

## Child Policy Essay Sample

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**New Labour stated that 'Every Child Matters' (DfES, 2003). Making reference to this statement, analyse and evaluate policy relating to the well-being of children and families since New Labour came to power in 1997. Your essay should focus on child poverty, child abuse and one other policy area.**

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Widely described as a 'sea-change', New Labour launched their Every Child Matters (ECM) initiative in 2003. This is both the name of the policy, and a politically ideological statement. As Sevenhuijsen (1999) notes, policy texts are not passive documents; rather, they are sites of power. Social policy is an activity (Alcock et al, 2008) and a phenomenology in its own right. The wording of a policy document reveals political intent, and, particularly when children are concerned, this shapes the experience of an entire generation (Hill, 2003; Clark and Waller, 2007). This is all the more so because social policy is not widely subject to hermeneutical exploration. By the time that a policy is launched, its text is already formalised and unmovable (Blakemore, 2003). Therefore, in order to explore the initiative in greater depth, this essay will address the ECM policy from a position of critical analysis. The policies are complex, and the academic debate has been fertile; therefore, this essay will focus on a small number of key aspects. Firstly, it will examine in some detail the issue of child poverty, showing how the negative rhetoric leads to social stigma and how the social investment approach neglects 'normal' children. The essay will then briefly turn to abused children, who are given much the same treatment as children in poverty, but with greater emphasis on direct state intervention. It will then make the point that many children are missing from the ECM policy, which could arguably be termed 'Some Children Matter'. Finally, the essay will outline how the coalition government has an unspoken 'No Children Matter' framework.

The statement that 'every child matters' is, whether deliberately or not, in itself somewhat semantically problematic. *To matter* is an intransitive verb, which means that it does not need to take a grammatical object; however, by not providing an object the statement seems to leave the question of to whom every child matters hanging vacant. Furthermore, *to matter* is a vague verb at the best of times, being

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necessarily defined by the variables that affect it, most usually in the form of a conditional sentence (for example, *will it matter if we arrive five minutes late?*) These dubious semantics appear to take on a darker hue when the document goes on to outline precisely why children matter so much. Well-being is not mentioned; rather, the social investment approach argues that children matter because they equate to money.

The statement that children are 20 per cent of the population, but 100 per cent of the future has become well-known (Fawcett et al., 2004). Labour also claimed that children are the country's future, and that investment in helping children to achieve their potential is the most important investment that Britain can make (ibid). Whilst this may sound like a Halcion vision, the reality is more economically driven. Children who do not achieve academic success have a negative impact on the economy for several reasons, most of which relate to the poverty cycle. This cycle is a well-researched phenomenon. According to Swanepoel and De Beer (2006) growing up in poverty dramatically increases chances of poor educational performance, poor health, and poor employment perspectives. In financial terms, this equates to a constant drain on public funds. Education, health, and benefits are all publically funded, and the long-term unemployed take from this funding without contributing to it. Put bluntly, the state pays to keep some people alive whilst receiving nothing in return except more children born into the poverty cycle. Therefore, investing in children is an economic move designed with long-term financial success in mind.

Child poverty has been broadcast as a particular problem in the UK. When New Labour came to power in 1997, child poverty stood at 34 per cent (Smith, 2008). It was soon predicted that more than £30 billion would be needed to lift 'every' child from poverty (ibid). Dramatic though these figures seem, they require closer

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consideration, as the situation is considerably more complex. For instance, poverty can be measured in any of several ways. The UK government has traditionally defined an adequate standard of living by using the notoriously unreliable relative income measurements system (Predelli et al., 2008), wherein “below 60 per cent of contemporary media equivalised household income” is the poverty line (ibid). According to Predelli et al., this is a poor foundation for a policy because with its focus fixed entirely upon finance, it neglects two of the most crucial elements: the concept of well-being, and the perspective of the children, both of which will be discussed in detail below. This means that the ‘poverty’ label is applied to a diverse range of families rather as a blanket term. For instance, that 50 per cent of children officially living in poverty live in working households is not highlighted, (ibid).

This use of a blanket term has negative consequences partly because the wording of the ECM document presents a single-mindedly negative view of poverty. For instance, children are described in the policy as being “in need” (ECM, 2003: 4), “at risk” (HTM, 2003: 2), “vulnerable” (HMT, 2003: 5), so that they ultimately become “victims” (HTM, 2003: 6). This language use is contrasted with the description of families living in poverty as being “high-cost, high-harm” (HMT, 2007: EV17), and of children living with “adults with chaotic lifestyles” (ibid). The unspoken assumption is that the two correlate, and naturally progress children from a state of being “in need” into their troubled teenage years, whereupon the rhetoric becomes somewhat sinister: they are “dangerous”, “anti-social”, “villains” and “offenders” (HMT, 2003:5). Politicians link all concepts together in authoritative statements, such as this one from the then prime minister Gordon Brown: “tackling child poverty is the best anti-drugs, anti-crime, anti-deprivation policy for our country” (Brown, 2000, cited in Lister 2006: 317). This overtly links poverty and deprivation with drugs and crime, which is

