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thinkpieces

CHILDHOOD

By John Rowlands



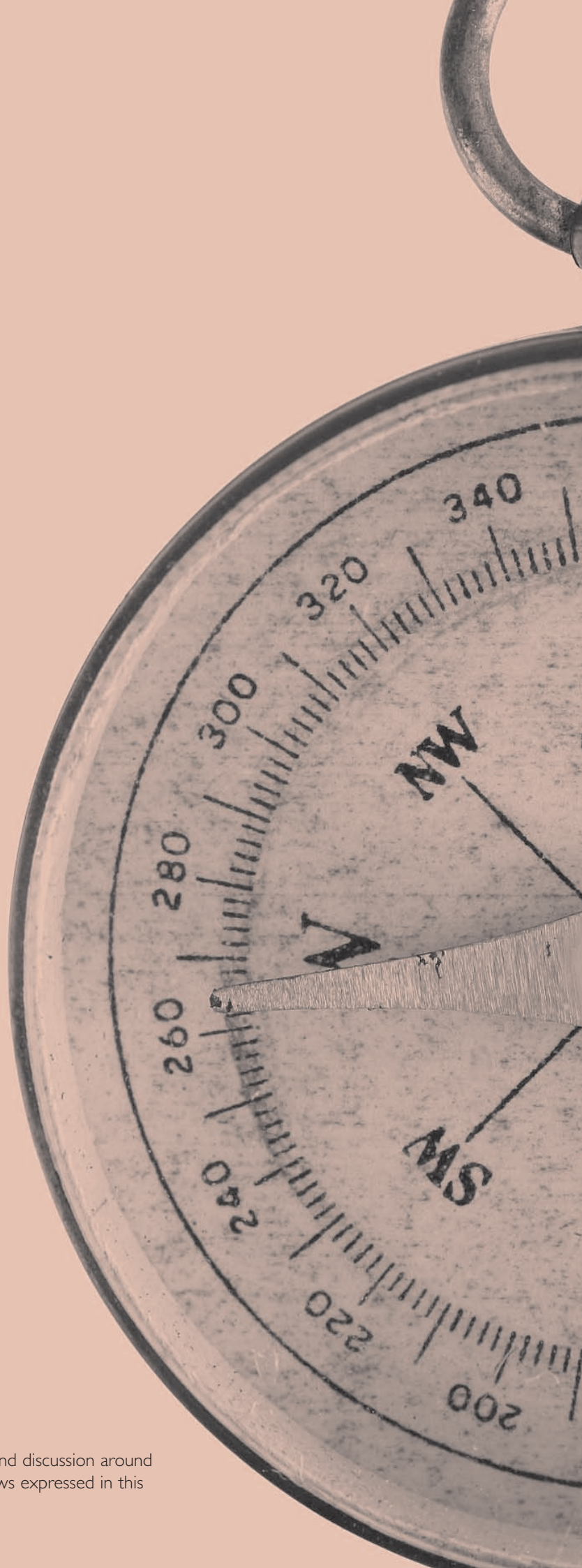
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Childhood

Wealth and Freedom

“Since the 1990s the distribution of wealth in Britain has become more unequal, following a relatively long period of stability. This is from a baseline of high inequality to start with. While some wealth inequality is to be expected as a function of age differences in the population, this demographic factor is unlikely to account for all (and probably not even for most) of the observed inequality.

Wealth inequality is one powerful, life-shaping expression of class inequality in British society. Against this background, a particularly disturbing phenomenon is the level of asset poverty amongst households – the high proportion of households with no savings.”



CHILDHOOD - Wealth and Freedom

By John Rowlands

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This thinkpiece explores some aspects of childhood and their implications for a good society. It argues that children and young people are as important stakeholders as adults. Childhood should not simply be taken into account. A better understanding of childhood should shape policy development. Children and young people need to be drawn into this process.

