Foundation for the Future: An International Conference on Early Childhood and Family Policy

How can we shape policy to help children and families flourish?

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Executive summary

There is a need to shape early years and family policy in a way that both supports infant development and incorporates a more central role for parents in their caregiving roles. It is not a question of returning to the past but reimagining the future. This international conference was an opportunity to hear about what is happening in other countries and learn more about what alternatives there might be to ever-increasing institutional childcare. Altering this trajectory will require not only policy solutions but will depend on major cultural shifts in society.

Policy background

- In the UK and wider Europe, an economic agenda prioritising employment is encouraging mothers of small children into the labour market by means of subsidised institutional childcare.

- As falling birth rates are partly attributed to childcare costs, subsidised childcare is seen as giving women more freedom to have children if they wish.

- This policy needs to be reassessed in terms of its future economic and social good, its alignment with parental wishes and, crucially, its ability to meet the needs of children.

Main themes of the conference

- Children and young people across the developed world are experiencing more mental health problems, isolation and financial insecurity which are damaging their life chances. The reasons for this are complex.

- Financial stresses together with social and psychological problems are contributing to a crisis of confidence in young people's own ability to start a family, in turn affecting the birth rate.

- Falling birth rates and the mental health crisis make a weak foundation for the future. Governmental oversight of the preconditions for economic growth found in the domestic realm, are exacerbating rather than mitigating these trends by undermining the family.

Further effects of the employment agenda on families

- Though it is the basis of national prosperity, informal household production remains undervalued and is not counted as economic performance.

- The goal of drawing more mothers into employment is pursued without regard to the best interests of children, and particularly to their social and emotional needs.

- Prevailing state-sponsored narratives frequently position children as a brake on employment, women's careers and gender equality. Such narratives can ignore the wishes of those wishing to care for children at home, mothers in particular.

- The employment agenda has had the effect of downgrading the status of parenting as less socially and economically valuable than work. It also militates against parents' ability to meet their obligations to children.

- Public policy aversion to marriage is a key factor in worsening family instability, inevitably affecting children most.

- Research shows that the most important factor influencing a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development is the home environment and the quality of parenting.

Conclusions

Children need their mothers.

- Key evidence highlights that a secure mother-baby bond is essential to the child's brain development, powers of emotional self-regulation and long-term wellbeing.
- Strong and stable attachment to the mother is the foundation of healthy relationships and therefore of many other successes in life.

Children must come first.

- The language of care has given way to the language of 'education' in policy affecting the family. This is to devalue the psychological, emotional and social wellbeing upon which a child's cognitive development rests.
- Short-termist economic priorities and an egalitarian moral agenda have sidelined the interests of children. Children's problems are too often medicalised without consideration of underlying causes.
- The consequences of separating children from their parents at an early age must be properly understood before pursing policies which only reduce the time parents and children spend together.

Children need stable families

- The home environment and the quality of parenting are the most potent factors in laying the foundations for a child's success in life.
- Unstable family life, the decline of marriage and fatherlessness all threaten the immutable needs of the child. Children's needs must take precedence over ideology and political interests.

Recommendations

- The research available to date points overwhelmingly to the necessity of adapting policy to enable mothers to spend as much time with their children as possible, particularly in the first three years of life.

- The UK should follow the lead of other countries in revaluing the work of mothers looking after children at home through measures to reduce the financial 'caring penalty'. Such measures may also help to address falling birth rates.

- Parents should be provided with guidance to better understand their role and significance in shaping children's futures.

- Unpaid homecare for children is a public good and as such deserves recognition in the tax and benefit system. Taxation must be re-designed to recognise the family and mitigate the financial penalty suffered by mothers caring at home; help with housing costs would do much to aid family stability.

- In 2016 (the last year it was measured), the net contribution to the UK economy (gross value added) of unpaid informal childcare at home by parents, grandparents and others was £351.7bn. This is not economic inactivity and should not be classed as such. Reintroducing a measure of the economic worth of domestic childcare would help to emphasise the value of parenting and enhance its perceived social status.

Introduction

The earliest years of a child's life set the foundation for their future. How can we shape family policy to help children and families thrive? This was the question which inspired the International Conference on Early Childhood and Family Policy which took place at the House of Lords in London and the offices of the Civitas think tank on 21 February 2025.

The day-long event was convened as a joint venture of Civitas and the European Federation of Parents and Carers at Home (FEFAF). Established in 1983 and representing 11 different national organisations, FEFAF campaigns for recognition of the value of unpaid caregiving, for better protections for unpaid caregivers and for the rights of families to choose to care for children at home.

The conference was attended by academics, researchers, policymakers and practitioners from around the world representing a wide range of organisations working in the fields of developmental psychology, early education, social policy and economics.

Delegates and speakers were brought together by a common belief that family and early years policy should be designed around the needs of families, starting with the best interests of the child.

The aims of the conference were to examine what children need for healthy growth and development, particularly in the early years, and to discuss ways in which policy can be better aligned with those needs.

As well as hearing about the academic evidence relating to child development, the conference learned about family policies in several different countries and discussed the impact of these policies on child and family outcomes.

Policy background

In 2016, the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that overall unpaid household service work was equivalent to 63.1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and that the

gross value added (GVA) of informal childcare was £351.7 billion in prices of the time.[1] Despite this, people who are not in paid employment because they are caring for young children continue to be officially described as 'economically inactive'.[2]

With near unanimity from left to right of the political spectrum, leaders across Europe are focusing on employment as a key driver of productivity. Despite already high employment rates in many of the countries concerned, the agenda is to encourage more women into work by transferring the care of young children from families to private or state-run childcare facilities. To 'remove disincentives for female labour market participation', the European Council wants to see 45 per cent of all member state children under age three in professional care. For children over three, the target is 96 per cent.[3]

In the United Kingdom, both Labour and the Conservative Party have made a commitment to expand the provision of subsidised formal childcare, with the Labour government offering the eventual offer of a childcare placement available for babies from nine months old for up to 30 hours per week. The view from HM Treasury is that the resulting move of mothers into the workforce will mean 'a bigger GDP', 'less wasted talent' and 'a more prosperous country'. Speaking to the BBC in 2024, then Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt stated that if 'it is good for the economy' it is 'the right thing to do.' [4]

More recently, education secretary Bridget Philipson has claimed that more state-funded childcare is the answer to falling birth rates in Britain. In June 2025, she wrote in *The Telegraph* that a generation of young people are being discouraged from starting a family because of the cost of living, housing and childcare. She claimed that this trend will have 'worrying repercussions for society and the future' and that more subsidised childcare places will give young people the 'freedom to choose' to have children if that is what they wish. The Labour Government set out to create more than 4,000 new school-based childcare places by the end of 2025. This new provision was to ease the cost of childcare for parents during the week while they are working and leave them with more money to spend on 'making new memories each weekend'.[5]

UK fertility rate

Since 2010, the fertility rate in England and Wales has been in overall decline. And 2024 saw the fertility rate fall for the third consecutive year, despite a 0.6 per cent increase in the number of live births.

