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Friday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Possible future work on Parenting – a consultation**

4Children welcomes the opportunity to comment on the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility's consultation on its prospective future work on parenting. 4Children is the national charity all about children and families. We have spearheaded a joined-up, integrated approach to children's services and work with a wide range of partners around the country to ensure children and families have access to the services and support they need in their communities. We run Children's Centres as well as family and youth services across Britain. We develop, influence and shape national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families.

We will focus this submission on questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 as set out in the consultation document, and respond to each of these in turn below.

**Question 1: Is this a good policy area for the APPG on social mobility to get involved in as its next major project?**

Yes. We agree that parenting is an important aspect of the debate around social mobility, and in our view this would be a very valid area of work for the APPG to focus on.

Evidence clearly shows that the quality of parenting, particularly in the earliest years of a child's life, has an enormous impact on later life outcomes and social mobility. In its inaugural "*State of the Nation*" report, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission stated that one of the key factors that can unlock social progress in Great Britain is "Adults being supported to be warm, authoritative parents actively engaged in their children's education, particularly in the early years".<sup>1</sup> The consultation document itself also recognises the important contributions made in this regard by Graham Allen's "*Early*

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<sup>1</sup> Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) [State of the Nation 2013: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain](#), p. 2

*Intervention: The Next Steps*” report,<sup>2</sup> as well as Frank Field’s “*The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults*”,<sup>3</sup> both of which highlight the crucial importance of good parenting during the early years, and of supporting children themselves to become good parents in later life.

**Question 2: If the APPG were to move ahead on looking at parenting initiatives, what would we need to say and do to avoid accusations of seeking to expand the “nanny state”?**

All parents need help from time to time, and with a little support most can overcome their difficulties and thrive – parents are the biggest influence on children’s outcomes, and if parents and families flourish we all benefit. Whilst, as the consultation document states, those concerned with supporting parents can sometimes face accusations of trying to foster a “nanny state”, in our view these can potentially be avoided by maintaining a focus on the evidence-base that has been built up around parenting initiatives, and using this to frame the debate on the need for and impact of such programmes.

In recent years, there has been a significant emphasis on the importance of ensuring that interventions with children and families are underpinned by strong empirical evidence. This is perhaps exemplified in Graham Allen’s “*Early Intervention: The Next Steps*” report,<sup>4</sup> which identifies 19 programmes which have essentially become the gold standard for evidence-based early intervention initiatives, and include various parent-focused programmes such as Family-Nurse Partnerships. Similarly, the Early Intervention Foundation has recently published an online “*Guidebook*” resource which includes a library of 50 evidence-based programmes which have the potential to improve child and family outcomes and have been successfully implemented in the UK.<sup>5</sup>

Focusing on the evidence that exists around the difference that parenting initiatives can make for families, and the broader economic and social benefits they can yield, will hopefully provide a solid foundation for an informed debate on parenting support.

**Question 4: Can we remove the social stigma from the concept of parenting support, and if so, how?**

To avoid social stigma being attached to the concept of parenting support, 4Children believes that parenting initiatives should always retain an element of universality, even if

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Allen (2011) [Early Intervention: The Next Steps](#)

<sup>3</sup> Frank Field (2010) [The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults](#)

<sup>4</sup> Graham Allen (2011) [Early Intervention: The Next Steps](#)

<sup>5</sup> <http://guidebook.eif.org.uk/the-programmes-library>

targeted provision is subsequently built on top, and that it is important for this to be reflected in the approach the APPG takes to the issue.

In 4Children's view, all initiatives aimed at supporting children and families, including the provision of parenting support, run the risk of becoming stigmatised if they are targeted solely at prescribed groups of "vulnerable" people. In such cases, support can come to be seen as a service just for "failing families", and paradoxically undermine its capacity to reach those who are most in need.

The CANparent initiative offers useful experience in this regard. CANparent is a Government programme which was recently trialled in four areas around the country (Camden, Middlesbrough, High Peak and Bristol) with the aim of examining the development of a universal offer of parenting classes. An evaluation of the project was published by the Department for Education in July 2014, which assessed certain supply-side issues such as whether free provision would incentivise providers to offer additional parenting classes nationally, but crucially also looked at whether a universal approach could normalise and de-stigmatise parenting classes.

With respect to this latter point, the evaluation clearly found that the CANparent trial "led to a significant drop in the proportion of parents believing that parenting classes were only for parents with 'problems bringing up their children' i.e. it reduced stigma around parenting classes".<sup>6</sup>

It is important to remember that this was a very limited trial, and that there were some aspects of the implementation of the scheme – such as the large number of providers in many of the areas, the infancy and lack of market sophistication of programmes, and the scale of the task to launch a new market with limited resource over a short period of time – which posed challenges. However, where the programme was aligned to existing provision (such as the "Parent Gym" in Camden) it worked well.

**Question 5: Could the APPG add any value by reviewing the evidence and impact of these and other parenting reports/initiatives to see if further policy recommendations could be made before the next election?**

There is currently an extensive body of literature around the benefits of parenting support, and the consultation document recognises that there have been a number of contributions in recent years from the likes of Graham Allen,<sup>7</sup> Frank Field<sup>8</sup> and Dame Clare Tickell.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Department for Education (2014) [CANparent Trial Evaluation: Final Report](#), p. 21

<sup>7</sup> Graham Allen (2011) [Early Intervention: The Next Steps](#)

<sup>8</sup> Frank Field (2010) [The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults](#)

<sup>9</sup> Dame Clare Tickell (2011) [The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning](#)

We agree that APPG may be able to add particular value to the debate by reviewing the Government's progress against the recommendations made in these various reports, many of which were published in the opening year of the Parliament, and highlighting those areas in which progress has been strong and those in which it has stalled.

