



**MICHAEL SIEFF FOUNDATION SPEECH**  
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In your excellent conference report from last year on wellbeing in the reception years, you'll remember the Foundation made the argument that increasing investment in early year's services had contributed to "achieving a more cohesive, inclusive, secure and responsible society." A reflection of the fact, I think, that those first few years of our lives are critically important ones in both our social and cognitive development. Enabling us to get to Primary School armed with a huge array of skills and complex understandings – and laying the foundation for our future successes by accelerating our ability to understand the world around us in ways that previous generations would, I suspect, never even have guessed at.

Just this week, for instance, I was reading an article about the ability of children from as young as four to understand their parents' use of irony, and - possibly less desirably – to deploy it themselves. Whilst we also know that young children of four and five can do everything from read and follow maps, to understand advertising and be 'brand literate'.

Today, I would like to consider how we protect that inheritance through into the primary school years and beyond, looking, if I may, at the specific role of government in encouraging wellbeing. And looking at the extent to which Government can help young people to be given the very best chance of forging the strong attachments that are - undoubtedly - the most critical aspect of that wellbeing.

These are, I think, issues that go to the very heart of the Coalition plans for a radical reappraisal of the way the state interacts with families. A relationship that has, in my opinion, become unbalanced over the last 40 or so years as successive Governments attempted to supplant – rather than to support parents, families and communities.

That shift came about almost imperceptibly at first, but speeded up over recent years in reaction to the huge changes we saw taking place in society. With more singleton children, the rise of the nuclear family and an increasing number of single parent families meaning we are raising our children very differently to previous generations.

There has, I think, been a growing unease about that social churn, which goes far beyond a lack of income and often describes people who live in highly concentrated communities, experiencing multiple and complex challenges that serve to lock them and their children into a cycle of underachievement, poverty and unhappiness.

The outward indicators of this are, unfortunately, well known to us all. Whilst much hard work has been done and some progress made, the UK still has some of the highest levels of alcohol and drug use amongst its young people in the world. We have the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe, and more than one million of our young people suffer from some kind of mental health disorder.

In short, wellbeing in childhood seems to be something that is becoming more difficult to achieve by the day – despite the fact that it might seem, on the face of it at least, that it should be getting easier as society advances economically and technologically.

The question for today is how to reverse that trend in the primary years. Do we carry on attempting to think along the lines of big government, small communities? Which the Economist recently suggested had turned the UK into: ‘arguably Europe’s truly Napoleonic state’. Or do we think instead - big communities, small government?

### **Well-Being**

Unsurprisingly, I’m an advocate of the latter. Not just because big government in its own right has done remarkably little to address social change. But also because, as we all know, the single most important factor in a young child’s wellbeing is their attachment to their parents, which - self evidently - is not something that can be counterfeited by Government through grand social programmes, quangos or bureaucratic systems. The job of politicians, professionals and communities is, instead, to make 100 per cent sure that the support is in place to help parents to do the best possible job.

To highlight this fact, I was at a conference on attachment at the end of last month in Cambridge, where academics and psychologists expressed serious concern over the manner in which Government has attempted to address those changes in family life through restrictive child protection legislation and regulation.

The problem with such an approach, as many of them see it, is that it not only over promises, but also over relies on the ability of institutions like schools to engineer social reform – despite the fact that most professionals understand that it’s what goes on within the four walls of the family home that really matters more than anything else.

Just as one example, I’ve quoted before the work of anthropologist Mark Finn, who spent more than a decade measuring the cortisol levels of children in the Caribbean. As you know, persistently high levels of stress can be especially damaging for young people from the very youngest of ages, and have been linked with any number of conditions ranging from ME to asthma and long term mental health issues.

Mr Finn’s work was revealing in as much as it suggested that social ills such as bullying or peer pressure in schools, have far less of an impact on stress in childhood than we might have thought. That is not to say, of course, that they are not incredibly important issues to tackle. But what really mattered were domestic concerns. Time and time again, Mr Finn’s research showed that when a family experienced difficulties – like a father leaving or parents having a fight – cortisol levels in children rose, staying high and often causing illness days later.