[1] ONS (2018) *Household satellite account, UK: 2015 and 2016*. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/satelliteaccounts/articles/householdsatelliteaccounts/2015and2016estimates (Accessed: 12 September 2025).
[2] HM Treasury (2023) *Spring Budget 2023*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spring-budget-2023 (Accessed: 12 September 2025).
[3] EUR-Lex (2022) *Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care*. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52022DC0442 (Accessed: 12 September 2025).
[4] Political TV (2024) *Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg | 3rd March 2024 | Will the Chancellor Cut Taxes?* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwlPeDvu-EQ (Accessed: 12 September 2025). See also: European Commission. *Women's situation in the labour market*. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/women-labour-market-work-life-balance/womens-situation-labour-market_en (Accessed: 12 September 2025).
[5] Martin, D. (2025) 'Have more children, says Labour', *The Telegraph*, 30 June. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2025/06/30/have-more-children-labour-bridget-phillipson-birth-rate/ (Accessed: 12 September 2025).

Now, the average number of live children that women can expect to have across their childbearing years in England and Wales is 1.41 – the lowest since comparable data was first collected in 1938, according to the ONS. However, if we want the population to remain stable over time, then, discounting the impact of migration, this figure should stand at around 2.1.[6]

Increasingly, major questions are being asked about the soundness of this political agenda, from an economic perspective and in terms of the interests of families and children. Is subsidised childcare an efficient or effective way to improve productivity? Is the industry practically capable of such an expansion, particularly while maintaining universally high standards? Will the focus on formal childcare create more freedom for young people to realise their family aspirations, or does it present them with a stark choice between not having children and having children that they rarely see? Do most parents in fact wish to be relieved of the need to care for their own children? Is the substitute care being offered in place of a mother's care of a high enough quality to ensure that all the physical, emotional and psychological needs of children are being met? Most crucially, if the developmental needs of children are not being adequately met on a large scale, what are the potential long-term costs to the economy and to society?

Main themes

Two recurring themes framed the day's discussion. The first was the epidemic in mental fragility that is being reported across the Western world. Many speakers referred to signs that children and young people are experiencing more anxiety, depression, behavioural problems and personality disorders, and to apparently increasing levels of loneliness, isolation and social fragmentation. There are indications that more people are unable to form lasting relationships or succeed in education or employment, resulting in increasing reliance on welfare and rising healthcare costs. Several speakers acknowledged complex reasons for this trend. Financial pressures, social expectations, family breakdown and digital media addictions were mentioned as some of the possible stressors contributing to a cycle of mental instability from which it is difficult to disentangle cause and effect.

A second recurring theme of the conference was the trend in falling birth rates. Again, speakers noted many possible reasons why people are deciding not to have children, highlighting shifting cultural norms and economic insecurity. A strong emphasis was placed on the likelihood that emotional, psychological and relationship problems are playing a role in the apparent crisis of confidence among young people in their ability to parent.

Taken together, falling birth rates and the mental health crisis indicate alarmingly vulnerable foundations for the future. The overall mood of the conference was a sense of urgency in the need to address these problems. From the presentations, a consensus emerged that governments across Europe and in the USA are pursuing an economic agenda which is exacerbating rather than reversing these trends, primarily because of the ways in which it ignores and/or undermines the family. Where problems are acknowledged, policy focuses on treating downstream symptoms rather than tackling root causes.

[6] Hall, R. and Carrell, S. (2025) 'Fertility rate hits record low in England, Scotland and Wales', *The Guardian*, 27 August. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/aug/27/england-and-wales-fertility-rate-falls-for-third-consecutive-year (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

Multiple interconnected features of this agenda were identified and reiterated throughout the day. It was argued that:

- A preoccupation with short-term growth is distorting both thought and policy concerning the family because it discounts the fact that everything in the formal economy is built upon informal household production.
- Policies which incentivise maternal employment through an increase in formal childcare attendance are being implemented without consideration for child development or what is currently known about the psychological and emotional needs of young children.
- The political and cultural narrative around family responsibilities has become essentially negative, with children portrayed as a burden to parents or as obstacles standing in the way of employment targets, women's careers and gender equality.
- The message communicated to younger generations through this language is that parenting has little social value and that parents – particularly mothers – ought to prioritise more important work.
- A narrow approach to gender equality perceives women's value only in terms of the labour market and ignores the wishes of women who would like to take care of their own children.
- Disdain for marriage and domesticity amongst political and educational classes has coincided with a decline in family stability and relationship security, with children suffering the worst long-term consequences.
- Early childhood intervention measures prioritise schools and formal daycare attendance despite clear evidence that the most powerful influence on children's cognitive and social outcomes is the family environment and the quality of interaction with parents.

The main message of the conference was that incentivising one area of human activity always comes at a cost to another area of human activity; the political and cultural emphasis on work is impeding parents' ability to fulfil their primary responsibilities to their children.

While it may be difficult to establish direct links between specific policies and broader social trends, it is not a huge leap to assume a connection between the declining state and status of the family and both the mental health crisis and collapsing fertility.

1. Conference presentations

Anne Fennell and Jim McConalogue: Opening remarks

The conference was opened by Anne Fennell, the main organiser of the conference, President of FEFAF and Chair of Mothers at Home Matter. Anne set the context and inspiration for the day by describing a number of disturbing trends that have become evident from her campaigning work across Europe and the USA.

Firstly, a negative narrative around children, where they are described as burdens and obstacles that need to be removed so that mothers can make a meaningful contribution to the economy. Secondly, a growing distrust and devaluing of the role of the parent in favour of the role of the professional. Thirdly, a lack of understanding from political leaders and from the media, and a lack of interest in the impact that childcare policies are having on children. Finally, a huge mental health crisis, with apparently 500,000 young people from the age of 16 to 35 unable to work mainly because of mental illness.

Anne expressed hope that the conference would be a forum for the voices of mothers to be heard and to discuss the numerous ways in which mothering has value for society. It aimed to develop a new, more positive narrative around parenting and present an opportunity to explore policies which could give families the financial freedom to provide for the best interests of their children.

Jim McConalogue, CEO of Civitas, reiterated the need to shape early years and family policy in a way that both supports infant development and incorporates a more central role for parents in their caregiving roles. It is not a question of returning to the past but reimagining the future. This international conference is a chance to hear about what is happening abroad and learn more about what alternatives there might be to ever-increasing institutional care and over-reliance on the state. He noted that altering this trajectory will require not only policy solutions but will depend on major cultural shifts in society.

Erica Komisar: Parenting, the needs of children and brain development

Erica Komisar is a psychological consultant specialising in parenting and work-life balance. She has led workshops for organisations such as The Garden House School, Goldman Sachs, and SWFS Early Childhood Center. A regular contributor to The Wall Street Journal*,* Washington Post*,* New York Daily News*, and FOX 5 NY, she is also a Contributing Editor at the Institute for Family Studies. Erica has appeared on major media networks, including CBS, ABC, FOX, and NPR. She is the author of* Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters *and* Chicken Little the Sky Isn't Falling: Raising Resilient Adolescents in the New Age of Anxiety *(2021).*

Erica's presentation focussed on the importance of mothers and attachment in early childhood. She emphasised the need to change societal attitudes about parenting, arguing that cultural narratives undervalue the crucial role of mothers and primary caregivers.

‘There’s no point in changing policy if mothers and fathers don’t see the value of caring for their own children and don’t feel valued for caring for their own children’ – Erica Komisar

She began by challenging several myths, including the idea that any caregiver will do, that quality time alone is enough, or that children are naturally self-sufficient and resilient.

Like many of the speakers, she highlighted a mental health crisis among children, noting that one in five in America face issues like anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems. Erica argued that these problems are rooted in poor early attachment and develop as the children’s natural ‘stress response’ to their environment. Rather than trying to understand and address these ‘psycho-social stressors’, the approach today is simply to medicate children and ignore the cultural and parenting norms underpinning them.

