

A Policy Driven By Prejudice Masquerading As Research

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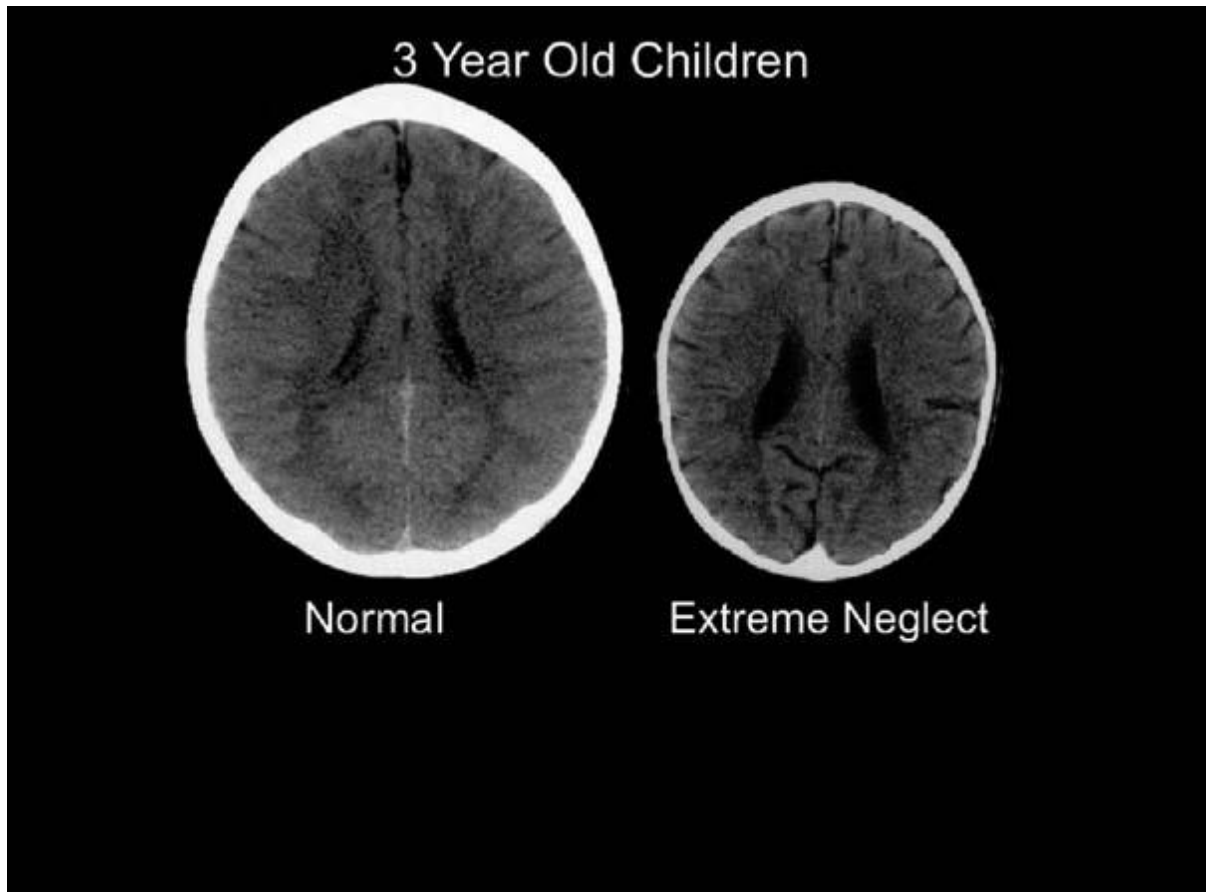
Graham Allen MP's report, *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings* published July 2011 is the latest in a series of similarly-themed policy documents. It is the follow up to his *Early Intervention: the next steps*, and these two documents so far comprise the main outputs of the Early Intervention Commission, initiated by the Government in July 2010. December last year saw the publication of Frank Field's report, *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children become poor adults*, a document that resulted from Field's 'Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances', a second Coalition Government initiative, announced in June 2010.

Looking back over the past 12 months, it is very clear that the Government (especially the Conservative part of it), was 'good to go' on election, pushing forward with developing a policy programme based on its ideas about 'Broken Britain' and how to mend it through 'early intervention' (it took only two months for the Coalition to announce Allen and Field's initiatives). The ideas for what is now evolving very fast had been worked up and developed already. Allen collaborated with Iain Duncan Smith (now Work and Pensions Secretary) on the Centre for Social Justice's *Report Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens* published in 2008, and most of the proposals set out over the past 12 months reflect ideas and themes in that report. Indeed what is happening now can be understood (in large part at least) as the operationalization of the approach developed by Duncan Smith and the Centre for Social Justice, discussed in detail in their tracts on the 'fractured family', 'breakdown Britain' and 'broken Britain'.

One point is clear from all these reports. Policy makers now believe very strongly in what the sociologist Frank Furedi calls 'parent determinism'. They are firmly committed to the idea that there is a direct, causal relationship between what parents do and why things go wrong in society.

Frank Field thus considers it the case that children born to parents who are 'poor' also end up 'poor' because of 'parenting'; he argues that 'the things that matter most' in preventing poverty include definitely not money but rather, 'a healthy pregnancy', 'secure bonding with the child' and 'love and responsiveness of parents'. In *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings* Allen tells us that 'early intervention' is what parents 'give to their children' when children develop 'attachment, attunement [sic], empathy, and communication'. The front cover of this report features images to tell us about the costs of what happens when this 'early intervention' doesn't happen. It shows us brain scans of what we are told are '3 year old children'. Alongside the one labelled 'normal' is a picture of a gold bar called 'early intervention'. Below it is a brain scan image labelled 'extreme

neglect' and this is coupled with gold bars called, 'low attainment', 'benefits', 'failed relationships', 'poor parenting', 'drink and drug abuse', 'teen pregnancy', 'violent crime', 'shorter life', 'poor mental health'. The message is clear; the root cause of any and every social problem one can think of is the same; it is 'neglectful parenting'.