Well-being and Well-becoming

These days we are perplexed about how childhood fits into the scheme of things. This is in part because economic growth accompanied by the norm of two working parents has created less room for the appreciation and understanding of childhood in our adult culture. Children are seen mainly in terms of how they will grow up, in particular how "good" or "bad" they become, how well they succeed at school and hence how they will serve the future economy. This means that childhood is a source of anxiety for adults – how will children turn out, how do we keep control, am I doing the right thing?

Childhood has a "here and now" part and a "growing up" part. Childhoods need well-being and well-becoming. A good childhood is one that is fun and fulfilling today and exploratory and developmental for tomorrow. Curiosity is central to childhood and is the source of both fun and developmental progress. It is the adults' job to promote curiosity in childhood. In a good society we would be more relaxed about childhood. There would be more time for adults to enjoy the childhoods of children they parent and children they know. We would value childhood in its own right and not simply as a preparation for adulthood.

Impact of Inequality

Richard Wilkinson¹ has spelt out the mechanisms through which social and economic inequality causes personal ill-health and social discord. He describes how the stress of feeling at the bottom of a very large pile, of feeling disrespected, impacts on health via the endocrine system and fuels violent and anti-social behaviour. He describes how parental stress is transmitted to children. Layard's analysis² of happiness and wealth tells us that happiness is measurable and in western societies has not increased with increasing wealth. This suggests we can change the distribution of wealth without reducing overall happiness.

In a good society we would be much more aware of how inequalities generate stress and how this impacts on children in families. In our relatively affluent society our policies would focus on inequality rather than just poverty.

Risk, Protective Factors and Resilience

Inequality is a pervasive driver of personal and social malaise. Its impact on individuals is strongly mediated by interaction with risk and protective factors. These have become well accepted largely through research in the USA and UK (notably Sir Michael Rutter and colleagues) into the causes of antisocial behaviour and psychopathology. A child's intelligence, for example, is a protective factor. Poor parental supervision is a very significant risk factor.

Studies of how risk and protective mechanisms work have led to the concept of childhood resilience. We cannot eliminate risk and be all protecting and thereby create ideal childhoods. But resilient children cope better with adversity and we know what constitutes resilience. For example, having a trusted adult they can turn to, having friends, having interests, learning how to see round difficulties. These are constituents that can be promoted through the agency of parents or care-givers.

Children do not like to see themselves as in need of protection. They see that as intrusive and restrictive. But they do want to be safe and expect adults to help them learn to keep themselves safe. This is an example of resilience. This research has led to increasing interest in preventing escalation of childhood behavioural difficulties into serious and expensive anti-social behaviour through training courses for parents. Structured parenting training schemes have the best evidence base for effectiveness compared with other interventions. There is not the same research backing, but it is a reasonable proposition that parents who neglect their children could be helped in a similar way to those whose children have behavioural problems.

A good society would promote childhood resilience. To this end it would help parents and carers through training to improve their parenting skills and capacity.



Inequality, the Media and Consumerism

The media has a major role in the lives of children and young people. The extent to which the media shapes these lives is disputed. Academic researchers argue that there is no conclusive evidence that violent media leads to violent behaviour.ⁱⁱⁱ The implication is that media simply reflects the realities of life and are not responsible for negatively influencing the lives of young people. A simple causal relationship between a media stimulus and the response of an individual is hard to find. It seems more likely that the cultures of the media and real life interact through a mechanism akin, in information science terms, to positive feedback. Films may start out portraying real life but add, in the interests of art, something different or more extreme and feed this back into the youth culture. (E.g. Pulp Fiction is a fine film but has undoubtedly fed an attitude or style back into the everyday life of young people.) The interaction between Channel 4's "Big Brother" and its audience seems to be leading to more extreme (but oddly tedious) televised behaviour.

Some young people will be more susceptible to the media than others. Poor parental supervision and social isolation may well be risk factors. The more susceptible are likely to include young people who feel disrespected at the bottom of the pile and those with risk factors stacked against them.

The media is the key motive force driving consumerism. Neal Lawson has described how powerful "turbo-consumerism" works on people's (especially young people's) unequal purchasing power to create a potent driver of crime.^{iv} The poor turn to crime to acquire what they see as normal, everyday possessions. This inability to participate legitimately in our current highly acquisitive society not only leads to acquisitive crime but engenders isolation. Wilkinson argues and explains how feeling isolated and disrespected fuels a wider spectrum of social discord including violence and the breakdown of community cohesion.