Drawing on research in brain science, Erica’s presentation emphasised that mothers are biologically essential to early childhood development, particularly in regulating a child’s emotions and buffering them from stress during the first three years. The right brain, which governs social and emotional processing, develops rapidly in this period, and the mother’s role as a regulator has been likened to acting as the child’s central nervous system. This is a critical period of plasticity, when the environment really matters. Mothers soothe babies moment to moment, responding to their distress and controlling their exposure to it until the child is able to do this independently after age three. Without this early support, children may struggle to regulate their emotions later in life, contributing to conditions like anxiety and depression.

‘Children who cannot regulate their emotions grow into adults who cannot regulate their emotions’ – Erica Komisar

Erica went on to describe in detail what happens in the brains of children, particularly sensitive ones, who are separated from their primary attachment figure during the first three years. The amygdala, which is the stress-regulating part of the brain, is designed to develop slowly and activate gradually as the child is stimulated by small, daily frustrations. When a child is exposed to intense and prolonged periods of stress, such as that introduced by long hours of separation in daycare, the amygdala grows quickly and becomes highly active very early. This premature development of the amygdala has been shown to lead to its premature decline, meaning the brain is unable to process stress and adversity in later life. Erica argued that the resulting ‘hypervigilant stress response’ explains the rise in conditions like anxiety, depression and ADHD.

'Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development'

In his theory of 'affect regulation', Allan Schore integrates neuroscience, psychology and psychiatry to explain how individuals develop the ability to manage emotions. Central to his theory is the understanding that early social interactions, particularly with caregivers, are critical for the right brain's development and the formation of the self, establishing patterns for lifelong emotional health and adaptation to stress.[7]

As well as buffering them from stress, mothers teach babies about social cues, how to interact and how to have trusting and loving relationships. Attachment security is what gives babies the experience of safety and security in the world. It is upon that foundation that children learn how to trust others and trust themselves.

Erica's presentation outlined three different kinds of 'attachment disorder'. She defined attachment disorders as 'pathological defences that children have to form in response to the absence of mothers'.

'A mother cannot be emotionally present for her child if she is physically absent' – Erica Komisar

Attachment disorders are important because they are correlated with mental illness in adults. Avoidant attachment disorder, where the child becomes defensive and turns away from the mother after periods of separation, has been linked to an inability to form intimate relationships. Ambivalent attachment disorder, where the child clings desperately to the mother at separation, has been linked to anxious behaviour and anxiety disorders. Disorganised attachment, where the child cycles wildly between defensiveness and clinginess, has been linked to personality disorders in later life.

'Neglect, whether it comes from poverty or whether it comes from affluence, produces the same result' – Erica Komisar

Erica ended her presentation by returning to the topic of institutional care. She highlighted studies which have linked daycare to raised levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and studies which have found associations between daycare and more incidents of aggressive behaviour in the school years, as well as anxiety, depression and ADHD. She also pointed out that daycare can be a chaotic environment and it is extremely challenging for staff to consistently and sensitively meet the emotional needs of multiple babies at the same time.

[7] Schore, A.N. (1999) *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development*. Routledge.

Not only can long hours in daycare expose children to high levels of stress, negatively affecting neurological development, but it can disrupt secure maternal attachment, which influences a child's personality and capacity to lead a healthy, successful and fulfilling life.

She argued that to address the mental health crisis at its foundations, rather than merely treating downstream systems, parents urgently need to be made aware of the importance of their role and the significance of being present in the first three years.

Ole Henrik Hansen: Parents' roles, the role of the welfare state and the child's needs

Ole Henrik Hansen is a researcher, author, and professor in early childhood education. He currently serves as Professor of Early Childhood Education and Care, Jönköping University, Sweden; Professor II in Social Work, UiT The Arctic University of Norway; and Affiliate, Meta-Research Innovation Center, Stanford University. His research focuses on pedagogical quality in preschools, children's well-being, and learning development, investigating topics such as children's relationships with peers and adults. He works to enhance teaching methods and promote positive early education experiences.

'Many parents experience a strong need to take care of their children throughout their whole life … And a lot of parents are sceptical about institutionalisation' – Ole Henrik Hansen

Ole's presentation focussed on the relationship between the role of parents, the role of the state and the needs of the child. He claimed that many parents experience a strong need to take care of their children throughout their lives, and that they are sceptical about institutionalisation. Parents also want to have good opportunities to shape their children's lives. At the same time, the welfare state has a duty to make certain that all children have a good and safe upbringing, ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities, regardless of social background. Finally, children need safe and stable relationships characterised by security, love and care and a loving family that supports their development.

Ole began by challenging Erica on the question of evidence. He argued that we need to be careful to distinguish between what is definitively known and what seems logical, and to be aware of causation versus correlation. Studies which compare outcomes for children who grow up in daycare, and children who do not, are very difficult to carry out, because of huge differences in daycare systems across countries, as well as different political and cultural contexts.

He described a research project he is involved with which is trying to establish this evidence base. A European Horizon project led by neuroscientist Sam Wass from the University of East London is attempting to determine how complex real-world environments influence brain development.

'European Consortium to determine how real-world environments affect brain development'

It is already established that a child's environment growing up can influence how they develop – yet since most research involves moving children away from their natural environment into a controlled lab environment to gather data, knowledge of *how* an environment shapes child development is 'surprisingly limited.'

Accordingly, the European Consortium plan to 'develop and test new open-source techniques that will allow us to measure objectively a range of different aspects of children's early environment.' This will involve measuring 'low-level' things, like the noise a child experiences at home, as well as aspects of the social environment, such as 'whether social partners mimic their facial and vocal affect when the child gets upset'. Researchers will also measure the physical environment, such as how much screen time the child has in comparison to time spent outdoors.[8]

'The non-cognitive thing must come before the cognitive. It cannot wait for the other way around' – Ole Henrik Hansen

Ole stressed the importance of understanding the difference between non-cognitive and cognitive development, which are often confused.

Non-cognitive development must come first. Pre-schools are generally good at fostering cognitive development, whereas non-cognitive development is primarily the responsibility of parents. Of course, not all parents are equal in their capacity to foster this development, and some fail entirely to care for their children. Pre-school, provided by the welfare state, has a role to play, especially where parents are unable to give their children what they need: a safe and stable relationship with adults, security and love.

Ole described the Danish pre-school system, where eight out of 10 children are in pre-school by the age of 10 months. After age three, it increases to nine out of 10, and this is also the case in Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Finland. However, there has been a 100 per cent increase in parents opting out of the pre-school system, and this group is growing.

He referred to a research project in which he asked 600 parents in Denmark why they had opted out of the pre-school system. These were predominantly women, on average more highly educated than the rest of the Danish population, married and in stable relationships, with an average of two children. Seventy-four per cent responded that they opted out not because they could not access satisfactory daycare, but because they just wanted to be parents.[9]

[8] UEL Baby Development Lab. *European Consortium to Determine How Real-World Environments Influence Brain Development*. Available at: https://uelbabydev.com/project/european-consortium-to-determine-how-real-world-environments-influence-brain-development/ (Accessed: 8 September 2025).
[9] Hansen, O.H. (2024) *Børnelivet i velfærdsstatens hænder: En kritik af samtidens opvækstvilkår for vores yngste børn [Child Life in the Hands of the Welfare State - A Critique of Contemporary Upbringing Conditions for Our Youngest Children]*. Dafolo A/S.

