a work culture that places more emphasis on autonomy, productivity and balance is an ongoing priority. The incremental extension of legally recognised time rights and minimum standards is justified.

But the more urgent question is whether the competitive drive for productivity and the wider culture of consumption and commerce that surrounds it truly reflects the peak of adult well-being and fulfilment and makes it possible to realise our full aspirations for our children.

While employers could bear much higher degrees of flexibility and support for working parents, it is also true that the economic cost of more time spent with children and fewer hours worked needs to be shared more widely; it cannot simply be imposed on employers. This might result in the reshaping of careers, so that people expect to work less while their children are relatively young, but also expect to work well into their 70s. In the meantime, **proactive expansion of workplace childcare facilities and a strong commitment to keep developing the availability and affordability of childcare should be a central priority for government**.

The bigger question for parents, employers and the media, alongside policymakers, is about the trade-off between time spent at work, the accumulation of material goods and paid-for services used as substitutes for 'informal' care time formerly given by parents to children, and the possibility that we might discover new ways of making collective choices to prioritise the quality of children's and family lives over the fulfilment of success in the workplace.

This question of cultural change and choice also links directly to the issue of marketing to children and whether there should be stronger regulation of the strategies and images used to sell to and through children.

Rather than seeking to control – in ever-greater detail – companies involved in selling or supplying goods or services recognised to be part of a current problem for children's quality of life, such as asthma or obesity,

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one option would be to regulate companies so that they are required to contribute positively to quality of life in other ways, such as through employee volunteering, corporate community investment and so on. In effect, this would be **a tax on companies profiting from high-risk areas of children's lives**. In the longer term, corporate and payroll taxes might be adjusted to reward practices, such as family-friendly employment, that contribute to children's well-being. Allowing such taxes to be paid in kind would allow space for interesting innovation.

Finally, as these new forms of financial reporting and impact evaluation are introduced, government should also announce a commitment to reversing the proportions of public spending in children's lives, particularly through education spending, to ensure that the highest levels of per capita spending are directed towards children in the first five years of life when intervention and support can have the greatest long-term impact. The UK government has finally grasped the nettle of higher education funding, and effectively established the principle that university graduates whose earnings benefit from their education should pay back a growing proportion of the cost. It is regrettable that public subsidy cannot support all of the expansion in higher education, but it remains the case that public spending in the earlier years is more strongly justified. The government should take the brave step of entrenching this principle in the way that it plans for and calculates education budgets over the next decade.

Conclusion: learning from and investing in the family and creating 'adaptive capacity'

Much of political and moral debate still centres around the apparent fragmentation of family life. As we saw in earlier chapters, the evidence on family breakdown is mixed, and the decline in the popularity of marriage appears to have slowed. The evidence on the impact on children of divorce and reconstituted families is still inconsistent, but it is increasingly accepted that higher flexibility in adult relationships may compromise some aspects of children's development.

We need to recognise that, as other traditional supports and surrounds to children's lives have been reshaped, the family remains the institution that has adapted most successfully to changing circumstances, and does most to produce positive quality of life for children.

From meeting basic security and constancy needs, to interpreting

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complex cultural contexts, the family is the ombudsman between children and society. The family is the primary arbiter over the child's well-being, supported by external influences but not replaced by them. Its role in children's lives is both proactive and reactive, responding to children's needs and society's demands and seeking to realise specific conceptions of what is good for particular children.

Public policy is gradually, even reluctantly, coming to recognise the primacy of the family's influence as a social unit on children's prospects for the future, as well as on their current well-being. This has been reflected in the recent review of adoption policy that has led to radically higher targets for the number of children moved out of state care and into permanent families.[135]

But rather than seeking to identify and idealise a single form of family, or to somehow return to a bygone set of social norms and power structures, we need to learn a different kind of lesson from the way that family life has changed. Most families have become object lessons in *child-centred adaptation*. They have to live and work in the real world. Parents cope – because they have to – with more flexible yet often longer working hours, more fragmented community relationships and new risks to their children's safety. Parents also cope, in various ways, with the consequences of relationship breakdown, and seek forms of support and compensation that enable children to deal positively with it.

In the main, families have managed the changes of the last 30 years by giving children a more central role in financial and other family decision-making, and by building flexible organisational and social arrangements around the increasingly diverse needs of individual children. Thus new communications technologies, consumer power, flexible labour markets, out-of-school childcare and so on have all been incorporated into mainstream family life in one way or another. Parents recognise a new need to support their children's evolving individual identities. The working model of the family is based on continuous negotiation and adaptation, combining constant commitment with growing flexibility about how outcomes are best secured. Family relationships are not laid down by charter or written into contracts.

Many children suffer lapses of care and appalling forms of abuse within families. However, most families still place children's needs and interests explicitly at their centre, and then seek to organise what needs to

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be done around these needs and interests. In that sense, family life has become more democratic, though the tendency towards participation and autonomy is always combined, sometimes uneasily, with the need for parents to act as guardians and protectors.