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a correlation that is utterly false. For instance, Britain's oldest and third most expensive public school, Winchester College, received somewhat inglorious fame in 2001 when between forty and fifty of its boys were sent home for habitual drug and alcohol use (Addison, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

According to ATD Fourth World (2005), a voluntary organisation working alongside individuals in long-term poverty, this multiple layering of negative discourse concerning poverty and its perceived effects is in itself self-perpetuating. Parents report a sense of shame, embarrassment, isolation, social exclusion, and stigma that comes from both the government and the public. One parent claimed that "we are spectators as we watch other people live, then struggle to survive to make a life for our children" (Voices for a Change, 2008). Put simply, poverty is laced with so much negative rhetoric that a resounding and unchallenged stereotype is created, and one that carries with it so much social stigma that the task of helping people out of poverty is made all the more challenging, and well-being is undermined on many levels. Indeed, Labour themselves proved this conclusion: child poverty had eventually been reduced by only four per cent in the decade that New Labour were in power (Smith, 2008), and, as Predelli et al., (2008) note, that four per cent is representative of the 'easy ones' (Predelli et al., 2008).

This sense of exclusion and shame is reinforced by the state paternalism policy approach. In this paradigm, the state conveys the message that parents cannot be trusted to bring up their children correctly. Therefore, parental rights rather than duties are emphasised (Gill, 2008). This ultimately means that the state can intervene if a child is deemed at being at risk. According to Voices for a Change

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<sup>1</sup> The college has unsurprisingly done much to eradicate this story, but reports can still be found in some archives, such as this: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1331095/Winchester-head-in-drug-warning.html>

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(2008), this has led many parents to fear losing their children if they either ask for help, or if they are perceived to be failing. This finding is supported by research, such as Canvin et al., (2007), which found that experiences with family-orientated public services were associated with feelings of being misjudged and misunderstood, and with the subsequent loss of resources. This parent-orientated punishment-based system is reflected in many other aspects of the policy, with parents risking losing child benefits if their children do not attend school. Considering that the state has deliberately put itself in a paternal role, it is therefore proving to be a particularly harsh parent.

Given the state's financial motivation for redefining childhood, however, this harshness is perhaps unsurprising. One of the methods for treating poverty under the ECM document is to remove as many non-working parents from the home as possible and to place them in income-generating positions (Williams, 2004). This creates a well-known paradox, for which the controversial US *Welfare to Work* scheme is a precursor: with parents being urged to spend more time away from home, it is harder for them to carry out the parental responsibilities that the state insists upon. Furthermore, this authoritative approach has been shown to have both immediate and long-term effects on well-being. UNICEF (2007) found that high levels of autonomy equate to high levels of well-being, and it duly placed the UK and US at the bottom of the league table (see Appendix B). Research has shown that adolescents who have had little experience of autonomy during childhood lack the basic independence and coping skills needed for survival (Gill, 2008).

The relationship between well-being and ECM is much discussed. Indeed, the problem is neatly put by Fawcett et al., (2004), who ask how the policy helps the seventy per cent of children not affected by poverty. The implication is that the focus

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is so firmly fixed on the failings of the few that the majority – those who can safely be assumed to achieve the required grades to continue on to further education or into employment without additional assistance - are forgotten (Lansdown, 2005). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) agrees (UNCRC, 2008; Payne, 2003). As Lister (2006) points out, even though the UK signed the convention on the Rights of the Child as far back as 1991, no mention of it is made anywhere in the ECM document. According to Lister, this is evidence of a failure to build a “culture of respect” for children’s human rights (Lister, 2006: 322).

Well-being arguably has little room in a document that perceives children as passively vulnerable victims who need to be turned into economic profit, because it is virtually impossible to measure. Wyness (2006) claims that developmental psychology and socialization theory are the major drivers of this paradigm, and this leads to the state perceiving the need for complete and intense state control above all else. Moss and Petrie (2005) argue that the state views children as incomplete adults, more akin to future *becomings* than present *beings*. Progress, therefore, is measured in stages. The UK Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the subsequent National Curriculum (NC) take as their foundation the work of the developmental psychologist Piaget. Piaget argued that children learn in clearly defined stages, which are limited by biological development. All children learn at the same pace, and failure to do so is indicative of cognitive impairment. Resultantly, the UK educational system is assessment driven. Lister levels this criticism:

“The focus is on achievement and education, not enjoyment and play. There is no room for play in the social investment template. For older children, education is reduced to a utilitarian achievement-oriented measure culture of tests and exams,

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with insufficient attention paid to the actual educational experience” (Lister, 2006: 322).

