

Childish argument [GB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Norman Glass is bemused. The man credited with inventing the government's early years Sure Start programme is considering the suggestion, made by some newspapers last week, citing US research that nursery daycare for children under three is in danger of creating a breed of antisocial monsters.

"The risks are so very slight," Glass sighs. "It is almost wicked to give the impression that, by putting their kids into nursery, mothers are breeding some kind of race of football hooligans terrorising the land."

Glass, an expert on early years child development, doesn't really do angry, but he is clearly unhappy with the direction in which some journalists have taken the debate. "It may be that I'd rather have a more boisterous child if I could earn sufficient to pay for healthier food and books," he says. "There are always trade-offs. You can't just take one outcome measure."

He fears the way the research from the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has been reported - in the Daily Mail, London Evening Standard, and elsewhere - could undermine the case for providing free nursery provision for under-3s. "It would be laughable if it wasn't so capable of causing damage," he says.

Capacity, a new thinktank chaired by Glass, has called on ministers to build on the significant expansion in childcare provision since Labour took power in 1997 by guaranteeing under-3s have 12.5 hours of free care each week. He says: "We know that high-quality childcare can make a difference to children's development - especially children from deprived backgrounds - and to the ability of mothers to integrate back into labour markets by improving confidence in themselves, and it can make bringing up children less stressful."

So he welcomes chancellor Gordon Brown's announcement, in Monday's 2004 spending review, of a pilot scheme offering a free part-time early education place for 12,000 two-year-olds in 500 disadvantaged areas. "I'm a little bit surprised," Glass confesses. "But it seems to me an intelligent way of taking this forward, as long as there is proper evaluation before making a decision about how it can proceed."

Also unexpected - but equally welcome - was Brown's proposal to fund 2,500 children's centres by 2008, instead of the initial target of 1,700 in each of the 20% most disadvantaged wards in England.

The spending review followed the government's five-year education plan, which offered "more opportunities for parents to stay at home with under-3s if they want to, and a wide range of accessible, affordable, high-quality early learning and childcare for parents to choose from, with payments according to means supported by tax credits". There is no detail yet; the government will say only that is exploring options for extending paid maternity leave to 12 months.

Glass favours extending maternity leave - "as long as it isn't a signal that childcare for young children is wicked". He says: "I'm all in favour of parents who want to stay home, but not all do. You need to look at the mother's point of view."

"There seems to be an industry devoted to making mothers feel guilty. But it all depends on circumstances - such as their relationship with their child, and their income. I don't see how there can be a universal recipe that everything would be all right if mothers stayed home all the time until kids went to secondary school."

Glass's research outfit, the National Centre for Social Research, which he joined from the Treasury as chief executive in 2001, has conducted a number of surveys on parents use of, and demand for, childcare and early years services. They demonstrated the need for more flexible free childcare.

For this reason, he welcomes the government's proposal to allow the 12.5 free hours of childcare a week for children aged three and four to be used more flexibly across the week than the daily sessions of two-and-half hours currently available, and to combine nursery education with childcare. He is disappointed, however, that the childcare was not extended to 20 hours a week, as Capacity recommended.

Glass also supports the extension of the Sure Start approach of bringing together health, early learning and parenting support for pre-school children by expanding the numbers of children's centres. The centres may be created by developing existing nursery schools or Sure Start programmes, of which there are 524. The eventual aim is to have a children's centre within easy reach of every parent.

But he is concerned that the £769m additional funding by 2007-8 that Brown announced in the spending review to deliver the children centres amounts to a lot less per head than the £500m annual budget for Sure Start.

Glass warns that it will be "fantastically difficult" if government expects a bigger contribution from local authorities and primary care trusts to fund the centres, since that would mean agencies having to give up money from their priority areas - such as child protection - to pay for a preventive programme.

One of reasons for Sure Start's success - in addition to parental involvement - is that it was well funded with extra money. "It was perceived by other agencies as additional money, so while they may have been competing for staff, they were not competing over funding," Glass says.

Glass, when he was chair of his local Sure Start, in Croydon, south London, came up against powerful professional boundaries. This experience, together with his 30 years in the civil service in various spending departments, has left him skeptical about whether joint working will ever happen. "It depends what incentives there are for people to collaborate," he says. "Sure Start meant that you would get extra money in your area if you worked together."

He believes that the development of an early years profession would help to break down boundaries.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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