



HOUSE OF LORDS

# Library Note

## **Early Parenting and Preparing a Child for Success in School: Public Reaction**

This House of Lords Library Note provides a summary of views expressed by members of the public on the issue of early parenting and preparing a child for success in school, in advance of the debate to be held on Thursday 3 February. It complements Library Note [LLN 2011/003](#), which provides background reading for the debate. In a new project by the BBC and the House of Lords, members of the public were invited to comment on these issues to help inform the debate, and the comments summarised in this Library Note are taken principally from the BBC [Have Your Say](#) website, as well as the BBC News [Facebook](#) site. The summary that follows is not necessarily a comprehensive or fully representative picture of all the ideas expressed in the public debate, but provides a brief outline of the key themes that emerged, illustrated with direct quotations.

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## 1. Introduction

This House of Lords Library Note provides a summary of views expressed by members of the public on the issue of early parenting and preparing a child for success in school, in advance of the debate to be held on Thursday 3 February:

Lord Northbourne: to call attention to the key role of good early parenting in preparing a child for success in school.

It complements Library Note [LLN 2011/003](#), which provides background reading for the debate. In a new project by the BBC and the House of Lords, between 28 January and 3 February members of the public have been invited to comment on these issues to help inform the debate, and the comments summarised in this Library Note are taken principally from the BBC [Have Your Say](#) website, as well as the BBC News [Facebook](#) site, during 29 January and 1 February. The summary that follows is not necessarily a comprehensive or fully representative picture of all the ideas expressed in the public debate, but provides a brief outline of the key themes that emerged, illustrated with direct quotations.

## 2. Importance of Early Years

Many respondents agreed that the early years of a child's development were very important:

... Studies show that a child that hasn't had love in the first two years will never be able to love. The first years are everything!!!

... The first three years of a child's life are critical. In this I would agree with Lord Northbourne.

... By three years old, individuals have already formed the basis of their personality. By this stage they will have completed more development in one short year than they will in the course of their whole lives—learning to walk, eating solids, talking, social interaction, creativity, working people out, discipline, etc. etc.

Several posts framed the issue in terms of the dangers of perpetuating disadvantage:

... We will never reduce child poverty unless we address the inadequate start some children get and the chaotic or undisciplined home life many have to endure. If they can't speak, socialise, hold a knife and fork, use a toilet, sit still and listen before starting school, they are already left behind.

... At last, we are getting at the root cure of the problem of poverty and inequality. The fact is, it is very difficult to correct mistakes made in our early years, and our early years can make our whole life a misery, or it gives us the potential for the highest aspirations.

However some respondents noted that social disadvantage was not the only cause of bad parenting by arguing that rich parents could also display poor traits: "The only difference is that they pay someone else to take on their responsibility".

### **3. Early Years as Preparation for School**

A number of posts noted that the early years were an important basis for early school years:

... One only has to talk to a primary school teacher away from school (socially) to hear how kids are being failed by their parents first and foremost—sometimes leading to the problem of being beyond the point of salvation from a primary teacher with 30 kids.

... If a child enters state schools unable to communicate verbally at a reasonable level, to understand commands and constraints on acceptable behaviour, to even be toilet trained (who really benefits from these pull up pants for 5 year olds?) then they cannot participate in their education as readily as those who can do these things.

... If a child is being brought up in an abusive, unstable home in its early life than this has actually been found to affect brain development. On a lesser scale, but still damaging, is the spoilt “can’t say no” attitude on display from some parents. This makes school life extremely hard for these kids, who cannot understand rules, discipline, sharing and the fact the world doesn’t revolve around them.

However, some replies, while agreeing that this was important, argued that it had to be carried on through childhood as “if it’s something that isn’t then maintained, the child can grow up to be just as badly behaved as one who hasn’t enjoyed a good upbringing from an early age”.

### **4. Importance of Interaction between Parent and Child**

Several respondents stressed the importance of parents interacting with their children:

... I think part of being a good parent is spending quality time with your children, having fun, playing games and reading books or just taking them out on walks, trips to playground, library, swimming etc.

... Adequate and regular ‘educational communication’ between Parent & Child right from Birth—is crucial. The success of the Child from Nursery and right through the School years depend on this.

... When I see parents (both fathers and mothers) pushing their babies whilst listening to their MP3 players or talking on their mobiles, totally ignoring their babies, then I despair. There is no connection between parent and child and so the child’s development suffers.

### **5. Importance of Role Models (for Parents and Children)**

A number of posts sought to highlight the importance of role models for parents:

... Decades of social research show that people tend to copy the parenting style that they grew up with, even if their parents were abusive and aggressive.

... Sad though it is to admit, parenting is all too often no longer a skill passed through the generations and some basic standards need to be taught and these basic standards need to be maintained.

... If a person has not received a suitable upbringing themselves with clear boundaries... who teaches them how to be a 'good' parent? If nobody has taught them, how are they to know what a 'good' parent is?

While others focused on the examples set for children:

... NOT getting [the child's] ears pierced and dressing it up, styling its hair and generally turning it into some kind of mini-me, designer labelled accessorized, suntanned, clothes horse-cum-trophy would be good parenting.

... I think a parents obligation is to instil sound morals in our children, preferably by example not compulsion.

... Good parenting is really about having good values and passing them on.

## **6. Disciplining Children**

Many participants focused on the ability of parents to discipline their children. Several were concerned that parents felt constrained in this respect:

... I'm not sure we're allowed to be good parents in this country anymore—good parenting means being able to discipline and control children... all of which rights were taken away from parents we can't win because we're damned if we do and damned if we don't.

... Discipline and knowing where my boundaries were did me absolutely no harm at all and to be fair, most of the kids I have the pleasure of instructing every week in the Cadet Forces, would vote for more discipline in Schools and at home if they had the chance.