It follows therefore that we have to look to strong families first as the way of improving children’s wellbeing and mental health, with primary schools and other professionals strongly expected to support that mission, but without reams of self defeating guidance and regulations that only serve to undermine their ability to function.

## **Social Work**

In social work for instance, I have very serious concerns about the amount of paperwork that has been foisted onto professionals – again with the very best of intentions – but only serving to steal their time. If a social worker is hunched over their computer for 80 per cent of their day, filling out forms - which by the way is a pretty conservative estimate - you don't need a maths degree to figure out the vast, vast majority of their working week is not being spent with the child or his other family, directly looking after their wellbeing.

At the same time, there is now an excessive emphasis on what can be counted, when of course our focus should always be quality of outcomes, rather than pure numbers. Quite clearly, if 5,000 children have been put through service x, y or z to improve their wellbeing – it does not necessarily make it an effective service. It's what happens to those children after they use it that matters. What has been the life changing experience? The value added?

That applies equally, of course, to issues such as the standard of support available to children in care, who face an incredible battle against the odds at the moment - due to very well documented failures that hamper their ability to form close attachments and – therefore – enjoy the standard of wellbeing that are enjoyed by so many of their peers. The Coalition has, as you know, asked Professor Eileen Munro of the LSE to investigate how we can help with some of these issues in her review of child protection. That review will be broad in scope, and include considering how effectively children's social workers and professionals in other agencies work together.

Over the coming months, we expect it to help us move away from the current reactive, fire fighting system to one that is a more supportive, and preventative model – that both frees up social workers and gives local communities greater freedom and flexibility. Where that first knock on the door happens before families have entered crisis, and in effect allows social workers to foster families.

## **Supporting Parents**

In short, we can best help professionals to tackle wellbeing by accentuating the importance of prevention and early intervention, and by getting them away from their desks and giving them the freedom to do the job they signed up for – which is very rarely sitting staring at a computer screen.

As for that most critical of areas – supporting parents themselves – this is where the focus must now lie. Much of this will happen at the pre-school age, where we are re-targeting Sure Start to help the most vulnerable parents – and where we are now working closely with the Department of Health to deliver on the Coalition commitment for an extra 4,200 health visitors, each of whom will have a pivotal role to play in helping mothers and fathers at the pre, and post natal stage to forge the strong attachments that are crucial to wellbeing and mental health.

But there is also a broader need to bring families, and family policy, right to the centre of government, which is why both the Prime Minister – and the Deputy Prime Minister – are actively involved in the Childhood and Families Task Force.

The simple reality is that modern life brings huge opportunities, but also pressures on time and finances for families. Many of which affect child wellbeing. How well we can mitigate

those impacts will be the biggest single factor in improving the wellbeing of primary school children in the UK.

## **Conclusion**

Quite clearly, the current system of big government has not worked. It provides reassurance, yes, because it is nice to think something is being done. Anything in fact. But they don't provide a genuine solution. In case we forget, there are still something like one in ten children between the ages of five and 15 suffering from a mental health disorder in the UK - and rising.

What is needed is real, and genuine, support for parents and carers. It is they who form the strong attachments that create wellbeing. It is they who have ultimate responsibility to create that wellbeing.

Does that mean Government has no role to play? Of course not. It has an incredible responsibility to support wellbeing and to improve mental health – as do the professionals who have daily contact with families and children. Hence the reason why the Department of Health has announced plans to publish a new mental health strategy for England over the coming months – of which CAMHS will be the most important area.

In the final analysis however, what this all boils down to is the most basic understanding that children need love, security and confidence to achieve and prosper - whilst recognising that Government cannot always provide those things directly – however much we might want to. More often than not, it will be achieved by supporting parents to make the best possible decisions, and by giving professionals the time and freedom to provide the best help.