

## Cameron: Making Britain the best place in the world for children to grow up

Conservative Party leader David Cameron today launches the second report of David Willetts's Childhood Review, which analyses how changing circumstances in the outside world have driven children indoors, and explains how this retreat from the outside world is having a profound effect on children's well-being. The Childhood Review was set up after a UNICEF report in February 2007 judged the UK the worst place out of 21 developed countries to be a child.

The analysis in the Childhood Review's 'More Ball Games' points out the need for work in three vital areas:

- . Making outdoor space safer and more protected, so that parents and children feel more confident about spending time there;
- . Dealing with bullying, which is a source of much misery for children and which has elicited too little attention;
- . Increasing accessibility to sports and other activities within and outside school, so that children have more opportunities to exercise, learn in an outdoor environment and mix with children of different ages and backgrounds.

Speaking at the launch of the report in London this morning, Conservative Party leader David Cameron will say:

"Nowhere is the right balance of personal responsibility, a strong society, and effective government more necessary than when it come to improving the well-being of our children. The UNICEF report was damning and shocking, but as a country we must not lose faith in ourselves.

"Together we can create a strong and confident society in which children live, play and grow happily within the boundaries of the common good. Boundaries which are monitored and enforced by all adults: not as lone soldiers but as part of a social fabric.

“This generation of children has as much potential as any previous generation. Today’s parents care as much for their children as any in the past. All we need is a shared commitment as adults to do all we can for children – not just our own, but everybody’s. That way we really can make this country the best place in the world for children to grow up.”

The full text of the speech is below:

*(check against delivery)*

“Last year, a UNICEF report showed, in devastating detail and on the basis of comprehensive research...

...that Britain is the worst place in the developed world to grow up – that we are bottom of the international league for child well-being.

Thousands of reports come out every year.

Millions of statistics are thrown around about the state of our nation.

And yet this report, from an organisation that many people have barely heard of, seemed to stop us in our tracks and force us to pay attention.

Why? I think it’s because we felt a collective moment of shame.

I think it’s because we all know in our hearts that creating a good society for children to grow up in is one of the greatest tests of any nation’s character.

And to be told that right now, this country is failing that test, is not a pleasant thing to hear.

## CHILDHOOD REVIEW

So a year ago, I asked David Willetts to lead an investigation into childhood.

To find out why Britain came bottom of the UNICEF league.

And to learn from the countries that did best - to learn what we must do to make sure that if UNICEF carry out the same survey in a generation’s time, we will be at the top.

Because if today, Britain is the least family-friendly country in the developed world...

...the aim of the next Conservative Government is to make it the most family-friendly.

So how are we going to do that?

Over the past year, as you've been hearing, David's Childhood Review has taken a wide range of evidence and studied the facts carefully.

Today we are publishing the first in a series of reports, and I'd like to put them into context by outlining what I see as the key childhood challenges we need to address.

Our Childhood Review confirms the picture in the UNICEF report and tells the story of the personal experiences behind the statistics.

It's a story of parents doing their best for their children in a hostile environment...

...with inadequate support from government...

...excessive commercial pressure...

...and a culture which fails to set the right boundaries for children, making it harder for them to grow into happy, confident and responsible adults.

I'd like to address each of these in turn.

## SOCIETY AND THE STATE

But first I want to set out our overall approach to these questions, and to make clear what I see as the big difference between us and Labour.

If you read Ed Balls' Children's Plan, which quite rightly seeks to address many of the issues we're discussing today...

...you will be struck by its old-fashioned over-reliance on bureaucratic state action to achieve desirable aims.

The Children's Plan presents an avalanche of initiatives, programmes and interventions that have no coherent theme and are based on no coherent analysis of why Britain, after ten years of Labour government, is a country so unfriendly to families.

As in so many other areas, Labour's approach to childhood is short-term and superficial.

Instead of addressing problems at their root cause, they offer bureaucratic quick fixes.