A few posts defended the use of physical discipline:

... Far too often do people confuse physical chastisement with physical abuse.

... I decided to smack the backs of my children's legs when they were tiny, through calm choice... On each occasion mine were lovingly reassured as to why this had happened, but I also found it a huge time saver compared with the piously recommended alternatives. It ceased to be necessary anyway, once they were old enough to grasp the meaning of a reasonable range of words.

However, this approach was questioned:

... Stop making excuses for poor parents; children need love, guidance and discipline they do not need to be beaten up by adults, especially those adults who are supposed to be protecting them.

Others called for a more balanced approach:

... The answer is actually quite simple—if you instil discipline into your child at a young age, along with the right balance of love and care of course, you're child will respect the decisions you make for them later in life.

... Good parenting principles include a loving and caring attitude, clear justifiable rules and, above all, consistent application of the rules.

## **7. Role of the State and Responsibilities of Parents**

Many respondents focused on the balance between the role of parents on the one hand and the role of the state and society more generally on the other. Some were wary of the state:

... Our culture, standards of behaviour, discipline and respect have sadly deteriorated in recent times. They are now at such a level that many parents genuinely believe that the responsibility of looking after their children rests with another. It is only too apparent that decent, caring parents rear equally decent, caring children.

... The nanny state has left many irresponsible parents blaming everything that goes wrong with THEIR lives and THEIR children on the state.

... Given the evidence of the last 15 odd years, hurling money at people who have children (maternity, paternity, child benefit, family tax credit, free prescriptions, etc. etc.) clearly isn't the answer.

Others were critical of parenting classes:

... As for teaching parenting skills in school—what a waste of my tax—they're there to learn academic subjects. Besides, how can you change the attitudes of a young person who is already lost to poor parenting themselves?

However, some contributors sought to stress the benefits of a more supportive approach:

... I used to teach Mother Care to fifth formers before the academic GCSE usurped the practical subjects. It was certainly appreciated by the girls who in later years came back to show me their offspring and discuss problems.

... [A]s a mother, grandmother and retired psychotherapist who worked with university-age people for many years I would have to agree that the teaching of parenting and so-called life skills in schools would be an excellent curriculum development.

Others agreed that intervention was needed if parenting was poor:

It seems to me that if parents are denying their parenting responsibilities (which many of them seem to) then we have no option but to allow the state to intervene by putting 'parenting classes' on the school curriculum.

With one reply arguing for a more proactive and punitive approach:

... The best way for Children to be ensured this necessary help, is for Councils to set up a Group of 'Assessors' to visit all Children on an ongoing basis, from Birth to Nursery School. Any Children found to be 'wanting' at this stage, should be helped then—it is too late to 'remedy' their problems once they start proper School... Any Parents found to be failing at this time should be 'Trained' or Fined.

## **8. Parenting with Financial Difficulties**

Several contributions highlighted the financial difficulties that many families faced:

How can many hard working families, spend the time needed with young children, when the wages for any normal job, in the UK don't cover the bills and overheads? Due to all the cut-backs that are now in the pipe-line, to all children services and schools which will attack all parts of the U.K.

However, several participants argued that parents often had choices:

... My wife and I brought up four children on a very average wage but we both said the children came first and decided to have my wife stay at home and manage on what I earned. Of course there were times we struggled financially but in those times we went without for the good of our children.

## **9. Family Structures**

Some posts sought to focus on the importance of family structure in terms of providing a stable structure for early years. Several made the case for more traditional arrangements:

... Two parents—one bringing home the bread and one looking after the home and both bringing up the children.

A stable marriage will produce stable children, and a home where parents are always available to share their children's ups and downs will produce secure children.

Some were critical of what they saw as a benefit system that encouraged one-parent families:

It became normal for women to have children alone (often by different fathers) with the state (taxpayer) acting as the supporting partner.

It's made a mess of a generation and there doesn't seem to be any sign of the current government changing this appalling situation.

... the Babies for Benefits Brigade who see pregnancy as viable career choice... The result is a multitude of teenage parents who have no parenting skills and are too busy prattling on Facebook and going "clubbing" to look care for their offspring.

However, this view was countered by others:

... Good parenting is important and especially in the early years. However, the government seems intent on forcing single parents back to work when the children are younger and younger.

## **10. Motherhood and Fatherhood**

Several replies contended that the role of mothers had been downplayed:

... Mothering is hard, exhausting, emotionally draining, and lonely at times and it is far easier decision to go out to work than deal with the relentless and frustrating job of dealing with the difficult, rude and emotional little darlings at home. Parenting is hard and in a materialistic world, unrewarding.

While several posts suggested that it was fatherhood that was being devalued:

Parenthood is defined now as motherhood, so those fathers who are poor second mothers, or assistants, are deemed poor parents. No one seems interested in true fatherhood or asking what it might be.

One reply thought that both roles should be appreciated alongside the needs of the economy:

... Yes the economy is important, yes we need business to thrive but not at the expense of family and quality upbringing. Work life balance needs sorting: it's time we changed.

## **11. 'Good Parenting Model'?**

Some respondents also questioned what was meant by 'good parenting'. Several posts were afraid that it might mean obedient but unquestioning children:

... I want a child capable of questioning, thinking, deciding and doing.

The 'system' wants a child that obeys instruction—preferably without thinking—so just does what they are told.

... What is acceptable? Those that sit quietly, do exactly what they are told, obey every rule.

Several posts warned against prescriptive models:

... All children are uniquely different individuals and there is no "one size fits all".

... Parenting should always suit the needs of the child. Anyone who has decided how they are going to treat their kids before they have had children should quite bluntly not be allowed to have children.