Of course, families are still also an institution, and their form and function are directly influenced by their place in much wider systems of economic exchange, cultural participation and so on. It is worth noting that the legal, structural and traditional characteristics of families as institutions no longer neatly overlap with the set of norms, expectations, informal commitments, supportive networks and flexible organisational arrangements that are now used to organise family life. The result is that there is an under-recognised quality in the way family life works. We need to learn how to create institutions and formal rules that can adapt on the same kind of terms, while explicitly recognising the fact that what happens in family life has the greatest influence on outcomes for children.

Over time, this recognition should lead to a much stronger parent and family support infrastructure, supported and sponsored by government, but delivered and reinforced by organisations from all sectors.

Perhaps the most basic lesson is that good parents do not support their children only by paying attention to them when something negative is happening, or when they are clearly at risk, or when they cause trouble of some kind. Whatever the specific philosophy, children's well-being rests on a constancy of commitment and care framed by a positive idea of what is good for the child, however implicit.

This, in turn, may provide a lesson for policy:

- First, negative outcomes for children can only be reduced so far without a central, explicit vision of what is good for children.
- Second, public institutions cannot deliver this positive vision without working proactively in conjunction with the rest of society to make it possible.

A model combining constant concern for children's well-being with continuous flexibility and adaptation in the face of a changing environment may provide a new kind of blueprint for the organisations charged with providing services and resources for children.

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This should provide a clue to the ways in which public service providers seek to involve parents and others more directly. So far, much of the trend in policy has been towards trying to formalise parents' responsibilities by contractualising them, and introducing sanctions when they fail to deliver. Stronger responsibilities may well need to be asserted for the sake of children's well-being, but if all public service providers do is insist that parents must fit in more actively with the operating routines and structures of existing institutions, we will have got it the wrong way round. The organisational character of education, healthcare, employment, criminal justice and neighbourhood management could, and probably should, change radically over the next generation. These changes will only serve children's interests if parents and institutions are prepared to construct their activities jointly around the full needs and potential of the child.

Equally, we have to recognise that many of the worst things that happen to children will happen in families. It remains the case that most of the children who are abused are maltreated by people known to them – if not parents, then people who are friends of or related to their parents. Privatised responsibilities and joined-up institutions will never be able to replace or diminish the impact of the culture and informal social ties of children; they can only hope to influence that culture and those social ties.

The persistence of abuse and exploitation provides a graphic illustration of the need to make children's well-being the focus of debate and collective concern. It is right to insist that children's interests should be the focus of public concern, but wrong to think that we can write law or policy that serves them fully. Children depend on the concern and support of adults beyond their own parents in order to flourish and thrive. They also rely on the strength of social norms, and of people's readiness to challenge existing loyalties and shame in order to overcome and prevent the forms of abuse and neglect that linger.

None of these is a task that government, or any specialised agency, can accomplish alone. That is why we should continue to debate the morality of how we treat children, and to argue over what is good for children beyond the limits of our own direct responsibilities. In the end, the capacity of society as whole to replenish and renew itself depends on the extent to which all of us are ready to take an interest in other people's children.

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Appendix

Timeline – what children can do when

Age	UK (some regional variation)	International	Historical (UK)
1			
2			
3			
4	Northern Ireland: start compulsory education	Luxembourg: start compulsory education	
5	Can drink alcohol at home with parental consent. England, Scotland & Wales: start compulsory education		Pre-1833: children could begin work
6			
7		Denmark, Finland & Sweden: start compulsory education	
8	Scotland: age of criminal responsibility		
9			1833: children below this age not allowed to work (in textiles)

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10	England & Wales: age of criminal responsibility	Nepal: 7% of girls are married by this age	
11		Chile, Mexico & Panama: age of consent	
12	Parents can be prosecuted if children under this age are left home alone. Scotland: can make a will	Norway: can refuse to change name Japan & Spain: age of consent	1860: age of consent
13	Can be employed, subject to conditions	Netherlands: age of criminal responsibility	1875: age of consent
14	Can ride a horse without protective headgear	Canada, Iceland & Italy: age of consent	
15	End of compulsory education	Denmark: age of criminal responsibility France: age of consent	
16	Age of consent (heterosexuals and homosexuals). Can marry with parental permission, buy cigarettes, operate a petrol pump	France, Italy, Spain, Austria & Belgium: can buy alcohol	1885: age of consent
17	Can hold a driving licence Northern Ireland: age of consent (heterosexuals and homosexuals)		

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18	Can vote, marry, drink alcohol, own a credit card, watch films of all certifications England, Wales & Northern Ireland: can make a will	Luxembourg: criminal responsibility	1994–2001: age of consent for homosexuals
19			
20			
21		US: cannot buy alcohol under this age	1967–1994: age of consent for homosexuals

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