Well-being, on the other hand, is challenging to measure. It is built upon subjective foundations such as happiness and enjoyment (Lister, 2006). According to Gill, (2008), this has much to do with immeasurable concepts including freedom, having a range of adult and child contacts with whom to interact, and child-friendly communities in general. For Gill (2008), the dominant philosophy in the UK is one of protection against risk. Indeed, it is the public enquiry response to high-profile cases such as those of the murders of two eight-year-olds in 2000 that precipitated the ECM document. Victoria Climbié’s torture and murder in February 2000 raised the issue of child safety within the home, whilst the murder of Sarah Payne, kidnapped whilst playing in a cornfield in July 2000, brought the dangers of the outdoors into the spotlight. Children are not safe indoors, nor are they safe outdoors, therefore the paternalistic state will use its powers of intervention to protect the vulnerable.

The example of Victoria Climbié does, however, raise the important point of the link between the ECM policy and child abuse. Just as the government links poverty with crime and drugs, so too it is held responsible for the majority of child abuse cases. There is evidence to support this. Perhaps the most controversial case of recent years was that of Baby P. The one-year-old had received over fifty injuries in the months leading up to his death in 2007, but the shock came when it was revealed that the local council had seen the boy on nearly sixty occasions (Garrett, 2009). Public outrage intensified when it was remembered that Haringey had been the same borough within which Victoria Climbié had lived and died only seven years earlier, and whose death had prompted the sea-change ECM policy to be made.

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Child abuse is a sociocultural phenomenon that is defined according to cultural norms, values and variables. Abuse is treated with similar rhetoric to poverty: by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, children had become “England’s most precious resource” (Gilbert, cited in Hendrick, 2005). However, the way in which this valuable resource is protected changed considerably during the last century. The ECM document and Children Act (2004) marked a significant shift in emphasis (Parton, 2006): the general concept of child protection was expanded to the wider concept of safeguarding children (DfES, 2010) and, with the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act of 2006, safeguarding all groups of at-risk people. In the context of ECM, this means that children’s well-being is defined in terms of how physically safe they are (ECM, 2003).

Abuse falls into four key categories: physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and neglect (see Appendix A). Perhaps the most striking aspect of this categorisation approach in the context of the ECM policy as a whole is the lack of measurability. Intervention from local child protection services can occur in cases of ‘significant harm,’ yet this is given no clear definition. Indeed, a clear definition may be impossible to establish given medical evidence that much of the harm resulting from abuse is not only psychological, but tends to emerge in later years (DoH, 1995). Additionally, the definitions do not expand upon circumstances. For instance, as is shown in Appendix A, failure to ‘protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger’ is part of the ‘neglect’ category. In the case of Baby P, wherein the mother admitted to knowingly allow her partner to physically abuse her child, this seems like helpful legislative guidance. However, on paper alone the same finger could be pointed at Sara Payne, the mother of Sarah Payne, who was not on hand to prevent her daughter from being abducted and murdered. The two cases, however, bare no

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comparison. Therefore, child abuse is most often associated with its resultant visible behavioural and developmental implications (Corby, 2002).

In many ways, legislation concerning abuse shares many rhetorical and semantic similarities with poverty. In particular, abused children are 'in need', a loaded term that conveys vulnerability. Abuse is often associated with poverty, as the case of Baby P exemplifies, and can form its own cycles (Garrett, 2009). For instance, all three adults imprisoned in the Baby P case had been abused as children (ibid). This explains why Labour would visualise abused children as being a potential category for social investment with swift intervention. Moreover, situations of abuse give the government significant power over the child, particularly in cases that qualify the child being taken into care. Lister (2006) raises the familiar criticism that the government is much keener to champion the rights of children in care than children deemed to be not-at-risk. As Pugh wryly notes, all children have needs (Pugh, 1992). This sense of gaps, blank spaces, and forgotten children appears to be a particular feature of the ECM policy (Predelli et al., 2008). It is not just the able-bodied and well-fed who are absent. Fawcett et al., (2004) states that disabled children are hardly mentioned in the document, and suggests that this is because they are not a good social investment.

ECM fails disabled children in many ways. For instance, despite research having shown that disabled children have similar sort of life and career aspirations as non-disabled children, their outcomes under ECM are lower or otherwise different. Furthermore, it has been argued that the ECM policy attempts to force the needs and capabilities of disabled children into a framework designed for non-disabled children (Reid 2005). That is, the government did not ask disabled children and their families what they would like to see in the policy, and therefore did not discover what

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enables feelings of well-being within the disabled life experience. Whilst some disabled children strive to ascribe to socioeconomic normativity, some disabled children will never be able to make an economic contribution to society, nor will some be able to achieve independence. However, as Sloper (2004) argues, this means that the well-being of disabled children needs to be measured against a set of criteria that reflects their unique and individual potential. ECM, on the other hand, simply falls quiet on the issue.