This sort of parent determinism has become more and more influential. It is striking that the past 12 months have seen very few voices raised in disquiet at the agenda that is now becoming so dominant.

It was of course to be expected that Labour politicians would help make this view consensual. As social policy scholars have explored, it was new Labour that pioneered 'explicit' family policy in Britain, centring on the alleged problem of 'parenting'. In *Every Parent Matters* (2007) it was thus claimed that, 'parents and the home environment they create are *the single most important factor* shaping their children's well-being, achievements and prospects' (my emphasis). It could be argued that the Coalition has simply developed (further and faster) this determinist belief in the power of parents to overcome all other possible impediments to their children's prospects, institutionalised

by new Labour. In general, the third sector and also the media have, however, raised very little in the way of objection. Some points have been made about hypocrisy (how can the Coalition oversee the demise of Sure Start Centres and profess such support for early intervention?). But these criticisms in fact tend to re-inforce not challenge the main premise, that how parents relate to their children matters more than anything else.

The present case for early intervention can perhaps be best characterised as an example of a 'good lie'. Those who consider it has flaws, or even know it to be entirely untrue in fundamental ways, have become prepared to overlook the lies in the hope that schemes they consider have some good aspects get funding support. Whatever the explanation for the easy ride Duncan Smith and his allies are getting, it is time for more questions to be asked about prejudice of parent determinism.

The brain scan images and related claims are a good place to start. The images of brains referred to above adorn the cover of both of Allen's reports. The idea they communicate, of irreparable 'hard wiring' occurring very early in life, which explains everything that then goes wrong in society, is repeated *ad nauseam* in all of the policy statements referred to above. Thus Duncan Smith and Allen claim, in *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens*, that, 'our brains are largely formed by what we experience in early life'; 'the more positive stimuli a baby is given, the more brain cells and synapses it will be able to develop'; and then that, 'the brain grows outside the womb over the 0-3 year old period. It is in this delicate and vulnerable period that our lives can be made or not'. On this basis, they argue that in 'dysfunctional families' babies and toddlers get insufficient stimulus; they become 'unable to relate or communicate to others properly' from the time they first start school; and 'dysfunction' is in this way 'transferred' through generations of poor people. On this basis they move to the assertion that policy makers should get far more stuck into assessing and modifying the way parents relate to their children: 'Public policy must ensure that parents administer the best three years of emotional cognitive 'intensive care' to every child', they argue. The proposed 'Foundation years' scheme of so-called education, together with a raft of other proposals for influencing parent-child interaction from pregnancy onwards, is the outcome so far of this way of thinking.

In response to the resulting idea, that policy which proceeds in the way is simply 'evidence based' and so beyond question, the following could usefully become points of debate:

1. What do those brain scan images actually tell us? A paper published in the journal *Brain and Mind* is cited by Allen as the source of the images, and this is the only reference provided. The reliability of the findings of the study that generated these images is one issue (there are only five lines of text in the paper describing where the scan images come from – these tell us no more than 'neuroradiologists interpreted 11 of 17 scans as abnormal from the children with global neglect' - and there appear to be no other data or analysis of them). Thus these images in truth tell us very little, and in far as they tell us anything at all it is about circumstances where children have 'minimal exposure to language, touch and social interactions' (this is the definition of 'global neglect' provided). The discussion that follows in the *Brain and Mind* paper is about the famous studies of Romanian Orphans, whose experience is clearly highly unusual and specific. So what is going on,

when politicians think this can be presented as information that justifies what is being proposed? How could there plausibly be any connection between a picture of an atrophied brain and an explanation for, say, why relatively poor people have babies young, get depressed, or use drugs? Indeed, the fetish for brain images can perhaps best be thought of as a version of 19th phrenology with its ideas about what can apparently be told about 'character' from an examination of head shape and size.

2. What relation is there between the effects of highly extreme levels of deprivation of very basic stimuli on the brain, and social problems? The notion that there is any connection is premised on the idea that if extreme deprivation shrinks brains, then any kind of 'deprivation' (now deemed to include shouting at children or having them watch lots of TV instead of reading to them) causes some level of brain shrinkage. By merit of the same logic, it is assumed in policy statements that the child's brain can be literally 'grown' and so children made more intelligent, sociable and so on, if an intensive sort of parenting style is adopted (cue: playing Mozart to the baby bump, extended breastfeeding, lots of toys, books, and trips to museums from an early age). This notion about the brain and its development is widespread, but its ubiquity speaks less (if at all) to any actual findings from neuroscientific research, than to a social and political climate that has become more and more fatalistic and highly individuated. It is fatalism (not evidence) that makes some believe that we are, and can only ever be, what our parents make us in the early years. It is a profoundly individuated political culture that sees behaviour modification programmes for parents as the only effective means of taking society forwards.

3. What will be the actual consequences of going even further down the route of politicising parenting? It is one thing to think it beneficial for parents experiencing particular difficulties in specific areas, especially parents who don't have any way of paying for help, to be given assistance with 'parenting'. It is quite another to accept the notion that *parenting style* in a generalised sense should be a policy question. Not only are there no grounds for imagining this approach will address any social problems, the problems that will be fostered this way – the growing loss of parental autonomy, and an even greater fetishisation of particular ways of relating to children – are considerable. There is nothing good about the 'good lie' parent-determinism; it is a prejudice with disorienting and damaging consequences.