Inequality engenders poor health. It is not just the impact of poverty forcing less healthy diet. The stress of coping "at the bottom of the pile" leads to physical and mental ill health. The media reinforces these mechanisms. Saturation advertising of fast and convenient food and drink impacts disproportionately on children living in stressed households. Schools and parents are in an unequal battle with the media in trying to promote healthier eating by children.

The influence of the media on girls' sensitivity to their body shapes, and the media's promotion of highly sexualised lifestyles create a level of expectations on both boys and girls that adds to the stress of childhood. Inequality may well interact with the influence of the media here, given that high rates of teenage pregnancy are so strongly associated with high levels of inequality.

Debates about the influence of the media have perhaps become tired. Advertising shows that media is influential but we do not seem to have a complete grasp of the power and the limits of media influence. Young people live in a media saturated world and yet we do not really understand what is going on. It is hard not to feel that the media is a key mechanism for transmitting the personal and social consequences of inequality on to our children and young people.

Early Years

Although there are disputes about the evidence relating to how children are best helped to develop in their earliest years, there is a broad consensus that children under the age of two to three do best in one to one relationships with parents or carers. Very young children probably do not do well spending a lot of time in group settings. However, the evidence largely from the USA shows that, for children over the age of about three, their emotional, social and learning development can be enhanced by exposure to high quality, well organised stimulation provided in group settings with other children and adults. Furthermore children who have the advantage of such early experience do better than others in the long term with respect to social adjustment and learning.

Parents able to pay have more easily been able to take advantage of such early years experience for their children compared with poorer families, particularly those living in deprived areas. Sure Start was conceived in the Treasury under New Labour as a means of bringing these advantages preferentially to families in deprived areas. The Government invested large amounts to fund Sure Start local programmes that would be open to all families living in specified deprived areas. Furthermore these schemes would not be provided through Local Authorities and local communities would have a direct say in how they would be provided. Thus Sure Start was a programme designed to combat inequalities in childhood opportunity. It has been cited in the press as a flagship policy for New Labour.

There have been two significant developments that have implications for future policy. Firstly, the Government has decided to double its investment and to extend the programme so as to become available to every child irrespective of where, and in what circumstances, they live. Funding would in future be through local authorities who will commission these "Children's Centres". This development has been criticised by Norman Glass, the former Treasury official responsible for Sure Start's inception, on the grounds that it will be spreading the service too thinly and local ownership will be undermined. Secondly, an interim report of the national

evaluation of Sure Start has been published.^v The report showed that most children attending local schemes benefited somewhat. But it also showed that children of the most marginalised families (for example, those with a single teenage parent) in Sure Start areas did worse than comparable children in areas where there were no Sure Start local programmes. The mechanism is not quite clear yet but it seems that the provision of Sure Start schemes may marginalise still further those families who, for whatever reason, are unable to engage with them. This certainly points to the need for such schemes to have powerful but sensitive outreach capabilities.

These issues raise significant policy questions about how early years child development schemes relate to, and help to reduce, inequality. One reason for making such services universal is so that poor families not living in designated deprived areas have access to them. But if the service is spread more evenly and thinly its impact on inequality will be lessened. Furthermore such schemes will have an even harder job reaching the most marginalised families. There is a danger that the new Children's Centres may heighten further the social exclusion of the poorest families.

In a good society we would promote long term opportunity and well-being by investing heavily in the early years development of children. Children from the poorest families would have assured access to early years schemes accompanied by acceptable support that pro-actively reaches out to these families.

Children's Services and Schools

The Government's Every Child Matters programme aims to unite all those concerned with children under a common set of outcomes that all are trying to achieve for children. Structural and practice changes are proposed to promote integrated services for children and families. Part of this programme includes the concept of extended schools whereby the resources of a school support children and families across a wider remit than learning and pastoral care. It is not entirely clear how far the role of schools will be expected to extend. Certainly the Government wants children to be provided for over longer periods to permit parents to be at work. But how far schools will support the welfare of children through social, supportive and therapeutic services remains to be seen.