Instead of honestly admitting that the state is only part of the solution, they continue to peddle the myth of an all-powerful state that can remedy every ill.

We reject that approach – the nationalisation of childhood.

But equally, we reject the privatisation of childhood: the idea that the state has no role to play and that children's lives would be just fine if only everyone and everything got out of parents' way and let them get on with their job.

That kind of dogmatic ideological purity doesn't last five minutes when confronted with the reality of real parents' lives.

Parents want help and support wherever they can get it – as long as it's the right kind of help and support and not just annoying lectures and instructions that make them feel inadequate.

And parents above all want to know that society is on their side: that as they go through daily life, the people and organisations they deal with are their allies, not their enemies, in bringing up their children.

We need an understanding that bringing up children is the most important duty not just of parents but of our society as a whole.

That means recognising that many different people and organisations - including but not limited to the state – have a vital part to play.

If we are to make Britain the most family-friendly country in the world, we have to live by the words of the African saying, "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child."

#### PARENTS DOING THEIR BEST IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

That is what parents want: but it's not what they're getting today.

For me, one of the most encouraging findings from our Childhood Review is that today's parents are doing so much for their own children, for example devoting more one on one time to them than in the past.

For most parents today, family life and family time are literally the most important things in the world and that attitude is without doubt the essential foundation of a family-friendly society.

But one of the most depressing things from the report is the sense you get that parents feel they are operating in a hostile environment, with the odds stacked against them, feeling they have to do more on their own.

They feel that other adults are hostile.

That private sector companies, including the media, are hostile.

And all too often that the state is hostile too.

#### INADEQUATE SUPPORT FROM GOVERNMENT

What should the state's role in childhood be?

First, it has to get the basics right.

That means, for example, creating a family-friendly tax and benefits system so we get rid of the stupid discrimination against couples that so disfigures our system today and does so much to damage children's lives.

It means giving more support to children in their early years, which we now know makes such a crucial difference to their life chances later on.

It means giving more support to parents in those crucial early years too – and indeed in the early weeks and months of a child's birth when the pressures are greatest and relationships most under strain.

That's why I have asked Michael Gove and Andrew Lansley to visit the Netherlands – the country that came top of UNICEF's child well-being survey – to see what we can learn from their system of home maternity nurses.

I want to see all parents of new-born children get the proper support they need, not just those who can afford to pay for it.

Getting the basics right also means tackling child poverty – not just through the failing Labour mechanism of transferring money to poor households, but through actually addressing, patiently and systematically, the root causes of poverty and deprivation.

And getting the basics right means reversing one of this government's most lamentable failures – its failure to ensure that our schools guarantee every child a decent education in an orderly and disciplined environment.

But the state today needs to go beyond these basics.

Parents expect their government to play a part in resolving what for many of them is the single biggest issue in their lives: time.

The rising cost of living and the cost of bringing up children means that parents have to work more, but they want to combine their work with a rich family life.

Government has a vital role to play here, helping to ensure the affordability and availability of childcare, and helping to ensure that flexible working is a real option for every parent.

In all these areas, I see scope for much stronger support for parents.

But as we set out last week in our examination of the role of the state in the post-bureaucratic age, that does not always mean the state itself doing more.

It means a smaller, smarter state doing a better job in helping parents.

## PUBLIC SPACE

And there is one area in particular which stands out from our Childhood Review and where we urgently need strong action.

Nowhere are the challenges facing parents more vivid than with public space.

Parents have lost confidence that their children will be safe on the streets and in our public play areas.

This is not some irrational fear to be educated out of them.

It is an understandable reaction to everything that goes on - from more traffic to the way gangs can take over children's playgrounds.

There are fewer eyes on the street.

We understand this.

And so from us, parents are not going to get another barrage of unrealistic advice.

Nor are they going to get promises that everything will be sorted by a shiny new playground or play area – because we know that, brilliant as they can be, they will only make a difference if they are safe.

