

Jill Kirby on childcare and full-time parenting

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by Jill Kirby

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· Research shows that children benefit from the loving secure long-term care they receive at home, and may suffer relationship-building problems in later life if they receive chop-and-change institutional care.

· Parents who decide to stay at home to look after children (or elderly relatives) should be regarded as being of equal worth to those who go out to work

· The tax and benefits system should be, at least, neutral, so that parents who wish to stay at home can realistically exercise their choice to do so.

Balance over time

"Balancing home and work" is one of those phrases which appears with great regularity - not only in the pages of women's magazines but also on the agenda of just about every family conference I have ever attended. And unless you are very lucky someone will be almost bound to mention the other cliché: "Having it All".

At Full Time Mothers (FTM) we believe that you can have it all - but not all at once. That if you spend the early years of motherhood frantically juggling and balancing, you will drop something. The chances are that family life will suffer - and that your children will be the casualties. And because it may not be a good idea to try to do everything at once, we continue to press for tax breaks for women (or men) at home who are caring for children (or for the elderly). The important concept is that a non-earning wife should have the option to transfer her tax allowance to her earning spouse and so boost the family budget. FTM was delighted that William Hague made a commitment to the transferable tax allowance as an essential recognition of the mother's status before the 2001 election.

Employment

Another main plank of the FTM campaign concerns our interpretation of family-friendly employment policies. Mothers should have the opportunity to take longer career breaks and there should be incentives to employers to retrain mothers of older children. Employers should be encouraged to view their maturity and their diminished family commitments as good reasons to bring them back into the workforce. It makes a lot more sense than pouring money into workplace crèches - and it's certainly a lot kinder to our children. One of the saddest stories I hear - and I hear it often - is the mother who works throughout her child's infancy not because she wants to miss all those wonderful early years, but for fear that she will be unemployable in later life.

Best for the child

There is general agreement among child psychologists (such as Oliver James and Juliet Hopkins of the Tavistock Institute, and indeed Penelope Leach) that young children do not benefit from institutional care but need continuity of care in familiar surroundings. That they need to become attached to the adult who cares for them and that they suffer a kind of bereavement if that carer leaves.

Oliver James has focused on the problem of anxious attachment suffered by the child whose

carers chop and change, and is unable to form lasting relationships in later life. Common sense tells us that babies and young mothers crave security, not endless social contact.

Labour policy

Recent surveys - including those commissioned by this Government's Women's Unit - show that mothers of young children resist full time work. Amongst mothers of school age children, there is a strong demand for part time work that fits in with school hours. Mothers who do leave their children in others' care prefer family-based, informal, homecare to childminders and day nurseries.

But despite all this evidence, the Government persists in subsidising "stranger" care. The Childcare Credit in the new Working Families Tax Credit provides families (including those well into the middle-income scale) with up to £105 a week towards the cost of "stranger" (i.e. registered) care. It continues to hammer the one breadwinner family. The Chancellor clearly subscribes to the view that a mother can and should operate as an independent economic unit - who should be encouraged to surrender the care of her children to maximise her "work potential".

Can there be a perfect solution?

The myth persists that there is a perfect solution for mothers called "accessible, affordable, high quality childcare". "High quality" care is not "affordable" care. "Accessible" care means childcare at home - or should do. "High quality" care means - for a baby or toddler - one-to-one care from a loving and committed adult. An adult who will not take sick leave or change jobs, or object to working long hours. This will never be affordable. (If it were, it would no doubt contravene the Social Chapter - who would do the hours?) This kind of care is beyond price. It is a mother's care. Yet our society places no value on it.

If we are to provide quality daycare, with the necessary adult-child ratios, it will be prohibitively expensive. Cheaper to pay a mother to stay at home with her children. And indeed there are some European countries - notably Norway and Finland - who have come to this view and pay a childcare allowance direct to families who may choose to spend it on daycare or give it to the mother if she is doing the caring. Other major European economies, such as Germany and France, operate systems of income-splitting or income sharing, so that families can opt to be taxed as a family unit - having regard to the non-earning adult, dependent children and so forth. It is generally admitted that this country has adopted a "worst of both worlds" system of independent taxation unaccompanied by recognition of family dependents.

I fear that none of these family-friendly options will find favour with this Government. It expresses enthusiasm for the family, but views it as a kind of fluctuating and optional arrangement of whom you happen to be living with at the time. It is tied to the feminist ideology, which declared that women at home were subjects of male tyranny. It ignores the crucial need for interdependence between men and women, enabling women to leave the workplace for a period in order to ensure the welfare of their children. It also threatens to institutionalise our children from an early age, in the guise of the new "educare" - wrap-around nine-to-five nursery care with an "educational" input. This will detach children from their families and detach mothers from their responsibilities. Do we really want to hand our children over to the State?

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

CONSERVATIVE POLICY

The Conservative manifesto at the 2001 General Election contained the following pledges:

- To introduce a transferable Married Couple's Allowance

- To increase the Children's Tax Credit for families with children under 5
- To introduce Family Scholarships to assist parents who had taken time out from their career to look after their children to retrain before returning to the work place
- To reform the Working Families Tax Allowance so that it is paid directly to the caring parent.

BACKGROUND QUOTES AND SCRIPTURES

"Women feel like they've broken the glass ceiling and now can operate on their own terms, not on men's terms. It's all about the power of choice. So if a woman chooses to stay at home and work as a full time mother, she feels her status is on par with a salaried position," Dr Miriam Stoppard (Families MAGAZINE, November 2001)

Bible Study: The Wife of Noble Character: (Proverbs 31: 10-31)

FURTHER READING

"What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us": Danielle Crittenden

"The Smart Woman's Guide to Staying at Home": Melissa Hill