This policy is not without its tensions. There is a view that the extended roles envisaged will divert schools from their core business of teaching. Certainly it is reasonable to argue that pupils whose welfare needs are effectively met will learn better. But it is not necessary for schools to be responsible for welfare services provided there are other responsive services directly and immediately available.

In a good society, children whose well-being and well-becoming show signs of being impaired because of personal or familial difficulties would experience positive and responsive help at the early manifestations of their difficulties. Schools and other universal service (e.g. health visitors) would be geared up to trigger this help.

Schooling

The relationship between the experience of schooling and childhood well-being requires closer examination. Schools cannot avoid the tension of both engendering stress in children's lives and supporting them through this stress. Schools test children's abilities and cope with their disappointments as well as their successes. Schools start to rank children and encourage individuals to improve their ranking. For the majority of children schools achieve this balancing act reasonably well.

But there are significant and enduring levels of absenteeism from school. A minority of children opt out of school. At the individual level the reasons for this are complex, but the extent to which schools and schooling are attractive to the full range of children and young people must be a factor in overall absenteeism.

Certainly if you are a child who has known little other than poor results in frequent tests at school, you will not find school as attractive as a successful child. Some children learn early the feeling of being towards the bottom of the pile. If protective factors, such as a loving, uncritical family, are there the child may cope and come to terms with not passing tests. If not, the child may opt out and seek other sources of respect or diversion.

Schools should find more ways of engendering esteem in all the children they serve. The national curriculum and system of tests need to be retained in a reduced form and become more "background" to the purpose of the school. Greater flexibility should be built into what schools can offer so that the curiosity of all children can be given rein. The system will not fall apart if most children do SATs in science, maths and English but some do other things that build their esteem and keep them wanting to attend. In a good society there would be greater equity of esteem for children pursuing different styles of learning. In particular, there would be similar status attributed to vocational, practical, sporting, artistic, social and academic pursuits.



Citizenship and Responsibility

The lobby for children's rights has been intermittently vocal for many years. Reviews of the UK's compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child include criticism, inter alia, of our propensity to incarcerate and physically punish children. It is dismaying that our so-called civilised society finds it so difficult to address such flagrant breaches of children's rights.

A partial explanation is the failure of the adult world to understand how children grow up. It does not really understand how a child transforms from being a totally dependent and irresponsible baby to an independent and responsible adult. How and when does the transition from irresponsible to responsible happen? We are fearful of children's rights because we are not confident that they are responsible enough handle them.

There is good empirical and theoretical understanding of how children gradually acquire independence and responsibility but this does not sit easily with the view that irresponsible children should be punished just like irresponsible adults. Governments constantly tinker with how we react to crime usually long after the behaviour has become learned. Many ideas have a little effect but none make fundamental differences because they can only try to deter, punish or reform. They do not really address cause. If we are serious about being tough on the causes of crime, then we need to bite the bullet that wayward children often need to be given positive experiences they have been denied in their upbringing. Along the line they have missed out on the experiences that build resilience and allow children to take on responsibility. These are positive experience they should have had of right. This fits uncomfortably with simpler models of crime and punishment that make easy copy in the media.

A better way of grappling with children's rights might be to consider their rights and responsibilities together. Growing up can be modeled as the interaction of the rights and responsibilities of children with the rights and responsibilities of adults. This obliges us to examine how children acquire responsibility. A child who is made totally responsible with no rights is being abused. Children must have rights in order to exercise responsibility. People who work with children participating in decision making in things that affect them report that they invariably make sensible decisions. These decisions are often particularly well founded because children think of issues that adults miss. Children and young people have an expertise in childhood and youth that is denied to adults. Given an opportunity that is real and not just token, children and young people will responsibly share their expertise.