‘We want freedom to choose what we would like to do with our children and we want flexibility in the labour market’ – Answer to survey of Danish parents.

As with the other speakers, Ole highlighted a rise in mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents. This is apparent on an unprecedented scale in all the Scandinavian countries, not only formally diagnosed disorders but poor mental health, loneliness, stress and anxiety and perfectionism.

Although the precise causes remain unknown, there are numerous potential contributing factors. These include prenatal and genetic factors, environmental factors such as societal pressures, high expectations, digitalisation and inadequate daycare conditions, and factors relating to parenting and upbringing. In the last category, family dynamics, gaps in parental knowledge and insecure attachment are all possible contributors to the rise in mental illness. A significant aspect of this is that parents in the Nordic countries work a lot and there is little time left for children.

Research has shown that vulnerability is often established early in life. Studies which have linked long hours in daycare to elevated cortisol levels are concerning because cortisol levels are a predictor for stress in young children. Cortisol levels are also influenced by the quality of daycare, the age of children and children’s temperament. Prolonged high cortisol can impact neurological development and may increase the risk of later health problems.

The quality of daycare is another significant problem. It is very hard to provide high quality. The quality of the Danish daycare system was measured in 2023 and it was found that the daycare system is not excellent, despite being one of the best in the world. Crucially, the lowest score was under ‘relational competencies’ in pre-school workers.

The quality of municipal daycare in Denmark

A study conducted by the Ministry of Children and Education by Denmark’s Evaluation Institute (EVA) and the National Research and Analysis Center for Welfare (VIVE) on the quality of municipal daycare for children aged two and under in Denmark found just 13 per cent of daycare institutions ‘offer a good quality of service’. In comparison, almost half (49 per cent) are ‘sufficient’, whilst almost four in 10 (38 per cent) are ‘insufficient’.[10]

Ole suggested that the mental health challenges facing young people need to be addressed on multiple levels, including through strengthening support for parents and families, improving conditions in daycare institutions, reducing societal pressures on young people, and promoting mental health awareness and early intervention. Additionally, he noted more research is needed to investigate the effects of stress on young children and what factors influence this.

Most importantly, parents and caregivers need to be aware that caring, present adults who are attuned to children’s feelings and intentions are essential for their learning and well-being.

[10] *The Copenhagen Post* (2023) ‘Quality does not meet expectations in daycare, reports national assessment’, 12 May. Available at: https://cphpost.dk/2023-05-12/news/quality-does-not-meet-expectations-in-daycare-reports-national-assessment/ (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

It is the quality and strength of a child's interactions and relationships, be that at home or in daycare, that form the foundation for healthy cognitive, social and emotional development.

Lea Pulkkinen: Are the 'Pillars of a Good Childhood' collapsing in Finland?

Lea Pulkkinen is a psychologist with expertise in human development and child well-being. She has served as Professor of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä since 1972; Academy Professor (1996-2001); Director, National Centre of Excellence for Research (entitled Human Development and Its Risk Factors) (1997–2005); and President of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development (1991-1996). A member of Academia Europaea and the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, she has contributed extensively to longitudinal research on psychological development. Her applied work has advanced child-centred education and after-school programmes nationwide. With over 600 publications, she has received numerous national and international honours.

'Children are left emotionally alone with their rights' – Lea Pulkkinen

Lea began by introducing the 'Ten Pillars of a Good Childhood', formulated at a Global Summit on Childhood in Washington DC in 2012. Her presentation addressed the question of whether these pillars are still strong in Finland today.

The 'Ten Pillars of a Good Childhood'

1. safe places to live and learn, and access to health care, adequate clothing and nutritious food;
2. strong families and consistent, loving caregivers;
3. social interactions and friendships;
4. creative play and physical activity;
5. appreciation and stewardship of the natural environment;
6. creative expression through music, dance, drama, and the other arts;
7. education that develops the full capacities of the child – cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and ethical;
8. supportive, nurturing, and child-friendly communities;
9. growing independence and decision-making;
10. children and young people participating in community life.

Having analysed Finnish statistics for the past 10 to 20 years, Lea has identified seven trends which are threatening the strength of these pillars in Finland.

- **Polarisation** concerns material conditions. The child poverty rate is about 10 per cent in Finland, which is one of the lowest in the EU and OECD countries, but there is a higher-than-average poverty rate in the families of sole providers and of parents of foreign origin. The child poverty rate is generally higher among unemployed parents, and particularly among foreign parents of non-European origin. The proportion of children living in these poorer conditions has dramatically increased.

- **Fragmentation** concerns human relationships. The family structure has become less stable. There is a smaller proportion of married or registered parents and a higher divorce rate after a shorter marriage. A new phenomenon is that of children having two homes and spending about half of the month with the 'distant' parent. Moreover, caretakers have become less permanent as there has been a shift away from small, local daycare provision to large group centres in cities with higher staff changes and fewer opportunities for social growth.

- **Urbanisation** concerns children's access to nature. Fewer children now live in the countryside. Thousands of small schools have been closed for economic reasons, which means that walking or biking to school has also diminished, and some children travel long distances to school. Playgrounds in daycare centres are nowadays smaller per child than previously; they are furnished with built-in equipment and increasingly they are covered with synthetic rather than natural grass.

- **Schoolification** indicates that education services are being set up along junior school lines rather than being suited to a child's developmental stage or following a child's natural learning strategies. There has been a shift in emphasis away from social and emotional experiences toward cognitive training and skills. The term 'daycare' has been changed to 'early education', and its administration was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2013. A child's right to early education has taken precedence over parents' right to take care of their children. Parents' freedom to arrange childcare according to their needs has been suppressed. The Homecare Allowance, which enables a parent or relative to care for children at home till the youngest child turns three, has been reduced to such a low level that few families can afford it and even that system is under threat.

- **Intellectualisation** involves an emphasis on cognitive development for increasing human capital through education. Creative play and physical activity are giving way to school-type working, at the same time as creative expression through music and other arts are receiving less attention than previously in Finnish schools and daycare centres and in teacher training. New information technology has been adopted, with learning materials digitalised and children using smartphones at an early age. Dependence on digital tools and games has increased, along with problems in concentration. A new school architecture modelled on open-plan office spaces has also impaired children's ability to concentrate.

- **Utilisation** refers to utilitarian ideology in which child- and family-centeredness plays a lower role. Global economic competition demands speeded-up cognitive development of children's capacities for human capital building and the full-time participation of parents in the labour force. In Finland, fathers and mothers typically work full-time. Municipal home care assistance in cases of parental depression or other

acute difficulties in families has diminished to one-sixth of its level in 1990. Resources available for medically oriented maternity and child clinics have also been reduced so that fewer resources are available for the guidance of parents in child development and parenting.

