

**PARENT'S ADVICE CENTRE NI
30th Anniversary Conference
20 May 2009**

Parenting Support – Northern Ireland Policy Context

I started my social work career just over 30 years ago and as a practitioner I used to advise people to contact the Parents Advice Centre. So when Pip invited me to speak at today's conference to mark your 30th anniversary, I was delighted to accept. I have to admit though I was also a bit shocked to be reminded that we both have been around for so long. It's a bit like realizing your children are grown up and wondering how come all those years have passed so quickly, when it just feels like yesterday they were taking their first steps. And I'm sure many of you here today remember clearly when the Parents Advice Centre took its first steps as a new organization.

Things have changed a lot over the past 30 years. We pay management consultants to tell us that the one certainty we can depend on in life is change. But what they don't tell us is that progress in the light of change is not guaranteed. The fact that the Parents Advice

Centre has not only survived for 30 years but has developed and expanded during that time reflects its ability to progress as society has changed and evolved.

You were set up when Northern Ireland was a society deep in conflict and have lived through the peace process into today's post-conflict situation. You have had to be responsive to changes in governments and government policy, to the economic upturns and downturns and significantly to changes in thinking about parenting and child care practices.

The adaptability of the Parents Advice Centre is reflected in its success of ensuring the continued relevance of its services over the years. Services that have had to adapt to changes in lifestyles, family structures, people's working patterns, new technologies and changing attitudes and expectations.

And importantly the Centre has always been creative in solving problems that it has faced. You have worked hard at building relationships with key stakeholders, including government and the media, and you have

been tenacious in securing funding. I'm sure Pip will say the funding has never been enough but again resourcefulness has ensured you have made what you have go a very long way.

But for all those changes over the 30 years there have been two constants. The first constant is that families are and continue to be the best place to bring up children, and parents are, in the vast majority of cases, the best people to do that job. Secondly, the Parents Advice Centre has always been there and continues to be there to help parents do that job as well as they can which I believe puts you at the forefront in this field in Northern Ireland.

Today's conference and its theme – Every Parent Matters – What lies ahead for parenting support? is very timely. Many of you will be aware that the Minister launched the long awaited Families Matter Strategy earlier this year. A strategy that was significantly informed and shaped by your organization and others working in this area. So hopefully it's a strategy that reflects what parents and families want and need and is

not something dreamed up by civil servants locked away in the 'house on the hill', divorced from the reality of peoples' lives.

The strategy recognizes the key role and responsibility of parents to bring up their children. It shares your organisation's commitment to making sure that parents have access to information and services in their local areas that give them the knowledge, support and reassurance to carry out their parenting role confidently. A role that includes nurturing, caring, guiding, protecting, educating, setting a good example as well as taxi driver, cash dispenser, chief cook and bottle washer.

As parents we all worry about our children. I was very taken aback when I had my first child and a friend said this was the beginning of a life sentence of worry. Over 20 years later I now realize that she was right and worrying about your children and discussing your hopes and fears for them is something that you do no matter what age they are. And, of course, we always

worry whether we're doing a good enough job as a parent.

And right now there are parents worrying. What if my childminder is sick tomorrow and I can't get to work – will I lose my job? Or – how can we afford to pay for the schooltrip? And right now there are parents sick with worry about the drug pushers and gangs in their neighbourhood and whether their child is involved.

But also right now there are a lot of dedicated people and organizations like the Parents Advice Centre who are working to help parents. For many these services can be a life line. The difference between coping and not coping. Services that help them be better and more confident parents, which in turn, helps children to be well cared for and supported within their families.

The highly critical media spotlight on the failings of our services when things go terribly wrong, such as the tragic case of Baby P and just this week the Ryan Commission report on the systematic abuse of children in the Republic, overshadows the good practice that

goes on every day to effectively support families and children.

News headlines are unfortunately not based on what is going well. That is not to say where things have gone wrong that those responsible should not be held to account – whether that be the parents, substitute carers or the service providers who fail in their responsibility to take action. Unfortunately, however, the blanket criticism and unrealistic expectation that every tragedy within the private domain of family life can be prevented by government or service providers has the potential to put at risk all our efforts to improve supports to families.

