

What About The Children?

Patrons: Sir Michael Morpurgo, Rebecca Abrams, Sir John Timpson, Dame Sarah Storey

'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of the under-threes in our ever-changing society'

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Summary of Goodman Lecture, 2017

Sir Al Aynsley-Green

Emeritus professor, University College London and Nottingham Trent University, and
Children's Commissioner for England 2005 to 2010

Are we betraying children and childhood and if so what's to be done about it?

He began the lecture by surveying the large audience and remarking on a 'severe shortage of the Y chromosome': most delegates at WATCh? conferences, like most early-years workers and advocates from all disciplines in the UK, are women. This, he suggested, was not the case in comparable countries where, additionally, children and teenagers are taken more seriously as individuals and as citizens.

He explained that when he was first appointed Children's Commissioner he was grilled by a panel of teenagers about his background and his aims in the role. And that background was a very ordinary one, in a mining community in Northumberland. His father died suddenly when he was only ten years old but already ambitious to become a doctor, and he spent his teenage years in relative poverty. These early difficulties – and particularly his father's death – had a profound influence on his professional work. He described his involvement with child bereavement charities such as Winston's Wish, and conversations with children who had lost parents through suicide, accidents and cancer and who appreciate his ability to understand and empathise. He gave moving accounts of the effect of loss on pre-school children, toddlers, babies and even *in utero*. Survey data has shown that 'war babies' whose fathers died before they were born have had shorter lifespans than others born at the same time in similar circumstances, an effect that presumably arises through their mothers' stress.

Nelson Mandela famously quoted that 'there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children'. Aynsley-Green went on to examine UK society today in the light of that quote, describing a number of ways in which it is found wanting. There is, he said, 'something bizarre' about British attitudes to children today. He noted that many, particularly in the higher echelons of society, still think it is OK to send them away to boarding school when they are very young; many regard corporal punishment as acceptable; and family policies are designed to prioritise financial goals over social ones. So he asked "how can we persuade our politicians that children are important?" One way, he suggested, was through self-interest. Today's children will self-evidently become tomorrow's adults; we will need to care about producing healthy, educated, creative and resilient children who will grow up to be able to care for a growing number of the old and very old.

But it is clear, he indicated, that children in the UK today are not – or at least not all – healthy and resilient. In recent years, survey after survey has put the country towards the bottom of the league in terms of every measurable aspect of child wellbeing. A UNICEF report in 2007 on the wellbeing of children in the world's 22 richest countries put us at the bottom; our position had risen slightly by 2013 but he suggested that it is likely to fall again if poverty and

inequality increase. Progress has been made – data from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health showed the expected improvements when viewed over 50 years or more – but the UK has failed to keep pace with other countries' progress, and the life chances of the most vulnerable children have hardly improved at all.

Blaming politicians is easy, but he suggested that we need to look at our attitudes more generally. Compared to many countries, UK children are absent from the public sphere. In countries that come towards the top of the lists, such as the Netherlands (which anecdotally, at least, has 'the happiest kids in the world'), childhood is much more often a time of freedom, simple pleasures and stress-free schooling. British children are trammelled partly, at least, because they are feared. The story of the 'Mosquito' youth deterrent is a case in point. This is an electronic device that emits a high-pitched sound that is inaudible to anyone over about 25 and that has been installed in public places in the UK to prevent teenagers from 'loitering'. No-one seems to have thought in these cases that it would be better to provide the youngsters with something to do.

So, what can be done to change direction? Aynsley-Green began the final section of his talk by suggesting that we need a paradigm shift, and that this can be best achieved if we abandon our 'bunkers and silos' and work across disciplines. This shift, he explained, should focus on three things: needs, nurture and communities. And he identified, also emphasised by WATCH?, the importance of focussing on the needs of the youngest children. What, he asked, does a foetus need? His suggestions: a healthy mother and father, well-prepared for parenthood; good antenatal and perinatal care; and social and economic security.

Each newly-born child is a newly-born citizen of a community and a country. We all care about our own children and grandchildren, but we need to extend some of that care further beyond the immediate family. One of the most important things we can do to promote the needs of our youngest citizens is to prioritise the development of healthy, securely attached relationships between babies (and toddlers) and their closest care-givers. The nurture of our youngest children does have advocates in the UK government, and some of them came together to produce the '1001 Critical Days' manifesto that attempts to tie all aspects of government into the welfare of children 'between conception and age two'. This agenda is threatened by government cuts and austerity, but there can be fewer more cost-effective government investments than those in these babies and children. And we all have a role to play.