**Question 6: If the APPG on Social Mobility decides to do some work on parenting, should it be more focused on the neediest cases or on more universal parenting measures?**

We feel that the APPG's work should aim to strike a balance between looking at support for the neediest cases and more universal measures.

As stated in our response to Question 4 we feel that there is an inherent risk in focusing solely on the neediest cases, which could lead to parenting initiatives becoming stigmatised, undermining their capacity to reach those who need them most. This is by no means to say that targeted support is in principle always wrong, and we very much recognise that it can deliver important benefits for families in very difficult circumstances. However, in our view targeted support should be delivered from a base of universal provision to be most effective, and we hope this would be reflected in the APPG's approach to the issue.

**Question 8: What, if any, less obvious factors that influence parenting should the APPG be focused on?**

We would highlight a number of issues which, while less immediately visible, can nonetheless have an important impact on parenting, and which the APPG may therefore wish to consider as part of its work:

- **Parenting at key transition points:** There are certain points in a child's growth and development when parents may need particular support, starting with conception and then birth and also encompassing moments such as starting primary school and passing into secondary school and the teenage years. It is important to ensure that parents are able to access appropriate support at these key transition points.
- **Family support network:** Parents benefit from having a wide support network, including their child's grandparents as well as friends in the wider community, which can help a family to be more resilient when they encounter challenges.
- **Fostering/adoption/caring:** Such parents may need additional support, particularly kinship carers who do not always get the same amount of help as parents who have adopted or are fostering.

- **Immigrant and refugee communities:** Parents from these communities may need additional support to become aware of both opportunities that exist within their new communities, including language support.
- **Working hours:** This can be a significant issue for parents, particularly those working long or unsociable shifts or who are employed on zero-hours contracts (in which working hours are not necessarily stable or guaranteed), meaning that they can go for prolonged periods of time without being able to spend time with their children.
- **Having a parent in prison:** Parents and children in this situation may need more support to maintain a healthy relationship.
- **Parental health:** If a parent suffers from a long-term illness this can potentially change the parent-child caring relationship, and place emotional strain on families which can affect children’s resilience unless proper support is available. In addition, it is important to ensure we provide support for parents who may have mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependency or be experiencing domestic violence, as we know these are some of the key issues which push families into crisis.

**Question 9: Should the APPG seek to integrate its potential new focus on parenting with work in the area of early years education, or do we see these as two separate areas of focus?**

We believe that early years education and parenting support should be seen as two separate but heavily interconnected strands of work.

In terms of fully integrating the two areas, our main concern would be that there are certain important issues that would not necessarily fit easily into a single strand of work, and that a degree of focus on these could therefore be lost (for instance, from the perspective of early years education such issues might include more practical debates around delivery and quality improvement, which are important concerns for both policymakers and practitioners).

However, we do very much recognise that early years and parenting are strongly linked and mutually reinforcing, and feel that these connections are something that the APPG on Social Mobility should seek to explore. Earlier this year the APPG on Sure Start Children’s Centres, for which 4Children provides secretariat support, held a joint meeting with the APPG on Strengthening Couple Relationships and the APPG on Conception to Age Two to look at the issue of couple relationships, which highlighted many relevant cross-overs. For example, it was noted that from a very early age, children are responsive to positive and negative dynamics of their parents’ relationship, and that the parental relationship therefore has a significant effect on children’s behaviour and outcomes in the early years. A number of contributors spoke about how these issues should not be seen in the context of a “either/or” debate, and that for those with a particular interest in the early years, adult relationships could be seen as “another lever that politicians can use”.

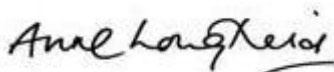
**Question 10: What are some other examples or case studies of parenting initiatives that the APPG should consider? This could include initiatives aimed at either especially disadvantaged families or a wider audience.**

As suggested in our response to Question 2, the APPG may wish to explore to those parenting programmes highlighted in both Graham Allen's "*Early Intervention: The Next Steps*"<sup>10</sup> report and the Early Intervention Foundation's recently published online "*Guidebook*",<sup>11</sup> particularly from the perspective of the empirical evidence-base which underpins such provision.

In addition, it may be useful to consider the CANparent initiative discussed in our answer to Question 4, particularly in terms of reducing the stigma around parenting support. Furthermore, the joint APPG session referred to in Question 9 discussed a number of parenting initiatives which the APPG on Social Mobility might wish to look at, such as support delivered through Children's Centres by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, as well as by Relate, and the "Family Foundations" programme which is run by the Fatherhood Institute.

Should the APPG on Social Mobility choose to pursue any future work on parenting we would be more than happy to support the Group's members and secretariat in doing so. If this would be helpful, please contact either John Davies (020 7522 6965 / [john.davies@4children.org.uk](mailto:john.davies@4children.org.uk)) or Steven Toole (020 7522 6919 / [steven.toole@4children.org.uk](mailto:steven.toole@4children.org.uk)) in 4Children's Public Affairs and Communications team.

Yours sincerely,



Anne Longfield  
**Chief Executive, 4Children**

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<sup>10</sup> Graham Allen (2011) [Early Intervention: The Next Steps](#)

<sup>11</sup> <http://guidebook.eif.org.uk/the-programmes-library>