- **Isolation** refers to overly demanding expectations regarding children's self-direction in their studies, self-care, and decision-making, leaving them physically and emotionally isolated. Children are increasingly being left alone because their parents are in full-time work. State support is available to municipalities for organising afternoon activities for the first and second graders, but they do it insufficiently. Public support is not available during a long summer holiday. The Child Welfare Act does not protect a child from being left alone for hours at a time, nor does the Act protect a child from the stress caused by excessively long or inconvenient daycare hours. Care is organised according to adult working timetables and it is the children who are expected to be flexible and adapt. Children's increasing adjustment problems, such as those manifesting as ADHD or neuro-atypical behaviour, are being medicalised without paying sufficient attention to how these problems might be triggered by life conditions. Emotional and practical support for parents is also being neglected, and parents' primary role of supporting their children is not mentioned in government documentation concerning the rights and wellbeing of children.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) contains '54 articles that **cover all aspects of a child's life** and set out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights' for all children worldwide.[11]

Article 3 of the UNCRC states:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Article 18 states:

Parents, or as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern. [12]

Lea concluded that these harmful trends are due to the dominance of economic values in Finland, a consequence of the global economic competition that started in the 1990s, replacing educational traditions and philosophy.

There are signs that both parents and children in Finland are not doing well. The burnout scores of mothers are higher than the European average, the number of children placed outside home due to child protection has doubled over the past 30 years, and the country's

[11] UNICEF. *How we protect children's lives with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/ (Accessed: 29 August 2025).
[12] UNICEF. *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available at: https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

fertility rate has continued to fall. Children and young people increasingly present with behavioural and mental health problems, and school achievements are declining.

Lea ended her presentation by emphasising that in all policymaking, the primary consideration must be the development needs and best interests of the child. A crucial part of this is respect for parenting and providing parents with knowledge about child development and factors that affect it. Parents also need the freedom to choose how to arrange childcare and the economic support for bringing up their children. Raising children should be seen as valuable work.

James Heckman and Alison Baulos: The value of mothering and mentoring

James Heckman is a Nobel-Prize-winning economist dedicated to studying inequality, social mobility, skill formation, and policy evaluation. A professor at the University of Chicago since 1973, he helped establish the Harris School of Public Policy and founded the Center for the Economics of Human Development in 2014 together with Alison Baulos. The Center conducts and synthesises wide-ranging research that explores the circumstances under which people develop the skills necessary to achieve their fullest potential and thrive in the current economy.

Alison Baulos joined Professor James Heckman's team in 2005 as the Associate Director of the Economics Research Center, where she launched the Pritzker Consortium on Early Childhood Education at the Harris School. Alison is now the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Center for the Economics of Human Development. She is also the Executive Director of the Center's Human Capital and Economic Opportunity Global Working Group, which she launched with Professor Heckman in 2010 to promote interdisciplinary human capital development research.

'What really is missing in this literature is the value of a mother and the value of household output' – James Heckman

James and Alison's presentation made the case that 'economism' is being applied too literally to the family, leading to massive distortions in both thought and policy. Simon Kuznets, the man who constructed the world's first system of national accounts, explicitly warned of the dangers of neglecting household production and this is precisely what has happened.

The current focus on 'equity' has measured choice only in terms of occupation and wages, and head counting has replaced careful accounting of different preferences and long-term costs. Feminism casts male and female issues in a very narrow mould. The only way they value what women do and what women receive is by the status of labour market rewards. The labour market has become the benchmark of success. This narrow approach ignores the non-market benefits of stable nurturing environments and the value of household activity. It fails to see child development as a major household output. It also ignores the satisfaction and joy experienced in raising children and disregards that some women want the freedom to be at home with their children.

These feminist attitudes are reflected in public debate. Although huge amounts of money are being invested in early interventions promoting children, particularly disadvantaged children, policy does not recognise the enormous value being provided by mothers, not just to their own children and families but to the next generation.

‘Public policy focuses on schools, political organisations focus on schools, politicians understand schools. And yet it’s not the school. It’s the family. Family plays a central role’ – James Heckman

James and Alison argued that there is now a vast body of evidence demonstrating the importance of family, parenting and the home environment in child development and child outcomes over the life course. Gaps in cognitive, emotional and social skills emerge early on in children’s lives, and these disadvantages can be improved through intervention. However, efforts to reduce these inequalities have focussed almost exclusively on schools and formal educational provision, when a far greater return on investment could be achieved through direct engagement with families.

‘Parental investment, not money alone, is a measure of child poverty’ – James Heckman

They noted that the family situation for many children in the US has worsened. More children are growing up in never-married households, and the percentage of children living with one parent has increased dramatically.

The evidence shows a clear relationship between children’s abilities and family background and structure. Children from disadvantaged environments are getting less emotional support. As such it is parental investment, not money alone, that is the proper measure of child poverty.

Parental investment is crucial for cognitive, social and personality skills, all of which are predictive of life success. Early investment in the quality of parenting and parental engagement has benefits for individual children and the whole of society, leading to increased productivity, higher income, better health, more family investment, upward mobility and reduced social costs.

James and Alison went on to describe programmes around the world which have demonstrated a clear, long-lasting effect of early parental support and education. The most well-known are the Carolina Abecedarian (ABC) Project and the Perry Preschool Project. Crucially, these programmes did not only offer targeted, high-quality formal childcare but attempted to enrich the lives of the children outside of the childcare centres. In both cases, parent-child interaction patterns were improved. However, early childhood programmes like the ABC and Perry Preschool projects are very intensive and expensive.

‘The mother needs to be held so she can hold the child’ – Alison Baulos

Similar results can be achieved, at much lower public cost, through home-visiting programmes which focus primarily on parenting, such as the Preparing for Life programme in Ireland. There are now 10 sites in Ireland, and the programme is being adapted for Hispanic families in Chicago. There is also a programme in China, based on the Jamaica Home Visting Program (Reach Up and Learn).

The Reach Up Early Childhood Parenting programme and the Jamaica Home Visit (JHV) intervention

The Reach Up and Learn Early Childhood Parenting programme is based on the Jamaica Home Visit (JHV) intervention – a programme which a ‘substantial’ amount of evidence shows has benefits to both child development and parenting practices, leading it to be adapted by other countries also.

The Reach Up training programme provides ‘comprehensive’ training packages for home visitors, trainers and supervisors, and was developed to increase the ‘capacity of implementing agencies to deliver effective and adaptable parenting programmes for parents of children up to’ three years old – even for the most disadvantaged families.

The core principles which guide the JHV and the Reach Up Early Childhood Parenting programme are: to build a positive relationship with parents ‘to support them in strengthening skills to promote child development’; ‘to build mothers’ skills, self-esteem and enjoyment in helping her child to play and learn’; for home visitors to listen to mothers, seek mothers’ opinions and give them ‘encouragement and praise’ for what they already do; to use ‘a structured curriculum of developmentally appropriate activities’; to use ‘an interactive approach of demonstration and modelling and practice of activities to build skills’; and for both parents and children to be offered praise.[13]

The prototype for this work was the Jamaica Reach Up programme which began in the 1980s and involved regular fortnightly sessions where parents and caregivers were given advice and guidance. Analysing the data for these children, now in their 30s, showed clear benefits early on in terms of health, executive function and school readiness, and later in life in terms of emotional regulation, educational attainment and earnings.

The key to success in early intervention and reducing inequalities, therefore, is not the level of professional qualifications or the quality of centres or the type of buildings or the availability of technology or any number of the things which currently preoccupy policymakers: the key is getting the parent or primary caregiver switched on and tuned in to their child.

James and Alison drew attention to the results of a well-known study carried out in Quebec, which investigated the long-term effects of a universal childcare programme introduced in the 1990s. The researchers found that while for more disadvantaged children the programme

[13] Reach Up. *Jamaica Home Visit Programme*. Available at: https://reachupandlearn.com/about/jamaica-home-visit-programme/ (Accessed: 29 August 2025).

improved social skills, for children with middle- and upper-class mothers the programme had a negative impact on socio-emotional development.