Instead we want to help tackle the things they worry about.

That means protecting public space better – through proper community policing and through proper measures to ensure that public play areas are supervised.

This in turn will help tackle many of the other things parents and children worry about.

More informal play will lead to more mixing between children of different ages, helping to reduce bullying.

And it also means more physical exercise and less dependence on the flat screen world.

## EXCESSIVE COMMERCIAL PRESSURE

The flat screen world is where we see much of the commercial pressure on children that parents find so frustrating.

The private sector must remember that it operates in the public realm - and that requires a sense of social responsibility.

I acknowledge that most companies are aware of this, and exercise restraint when

it comes to children.

But some still do not, and so we see a constant flow of inappropriate commercial activity aimed at children that makes a mockery of any attempt to build a truly family-friendly society.

As I have said repeatedly in the past, I do not think there is a purely regulatory solution to this very real problem.

But just as when it comes to influencing social behaviour, we need to understand the importance of common social norms – the fact that people tend to behave in ways they think are expected, and to copy what other people do...

When it comes to influencing commercial behaviour I think we need to take a lead in establishing the right kind of commercial norms...

...so that it becomes unacceptable and eventually unthinkable for companies to display the excesses of childhood commercialisation that we see all too frequently today.

I want to see business leaders put pressure on their peers over this issue, because the actions of a small minority are giving business as a whole a bad name.

## ADULTS IN THE PUBLIC REALM

But if we are serious about improving childhood in this country, we have to get serious about the scale of the wider cultural change that's needed.

Because our Childhood Review demonstrates clearly that one of the biggest issues in childhood today is not about the relationship between parents and their children.

It's about the relationship between adults and other people's children.

In the countries that do well in the UNICEF survey, there is a widespread understanding of the point I made earlier: that it takes a village to raise a child.

Parents cannot and should not be everywhere with their children all the time.

We need adults to feel able to exert authority over, and to show compassion towards other people's children.

But this basic social responsibility - in many ways the mark of a civilised society - has been dramatically undermined by a risk-averse health and safety culture which has poisoned the relationship between adults and children.

Adults' natural authority, good sense and positive instincts have been dangerously undermined.

So adults no longer feel any right, or any responsibility, to constrain children's

behaviour if they are not their own.

This is a disaster for our society, and we have to reverse it.

Doing so will not be easy.

It will mean confronting some sensitive issues.

But it must be done.

## CONCLUSION

So I am clear about how we will go about achieving our long-term vision of making Britain the most family-friendly country in the world.

First, by government getting the basics right.

That means more and better support for children - and particularly mothers - in the early years, improved childcare provision, and a transformation in school standards and discipline.

Second, we need to address one of the biggest issues at the heart of the problems affecting children today, and that is the safety of our streets and public spaces.

Third, we need adults to accept a shared responsibility for bringing up the next generation.

Fourth, we need businesses to get the message about exploiting children: stop trying to get away with it and start showing some real responsibility.

But above all, we need to understand that making Britain the most family-friendly country in the world is not just a job for the state, as Labour seem to think.

And neither is it something that should just be left to parents to get on with on their own.

This is a challenge for our whole society, it is about action to improve the quality of our public realm – the physical condition of public space, and the emotional condition of our everyday interactions and relationships with children.

This is a social responsibility and at present we are not discharging it.

Nowhere is the right balance of personal responsibility, a strong society, and effective government more necessary than when it come to improving the well-being of our children.

The UNICEF report was damning and shocking, but as a country we must not lose faith in ourselves.

Together we can create a strong and confident society in which children live, play and grow happily within the boundaries of the common good.

Boundaries which are monitored and enforced by all adults: not as lone soldiers but as part of a social fabric.

This generation of children has as much potential as any previous generation.

Today's parents care as much for their children as any in the past.

All we need is a shared commitment as adults to do all we can for children – not just our own, but everybody's.

That way we really can make this country the best place in the world for children to grow up.”