In a good society we would support parents and carers to promote resilience in their children. In a good society children would share in decision making in things that affect them as a right. Adults would value their expertise. Children would experience some responsibility for the decisions made. Adults would learn a greater understanding of how the ability to participate responsibly in society is acquired.

The Environment

Children have a significantly greater investment in the future than adults and the aged. They will inherit what today's adults leave for them. There is overwhelming evidence that the environment is being damaged by current levels of resource consumption. This is a global reality which requires a global response. The challenges involved are enormous. For the sake of our children, we cannot afford to avoid these challenges by minimizing the problems and clutching at straws.

Some way or other we have to cut back on consumption and devise new economies that are sustained with lower levels of activity. In future, economics must align with or even defer to global ecology. Such an agenda is entirely compatible with addressing social and economic inequality at the same time. In a good society the environment would be by far and away the highest political and economic priority.

Conclusions

Where does this survey of childhood issues take us?

Social, educational, economic and environmental policies need not simply to take account of childhood. An understanding of childhood has to be centrally informing of how policy is shaped. A good society will have to be delivered over time. Childhood experience today will be formative of a future society so that we need to lay down what we need of childhood now. Poor childhoods will not promote or maintain a good society.

To understand childhood and youth, policy developers must engage more actively with children and young people. There should be a statutory basis for the participation of children in decision making in the governance of councils, schools and health authorities.

Policies should be directed at enhancing the present quality of the lives of children and young people (e.g. places to meet where children can do things on their own terms, child friendly and affordable public transport, etc). Policies directed at children's learning and development should not undermine well-being by creating unremitting stress. Schools should be judged by their ability to attract and retain children as well as by academic and vocational attainment. Education should be structured so that there is equity of esteem attributed to vocational, practical, sporting, artistic, social and academic pursuits.

Growing up in the context of pronounced inequality will bring in its wake, poor health, poor mental health, and poor social order. Reducing inequality should be a primary objective. Taxation should be more progressive. People who generate and manipulate wealth should pay more for the social and economic infrastructure supporting their enterprise, including an educated, positive, law-abiding and healthy workforce.

How the benefits of Sure Start are best developed should be re-examined. Its aim to reduce inequality in the longer term should be re-affirmed. The right balance of intensity of service against demographic distribution should be recalculated so that the programmes' impact on reducing inequality is maximised. An element of the funding should be directed specifically at reaching the poorest and most marginalised families.

Inequality will impact differentially on individual children depending upon risk, protective factors and resilience. It will remain necessary for the state to intervene in the lives of some children in different sorts of trouble. Such interventions frequently do not produce good outcomes. One major reason is that the intervention is too late. Policy should be directed at shifting expenditure on intervention to an earlier stage in children's lives and specifically on proactively supportive and structured parental training. Schools should feel they are supported by services that are responsive to the early signs of childhood difficulties.

Children live in a complex world of intense interaction between "real life" and media representation. There should be more policy activity directed at the media. Government should make it its business to tackle the manipulative intent of the media including, but not confined, to advertising. Advertising directed at children should be more tightly regulated.

There should be a Government sponsored, evidenced based public debate about how to achieve greater responsibility in the media for promoting childhood well-being and well-becoming.

All this will be of little account if we become overwhelmed by environmental and climate problems. We should strive towards a level of contentment with our health, education, law and order, national security and defence policies in order that the environment can be afforded the markedly enhanced political priority that is vital to our children's future.

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- ⁱ Wilkinson, Richard G. 2005. *The Impact of Inequality*. Routledge
- ⁱⁱ Layard, Richard. 2003. *Happiness: Has Social Science A Clue*. Lionel Robbins memorial Lectures, March 3,4,5 2003. LSE.
- ⁱⁱⁱ E.g. Dr Guy Cumberbatch at <http://www.videostandards.org.uk/sections/videoviolence/v1.html>
- ^{iv} Lawson, N "Turbo consumerism is the driving force behind crime" *The Guardian* 29/6/06
- ^v Melhuish et al. *National Evaluation Report 13*. 2005. *Early Impacts of Sure Start Local Programme on Children and Families*. Birkbeck College, London

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and develop the ideas for a more equal
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