This highlights the fact that there is a cost to children and to society when mediocre childcare is substituted for high-quality maternal care. The mothers in these cases had been making a fundamental contribution to their children's wellbeing and future prospects.

When governments subsidise work, they subsidise away from parenting, and the potential consequences are being completely ignored in public policy.

'Universal Child Care, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being' study

Baker *et al's* 2008 study analysed the introduction of subsidised, universally accessible childcare in Quebec by looking at its impact on childcare utilisation, mothers in the workforce, and family wellbeing.

The study's authors found there was 'strong evidence of a shift into new child care use' and the maternal labour supply 'significantly' increased. But importantly, the evidence also suggested the programme's introduction had negative consequences for both children and parents. Children were found to be 'worse off by measures ranging from aggression to motor and social skills to illness'. For parents, meanwhile, the programme 'led to more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships.'[14]

James and Alison concluded that parenting is a powerful driver of child outcomes and that investing early is the right time to influence the trajectory. To promote child development, social equality and a healthy economy, the greatest return on investment would be gained by supporting mothering and mentoring in the home.

Edward Davies: Challenges in UK family policy

Edward Davies is Policy Director at the Centre for Social Justice. Previously, he worked for national newspapers in the UK and US as a journalist and editor specialising in health policy, and served as an expert advisor to the UK health secretary (2021-2023). His work focuses on how family, education, and employment shape wellbeing beyond healthcare systems, emphasising the role of community-driven change.

'We are governed by the Treasury and the Treasury's primary motive is to get women into the workforce' – Edward Davies

Edward began his presentation by describing the enormous challenge posed by a culture and knowledge environment within the UK Government which is antithetical to support for the family. The Treasury is the dominant influence and the primary motivation of the Treasury is to get women into the workforce.

[14] Baker, M. et al (2008) 'Universal Child Care, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being', *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 116(4), pp. 709-745. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591908 (Accessed: 1 September 2025).

His experiences working as an expert advisor to the UK Secretary of State for Health illustrates this challenge. When proposing possible solutions to the problem of adult social care, specifically ones which would enable families to look after their elder relatives, no department would entertain any option that might incentivise women between the ages of 50 and 65 to leave the workforce, regardless of broader merits or cost effectiveness.

The situation is the same with childcare. When the Government announced its plan to introduce 30 hours of childcare from nine months old, the focus was entirely economic and the potential impact on children was never even within the consciousness of those involved, let alone part of the discussion. Key senior officials at the Department of Health and Social Care had never heard of attachment theory.

Although this presents a depressing picture, Edward stressed the importance of continuing to pressure for change.

He described two family policies which the Centre for Social Justice has been promoting for many years. The first is the idea of front-loading Child Benefit. At present, parents are entitled to cash payments until their children are teenagers; without any further cost these payments could be front-loaded to the first few years, giving parents the choice to work or not to work while their child is very young. However, in the current political context this proposal will never be adopted because it gives women the choice not to work.

Front-loaded Child Benefit

Currently, Child Benefit is paid at a flat rate, usually every four weeks, from when a child is born until they are 16 (or 20, if the child is in approved education or training).[15] For the eldest child, the rate is, at the time of writing, £26.05 per week. For additional children, it is £17.25 per child, per week.[16]

The idea to 'front load' Child Benefit – that is, to allow the recipient of Child Benefit, if they wish, to receive it on a 'sliding scale', such as receiving 'a higher rate of child benefit when a child is younger in exchange for a lower rate when the child is older', rather than the current flat-rate way – was put forward by the think tanks Centre for Social Justice, Civitas and Policy Exchange. It is argued that front-loading Child Benefit would allow more parents the choice to stay at home to care for their child(ren) during the early years.[17]

The Front-loaded Child Benefit Private Members' Bill initially had its first reading in the House of Lords in 2021, but due to Parliament's 2021–22 session ending, the bill did not receive a second reading.[18]

The second policy proposed by the Centre for Social Justice, Family Hubs, has been adopted by central government and has cross-party support. There are now more than 400 Family Hubs around the UK providing services for families, and the Government has invested several hundred million pounds into this provision.

[15] UK Government (2025) *Child Benefit*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/child-benefit (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
[16] UK Government (2025) *Child Benefit*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/child-benefit/what-youll-get (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
[17] Smith, C. (2022) *Front-loaded Child Benefit Bill [HL] HL Bill 6 of 2022–23.* House of Lords. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2022-0017/LLN-2022-0017.pdf (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
[18] UK Parliament (2021) *Front-loaded Child Benefit Bill [HL] Private Members' Bill (Starting in the House of Lords)*. Available at: https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2894/news (Accessed: 1 September 2025).

UK Family Hubs

Family Hubs have been government policy since 2020, and funding has been provided for over half the upper tier local authorities in England to implement Family Hubs.[19]

Family Hubs are local support centres for families with children aged 19 and under. They are often co-located with early years health care and support, such as in children's centres, and hubs are also becoming in present in places such as schools and community centres.

Through the hubs, families are able to 'access a broad and integrated range of early help to overcome difficulties and build stronger relationships.'[20] They offer families a wide range of support – from parenting support and health advice to domestic abuse services and debt counselling, for example.[21]

'The best support you can have is the child's father' – Edward Davies

Edward also highlighted the vital role of fathers and the problem of fatherlessness in the UK. He noted that although we often look to the state for support, when speaking of mothers caring for a child the best support you can have is the child's father. It is very difficult for mothers to be at home without an engaged and committed father. He described the results of a recent poll which found that 60 per cent of young men, versus 50 per cent of the general population, say fatherlessness is one of the biggest problems they face and the principal cause of behavioural problems. This is the experience of the younger generation.

Edward argued that the most significant factor in this trend of fatherlessness and lack of parental engagement is the decline in marriage. In 2022, for the first time, the UK had a larger number of adults not marrying than married, and the majority of children were born outside married couples. The outcomes for children born to unmarried parents are worse in every single respect. Despite the huge difference that having committed parents makes to children, the importance of marriage has become a taboo subject in political circles.

Edward concluded that, in addition to advocating for mothers to have the freedom to choose care, fathers and marriage are a crucial part of the equation when it comes to shaping family policy in the best interests of children.

[19] Family Hubs Network. *Introduction*. Available at: https://familyhubsnetwork.com/about/ (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
[20] Family Hubs Network. Available at: https://familyhubsnetwork.com/ (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
[21] Family Hubs Network. *What Family Hubs Offer.* Available at: https://familyhubsnetwork.com/hubs/what-family-hubs-offer/ (Accessed: 1 September 2025).

David Goodhart: Restoring the domestic preconditions for growth

David Goodhart is a broadcaster, author, and journalist known for his contributions to UK public debate. A Commissioner on the Equality and Human Rights Commission, he explores social and economic issues, including the impact of care in society. His latest book, The Care Dilemma*, examines the undervaluation of care work and its consequences, from declining fertility to rising mental health challenges. He questions whether our current social and economic models truly serve our well-being.*

‘There’s quite a high consensus amongst policymakers and economists about what creates economic growth – and stuffing the labour market full of reluctant mothers is certainly not one of them’ – David Goodhart

David’s presentation began by re-iterating the challenging political and cultural landscape faced by those attempting to promote family and motherhood. The professional graduate class tend to look down on domesticity as belonging to women and society of the past. Even relatively mainstream views about family and family stability are not represented in the political class. Both the Left and the Right have adopted similar standpoints, regarding men and women as essentially the same, expressing little interest in family structure and promoting more and earlier daycare as good for mothers and children. The only organisations and advocacy groups which have influence and the ear of policymakers are those in line with the Treasury’s priority of maximising employment.

