

# Children in greater need [GB] <sup>[1]</sup>

While the government presses on with child care reform, it still lets down our vulnerable youth

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Ever since Mowgli teamed up with Bagheera, childminding has been linked with myth and magic. Mary Poppins descending from the heavens requires hardly more suspension of disbelief, though, than current social policy. In the most expansionist miracle since the loaves and fishes, the government is transforming child care.

The Britain of 1997 was one of the worst providers in the developed world, relying chiefly on a patchy network of grandmas and homesick mothers' helps from rural France. Since then, more than a million nursery places have been created and 2,500 children's centres are promised by 2008. Child care, a core issue for the third term, is now embossed on Labour's soul.

Last week, that vision collided with BBC 1's *Nurseries Undercover*, showing treatment critics called 'cruel and shocking'. Toddlers were ordered to 'sit' by Crufts-style disciplinarians, a child was manhandled and narcoleptic staff took 'power naps'.

Nothing exposes the illogic of the British psyche as much as the way we treat children. Smacking them is allowable, in ministers' eyes. On the other hand, fathers invited to parenting classes will allegedly be warned of the pernicious effects of chatting on mobile phones while playing with their offspring. The behaviour exposed by the BBC fell between these distant benchmarks.

Though some incidents were indefensible, it seemed reassuring that a programme avid for scandal had to settle for such low-grade sins. The corporation may not even have believed its own sensationalist pre-publicity, since it did not bother to inform the regulator, Ofsted, about the alleged maltreatment until months later. What the programme did hint at was a pattern of ignorance and overwork, in which harassed carers offered no sign of understanding small children or even liking them. The worst incident, in which a little girl burned her hands on a radiator, reflected zero knowledge about emergency response.

Until now, fractious arguments about daycare have turned on ideology. Research suggesting that under-twos spending long hours in nurseries may be slightly more aggressive has been seized on by those eager to keep mothers at home.

Stripped of hysteria, the picture looks like this: a million children have been lifted out of poverty, partly because their mothers work. That is why Gordon Brown was so keen on child care in the first place. Leon Feinstein's discovery of a 13 per cent gap in educational attainment at 22 months makes an iron case for poor and rich children being cared for together, and group care is indisputably good for over-threes.

The remaining question is whether British child care is any good. Ministers have not properly confronted the quality issue, chiefly because they do not dare. Like locomotion and electric light in the 19th century, daycare has become the growth industry of its age, with around 180,000 new workers needed in the next three years to meet the government's targets. But whereas European applicants need a diploma or degree, many British nursery staff require little more than evidence that they are not convicted predators, plus a tolerance of long hours, minimal wages and life in a sector where leadership, support and funding have lagged way behind expansion.

As the Daycare Trust and the National Day Nurseries Association point out, nurseries are not affordable, when parents pay up to £388 a week. But nor are they expensive. Getting your child cared for, at £2.60 or so an hour, is one of the cheapest deals around. The dislocation lies in a state subsidy of 0.3 per cent of GDP for early years, against Sweden's 2 per cent.

Problems at some nurseries are not an argument for mothers staying at home. Daycare can be the best possible foundation for shaping sociable, humane, well-educated people, irrespective of their wealth and background.

The danger comes only if a child care revolution starts to produce human storage units plagued by fast staff turnover, bad training and low pay. Gordon Brown, on the verge of announcing his 10-year plan for affordable child care for every family by 2015, has tackled quantity. Now he must offer to pay the very large price necessary to train and reward staff.

That investment would be one signal that this is the century in which children of all ages cease to be seen as third-rate human beings.

- reprinted from the Observer

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability <sup>[3]</sup>

quality <sup>[4]</sup>  
funding <sup>[5]</sup>  
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