Firstly, the risk that service providers will be driven to become more risk averse and self protective, which in turn will mean that people will avoid seeking help for fear they will be viewed as inadequate parents and their child will be taken into care. We know that the vast majority of parents who seek help are not dangerous, inadequate or neglectful. They are just like the rest of us, trying to do the best for their kids, but who need help to deal with particular problems.

Secondly, the risk that resources for family support services, which are only now being built up after years of neglect, will be diverted into child protection. This risk is further heightened by the current economic climate and pressure on budgets.

And the third risk is that decisions concerning services for families and children will be driven, not by evidence of what works, but by what has gone wrong. This is why the work of Dr Boddy and Dr Ghate is so important in providing the evidence base of what does work.

The Families Matter Strategy is a crucial element in the Department's contribution to the government's overarching 10 year Children and Young People's Strategy. This overarching strategy aims to ensure that all children and young people in Northern Ireland are helped to get the best possible start in life, to do as well as they can and to fulfill their potential. Supporting parents is one of the pledges within this 10 year strategy.

Families Matter also directly supports the inter-departmental Care Matters Strategy which seeks to improve the lives of the most vulnerable children in our society. Those children who are in or on the edge of care. Care Matters highlights the importance of family support as a means of helping prevent children coming into care, supporting families whose children are in the care system and, importantly, enabling children to return home. Family support is also relevant for the young people themselves as they are two and a half times more likely to become teenage parents. Surveys suggest that as many as 1 in 2 women who have been in care become mothers before their 19th birthday. Ensuring these young people have access to support and help is particularly important if they are to be helped to be successful in their parenting role.

The Children and Young People and Care Matters Strategies, along with the Families Matter strategy, provide the framework for a continuum of services – from universal services available to all families bringing up children to more targeted family support for those in need through to specialist child protection services.

Minister McGimpsey is very committed to prevention and early intervention which is reflected in the Families Matter strategy. The evidence for such action is compelling with numerous studies highlighting that the quality and nature of the care children receive, particularly in their early years, plays a critical role in how they develop and mature physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually. This is why it is so important that parenting and family supports are available and accessible not just from the point when a child is born, but even before that, preparing people for parenthood both before and during pregnancy. There are important links to be made with the work of the Public Health Agency in this respect in their role of improving both health and social well-being and the focus on developing preventative and early intervention strategies.

Our Minister is determined that the Families Matter Strategy will be fully implemented. At the launch of the strategy, the Minister said ‘Through the provision of the right services at the right time, I want to ensure more children have the opportunity of a safe and happy family

life'. But we will only be successful in delivering this strategy by working together with the planners, commissioners, providers, local communities, other government departments and importantly with parents and children. We are currently setting up a working group to advise us on the way forward. The Parents Advice Centre is being invited to join this group along with a number of other key players.

The Department has had a long and successful partnership with the Parents Advice Centre. As I said earlier one of the hallmarks of your success has been your ability to continuously adapt and develop your services so they remain relevant to today's parents and today's context. A context that is increasingly challenging and difficult. That is why we are pleased to support initiatives such as the Parents Helpline and innovative projects like Kickstart and the Parent's Forum.

I am speaking to you today in my role as the Acting Assistant Chief Social Services Officer. In other contexts I have different roles – social worker, civil servant, daughter, sister, friend, parent. In terms of

which role I consider most important and, indeed, which role I have found most challenging, most rewarding and where I have learned the most about myself, parenting is always the one I would chose.

Parenting is a fundamental and crucially important building block that influences not just a child's future but the future of our society. Hilary Clinton used an African proverb as a title of a book which I'm sure many of you are familiar with. 'It takes a village to raise a child'. While parents have the primary responsibility to raise their children and we should not usurp them in this responsibility, it is a job that needs to be supported. Supported by teachers, doctors, community leaders, those who protect our health and safety, organizations like the Parents Advice Centre and by government. We all have a role to play.

I would like to congratulate Pip and all her staff on the tremendous contribution and commitment they have shown over the past 30 years in playing their part in supporting and improving the lives of many parents and their children in Northern Ireland.

Thank you

**Christine Smyth
Assistant Chief Social Services Officer (Acting)**