David went on to argue that efforts to improve on family stability, parental choice and fertility rates — traditionally seen as ‘small c’ conservative concerns — should in fact be bridging issues between conservative and liberals because they require quite liberal means to achieve them. This includes real choice for young parents about balancing work and childcare. More equality in the home tends to have historically been quite good for higher fertility.

Another idea which is normally associated with the liberal Left, particularly in terms of the environment, is the precautionary principle. The precautionary principle has been thrown out of the window when it comes to child development and daycare and the impact of daycare on children’s behaviour.

‘The wished for children should be born … let’s not punish the families who want children’ – Delegate.

David proposed that one way to increase flexibility and choice for parents would be by introducing a form of Home Care Allowance, along the lines of what had been available in Finland. If the £9 billion childcare subsidy were paid directly to young parents, they could receive approximately £10,000 per year per to use themselves, pay a relative or pay for formal

daycare. If that was combined with front-loading Child Benefit and recognising the family in the tax system, families would have a real choice that they do not currently have.

Finnish Home Care Allowance

In Finland, families are eligible to receive the Child Home Care Allowance (CHCA) if the child is older than six months (at least 160 working days have passed since the birth) and younger than three years old; if the child does not have a place in municipal early childhood education; and if the parent/guardian is either caring for the child themselves or have arranged for someone else to care for the child. Families can also receive the CHCA for additional children who do not have a place in municipal early childhood education, until the youngest child turns three years old.

The CHCA consists of a care allowance and a care supplement. Care allowance for one child under three years old is €377.68 per month. For each additional child under the age of three it is €113.07 per month; and for each additional child who has reached the age of three but is still under school age, the rate is €72.66 per month. The care supplement, meanwhile, can only be paid for one child, and the highest possible amount is €202.12 per month.[22]

Home care for children under the age of three in Finland is common, and the CHCA is a very popular choice for mothers in Finland – with almost 90 per cent of mothers of children born in 2018 claiming it after their parental leave has ended, 'half of them less than one year after and the other half longer.' All parents in Finland, however, are entitled to receive early childhood education and care for their child(ren), as well as the CHCA.[23]

This will not happen in the near future because GDP thinking has a grip not only on policymakers but the public. The Treasury are focused on short-term maximisation of jobs and tax income and GDP growth, even though we know that GDP is not the same as wellbeing and we are eating our seed corn by making it more and more difficult to create the stable, productive children of tomorrow.

The one-sided concentration on GDP growth in recent decades – including the movement of women from the home into part-time and then full-time work – has blinded us to the erosion of the taken-for-granted *preconditions for* growth found in the domestic realm, preconditions which, within living memory, enabled something close to replacement rate fertility and relatively stable family life.

Focussing on female employment to stimulate growth is misguided. The UK already has one of the highest employment rates in the world, and pushing hundreds of thousands of young mothers into the workforce who would prefer to be at home is not going to improve productivity in a meaningful sense.

The fixation on GDP figures is distorting policy decisions because it ignores all the caring and productive work that occurs in the home and the social value of enhanced individual health

[22] Kela (2025) *Child home care allowance*. Available at: https://www.kela.fi/child-home-care-allowance (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
[23] See Lammi-Taskula, J. et al (2025) 'Employed Mothers' Justifications for Using Child Home Care Allowance in Finland', *Journal of Family Issues,* vol. 46(2), pp. 275-295. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0192513X241257226 (Accessed: 1 September 2025).

and wellbeing. If work carried out in the home was included in the calculations, GDP would be two-thirds higher.

David concluded that it will be the economics of collapsing fertility that will ultimately bring about change. When it finally becomes clear that we need more women to have children, politicians will be forced to listen to what mothers actually want. Although the climate is still hostile to these ideas, it is worth thinking about and developing proposals in preparation for when there is a shift in policy focus and priorities.

Kinga Joó: A European perspective

Kinga Joó is Vice-President of ELFAC (European Large Families Confederation) and advisor on international relations at the National Association of Large Families (NOE), the widest network of families in Hungary. Since 2010 she has also been a member of the European Economic and Social Committee, the representative body of organised civil society in the European Union. As a member of the Committee, she was rapporteur for the opinions on the European Care Strategy and on the European Child Guarantee and was President of the study group on the work-life balance directive.

From her experience working in policy development at the EU level, Kinga's presentation explained some of the thinking behind EU family and childcare initiatives, and she suggested that both positive and negative aspects of these policies need to be considered.

Kinga began by drawing attention to the fact that the International Labour Organization, of which the UK is also a member, measures unpaid care in terms of GDP. It estimates that the value of unpaid care and domestic work is around nine per cent of global GDP, with women's contribution at around 6.6 per cent and men's two per cent. The conclusion drawn from this is always that women's disproportionate contribution to care work is preventing them from doing paid work.

'When we talk in international development about upskilling the women's workforce, it's basically saying: we don't think mothering is a skill. That is something that we need to change' – Delegate.

At this stage a delegate interjected to point out that these estimates are based on the minimum wage for care, treating it as unskilled labour. When care work is equated with unskilled labour, meaning tasks and chores that can easily be commoditised, its true value is grossly underestimated because the most valuable component of care is relationships. This is also the most skilled component of care. Although it is difficult to allocate a financial value to relationships, they are critical for human flourishing. We need to change the narrative that care work is mere drudgery and see it as foundational to society's wellbeing.

To provide some insight into the social consensus in Hungary, Kinga shared the results of a Europe-wide survey carried out by a Hungarian think-tank.[24] When asked if family is important in your life, 90 per cent of respondents answered yes, and this included the UK, Western Europe and Central Europe. When asked if the state should support families, there was a little less agreement. In Hungary and the region there is strong agreement that the state must support families, but in the UK and Western Europe there is a little less agreement. When asked if the state should support large families, meaning families with three or more children, in the UK and Western Europe this is not considered important. In Hungary more than 80 per cent of people agree that supporting large families is important.

Kinga outlined a number of policy ideas coming from the European Union level. She stated that although there are things to criticise in Brussels, there are also successes. For instance, the work-life balance directive has resulted in all 27 members introducing 10 days paid paternity leave. Prior to 2019, not even half of members states had any kind of paternity leave. Although this may not seem like much, it is a significant political shift towards recognising the value of fathers' involvement in childcare. Importantly, it appears that fathers who use the paid paternity leave at birth tend to use more of the parental leave available later and spend more time overall with their children.

A second EU policy concerning the early years is the so-called 'Barcelona targets', which sets goals for member states on the numbers of children attending formal daycare under and over age three. The full title of the recommendation is 'Access to Affordable, High-Quality Childcare'. Although the aim to increase the percentage of children attending daycare is linked to women's employment, the policy is not only about the labour market. One underpinning consideration is integration, especially to help children from non-native families to learn the national language. It also includes targets on improving staff-child ratios. Healthier nutrition and a reduction in screen time for some children are further aspects of the policy which can be regarded as beneficial.

