The needs of the under fives in the family

The discussion document on this subject prepared by the Children's Committee is important because it has been written by a working group whose membership reflects a balance between health, education, social work, and the voluntary sector. It is the first cross-disciplinary analysis of the contemporary needs of young children and their families. The motive behind the document is a concern felt by the Children's Committee, 'that society, distracted by other policy issues, has given insufficient attention to the high priority that needs to be given to families who have the responsibility of rearing young children'.

The working group raises issues in three areas—policy, financial support, and services.

Policy

It is argued persuasively that as a society we should give more recognition in our policies to the 3 mothers in 4 who stay at home to care for their children, and whose morale is being eroded by increasing isolation, and higher expectations of their parenting. The working group points in particular to the rigid organisation of employment, and the need for reforms that would enable more mothers to combine work with family—better maternity and paternity leave, more flexibility of the working day, shared jobs, and extra leave for essential parental duties.

Financial support

In the meantime financial support for families should be increased—child benefits, maternity grants, free milk, and vitamins. This is not a new message; but the working group adds a careful analysis of the reasons for poor take-up of existing benefits, and gives suggestions for improving information about benefits. An appendix summarising the benefits available to families with children should help us all, paediatricians included, to be better sources of advice.

Services

The working group catalogues briefly the disintegrated chaos with which we are all depressingly familiar, arising out of the damaging distinctions between care and education in preschool provision, and between cure and prevention in the child health services. Instead of recommending solutions to these professional entanglements, the working group turns refreshingly to the key for improving all services—closer involvement of parents. In the most forward-looking section of the document professionals are urged to recognise parents as the central people in the life of the child; to focus their support on schemes in which parents help each other; to make their services both geographically and psychologically more accessible; and to take their services more often to where the client or patient is—the mother and toddler group, the playgroup, the home.

Is such a fundamental change in the role and training of doctors, nurses, teachers, and social workers possible? The working group believes it is, pointing optimistically to starts that have been made in Southampton, Liverpool, London, Sheffield, Norfolk, Suffolk, Newcastle, Leeds, Devon, Somerset, Hounslow, and Wales.

So much for the contents of the document, and few would disagree with the direction or balance of its arguments. If it is hard to be enthusiastic, it is because we know the relative impotence of professional groups and quangos to activate change. The Children's Committee deliberates, discusses, soliloquises—a Hamlet urged on by the ghost of its father (Court) and by a whole range of supporting phantoms from Plowden to Black: but where and when is the action? 'This document does not necessarily reflect the thinking of the Department of Health and Social Security or the Welsh Office', written as unobtrusively as the health warning on cigarette packets, betrays a deep neuroticism in our society's attitudes towards children.

What can paediatricians do? If they are to have any influence at all, they must first put themselves in touch with the broad needs of children, not just the temporary needs of the acutely ill minority. This means spending more time outside the security of hospital, and working towards true partnership with parents in the ways suggested in the discussion document. They may then find that it is parents, given adequate support and information by paediatricians and others, who are the strongest agents for change, rather than professional organisations, whether Children's Committee, the British Paediatric Association, or royal colleges. Certainly if children
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concern them, they should think about these things, and take courage from those who believe that as the industrial era draws to a close, 'we are currently entering a rare open moment in history, a space into which we can insert our wills'.

References

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