With the advent of the coalition government, these already shadowy children seemed to fade further from view. The coalition government's 'Big Society' is a form of decentralisation wherein some of the paternalism associated with New Labour is transferred back to the community (Helm, 2011). Of particular note is that this new community appears to be a land without children. Labour, whose policies tended towards area-specific services, had invested in the voluntary sector managed by local children's trusts (Evans, 2011). Much of this funding was either reduced or cut entirely under the coalition (Helm, 2011). A new introduction was made: the National Citizen Service. Only open to young people aged 16 to 19, this short course has just 11,000 places to share between 750,000 young people (Evans, 2011). That children appear to be missing from the Big Society conveys the message that children are not citizens (Helm, 2011).

Therefore, that 'Every Child Matters' can be said to be yet to be demonstrated. The legislation aims to include every child, but due to a combination of rhetorical issues and an unwavering focus on two small areas of society, poverty and child abuse, the policy could be said to be closer to 'Some Children Matter'. The well-being of the vast majority of children became largely ignored as the system of measurement, achievement, and reaching targets became the primary way of ascertaining success.

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A paternalistic authoritative approach further hampered potential for well-being by creating a culture almost entirely lacking in autonomy. The Coalition has yet to address the issues, but have also done nothing to improve the situation. Primarily, their focus on immediate economic concerns has meant that children do not feature in their policies thus far, except where funding is to be removed from children's services. This lack of investment in children, social or otherwise, is underlined by their absence from the Big Society concept. Therefore, the UK has arguably reached a situation wherein 'No Children Matter'.

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## APPENDIX A: DIFINITIONS OF CHILD ABUSE

HM Government (2010) *Working together to safeguard children. A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.*

London: The Stationary Office.

### What is abuse and neglect?

Abuse and neglect are forms of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or community setting, by those known to them or, more rarely, by a stranger for example, via the internet. They may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children.

**Physical abuse** may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating, or otherwise causing physical harm to a child. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer fabricates the symptoms of, or deliberately induces, illness in a child.

**Emotional abuse** is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may include not

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giving the child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them or 'making fun' of what they say or how they communicate. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. These may include interactions that are beyond the child's developmental capability, as well as overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning, or preventing the child participating in normal social interaction. It may involve seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another. It may involve serious bullying (including cyberbullying), causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of children. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of maltreatment of a child, though it may occur alone.

**Sexual abuse** involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet). Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

**Neglect** is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development.

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Neglect may occur during pregnancy as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born it may involve a parent failing to:

- provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (excluding exclusion from home or abandonment)
- protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger
- ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care-givers)
- ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs.

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## APPENDIX B

### CHILD WELL-BEING IN RICH COUNTRIES: A SUMMARY TABLE

The chart below presents the findings of this *Report Card* in summary form. Countries are listed in order of their average rank for the six dimensions of child well-being that have been assessed.<sup>1</sup> A light blue background indicates a place in the top third of the table; mid-blue denotes the middle third and dark blue the bottom third.

Dimensions of child well-being	Average ranking position (for all 6 dimensions)	Dimension 1 Material well-being	Dimension 2 Health and safety	Dimension 3 Educational well-being	Dimension 4 Family and peer relationships	Dimension 5 Behaviours and risks	Dimension 6 Subjective well-being
Netherlands	4.2	10	2	6	3	3	1
Sweden	5.0	1	1	5	15	1	7
Denmark	7.2	4	4	8	9	6	12
Finland	7.5	3	3	4	17	7	11
Spain	8.0	12	6	15	8	5	2
Switzerland	8.3	5	9	14	4	12	6
Norway	8.7	2	8	11	10	13	8
Italy	10.0	14	5	20	1	10	10
Ireland	10.2	19	19	7	7	4	5
Belgium	10.7	7	16	1	5	19	16
Germany	11.2	13	11	10	13	11	9
Canada	11.8	6	13	2	18	17	15
Greece	11.8	15	18	16	11	8	3
Poland	12.3	21	15	3	14	2	19
Czech Republic	12.5	11	10	9	19	9	17
France	13.0	9	7	18	12	14	18
Portugal	13.7	16	14	21	2	15	14
Austria	13.8	8	20	19	16	16	4
Hungary	14.5	20	17	13	6	18	13
United States	18.0	17	21	12	20	20	–
United Kingdom	18.2	18	12	17	21	21	20

OECD countries with insufficient data to be included in the overview: Australia, Iceland, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, the Slovak Republic, South Korea, Turkey.