Kinga ended her presentation by describing the negative aspects of attempting to universally impose these targets for formalised public daycare. First and foremost, families are not given a real choice on how to care for their children. Another problem is that different cultural contexts and preferences are not taken into account, for instance in countries where it is customary for grandparents to provide childcare. A final problem is that there is a vast difference between placing children in formal childcare when they are babies and when they are toddlers. In Hungary, 90 per cent of children who attend daycare are above two. In Belgium, which has only four months parental leave, the trend is for full-time daycare at four months old. These differences have consequences for children's social development.

[24] Századvég Foundation (2022) *Project Europe: Family*. Available at: https://szazadveg.hu/en/cikkek/family-2022/ (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

Árpád József Mészáros: Family policy in Hungary

*** This presentation was made in 2025 relating to policies during the period of the Fidesz administration***

Árpád József Mészáros JD is a lawyer, married, and a father of one child. Between 2019 and 2023, he served as Deputy Director and later Director of the Legal and International Directorate at the Chancellery of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. Since 2012, he has held several positions, including Deputy Head and later Head of the Department for EU and International Organizations at the Ministry of Human Resources. He also served as Deputy State Secretary for International and European Union Affairs at the Ministry. Since 2023, he has been the Strategic and Coordination Vice-President of the Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families.

‘One of the most important policy principles in Hungary is that family policy should be based on the mothers’ needs’ – Árpád József Mészáros

Árpád’s presentation outlined the cultural and social foundations of family policy in Hungary. He described a variety of generous, flexible and continually updated measures which have been introduced by the state to support families and encourage childbearing, all rooted in the principle that family policy should be shaped around the needs of mothers.

Árpád began by describing the role of his institute in providing strategic support and independent scientific evidence for family policymaking in Hungary. He noted the significance in and of itself of the Government establishing such an institution. It indicates a willingness to listen to the outcomes of research and the analysis of researchers, not only to civil servants working in ministries.

In Hungary, kindergarten is a care, not an educational, institute that plays an important role in preparing children for school. However, while couples are planning to have children, and during the time their family consists of young children, the Government offers a range of support to them.

The first way the Hungarian Government supports families is through offering opportunities to housing interest-subsidised loans, since home ownership is a crucial part of ensuring young couples feel financially secure enough to start a family. In respect of Family Housing Subsidy Plus (CSOK Plus), the obligation to repay these loans decreases with the number of children born in the family and the remaining loan is eliminated after the third child. Established in 2024, it offers families the equivalent of £30,000 to £100,000. These interest-subsidised loans include what is referred to as the ‘baby-expecting loan’(Babaváró), which is available during the family-planning period and is worth up to the equivalent of £22,400.

In the countryside, the so-called Rural Family Housing Subsidy (Falusi CSOK) can help the married young couples remain or move to the village where they would like to live, as a non-repayable state grant for families with children or those planning to have children. Eligible

persons can receive HUF 1 million (EUR 2,500) for one child, HUF 4 million (EUR 10,000) for two children and HUF 15 million (EUR 37,500) for three or more children in the form of non-repayable grants. They can also ask for a loan to supplement the Falusi CSOK loan, or CSOK Plus. Since 2025, the Home Start Programme (which is not only for married couples) helped families buy the first residential property through a fixed-rated 3 per cent interest-subsidised loan of up to $153,200 (HUF 50million), which can also be combined with the other previously mentioned loans, providing more opportunities for people planning a family.

A second way that families are supported in Hungary is through taxation based on the principle that those that have and raise children should be better off financially than those who do not. The message that this sends to young people is invaluable. The Government has introduced a wide range of personal income tax elements and exemptions for those raising children, including a family taxation system which means the more children a family has, the less personal income tax it pays.

Another policy is very generous maternity benefits which, combined with the tax exemptions, can result in new mothers being in a significantly better financial position for six months after childbirth than they were before giving birth, as they receive their previous gross salary as a net allowance. After this period, mothers can receive 70 per cent of their previous salary (up to a maximum of 70 per cent of twice the annual minimum wage) until their child reaches the age of two.

A final example of how families are supported in Hungary is through a health visitor system. This involves health professionals/nurses who help and regularly visit the mothers and babies after childbirth, mostly at home, and give practical guidance and advice. A successful outcome from this practice, among others, is that there has been a breastfeeding rate in Hungary of 45 per cent at six months, compared to an EU average of 25 per cent.

Árpád pointed to other signs that family-friendly policies in Hungary are reversing some of the negative trends seen in other countries. There has been rising birth rates in the largest families (that is, less women are having more children) and employment has increased in Hungary. Marriages are also on the rise as the annual figures doubled, and the number of divorces has been declining by 25 per cent for the last 15 years. More children were born in wedlock, and the number of abortions has also declined by half.

Árpád concluded by suggesting that Hungary also illustrates how a whole country can become family-friendly, offering a vision of society in which childrearing and family life is presented as both an attractive and valued choice for a generation of young people.

2. Conclusions and takeaways

What do children need for healthy growth and development, particularly in the early years?

Children need their mothers

Consistent, sensitive and responsive maternal care is integral to children's long-term outcomes, wellbeing and ability to function in society. Both attachment theory and, increasingly, the biological sciences are telling us that social and intellectual development rest upon a foundation of emotional and psychological security which depends on the child's bonding and environment in the first three years of life.

Research has shown that the first three years of life are a critical period of brain development and plasticity, and during this time babies are particularly sensitive to stress. Over-exposure to stress early on can influence the growth of both the amygdala and the hippocampus, parts of the brain connected to stress responses and the capacity to regulate emotions.

Separating young children from their primary caregiver during this critical period can disrupt these processes and may be a root cause of anxiety, depression and other behavioural and mental health disorders. Strong and stable attachment between mother and child establishes a feeling of safety and security, which itself is the basis for self-confidence, trust and the ability to form and maintain successful relationships. Successful relationships are the foundation for all other kinds of success in life.

Children need to come first

In recent years in many countries there has been a shift in language around the early years, from 'care' to 'education'. Childcare services are being set up along school lines rather than prioritising child development and wellbeing. The emphasis is on cognitive training and measurable performance skills rather than on socio-emotional development and the quality of childhood experiences.

Policies which aim to incentivise maternal employment through an increase in formal childcare attendance are being promoted on the basis of projected benefits to the economy and/or a desired acceleration of social equality. The best interests of the child are not the primary consideration. Where children are showing signs of a failure to adjust, their problems are being medicalised, eliminating the need to investigate the life circumstances which may be contributing to their symptoms.

Before implementing policies which are steadily reducing the time that children spend in the presence and care of their parents, at younger and younger ages and for longer and longer periods of the day, the potential long-term consequences need to be better examined and understood.

Children need stable families

Research consistently demonstrates a strong corelation between children's outcomes and family background and structure. More than other socio-economic factors, it is the amount and quality of parenting and emotional support that children receive which determines their level

of disadvantage. Parental investment is crucial for cognitive, social and personality skills, all of which are predictive of life success.

In the UK, the US and many European countries, the stability offered by the family situation for children has become steadily problematic in recent decades. Fewer people are getting married. Many children are required to split their time between two households, and some are growing up without fathers.

The decline in family stability has coincided with a political and cultural indifference to the value and significance of stable family life. To foster the conditions for healthy childhood, the most basic and immutable needs of children must take precedence over constantly shifting political and ideological interests.

How can policy be better aligned with what is known about the developmental needs of children?

Choice for women

Aligning policies with the current state of knowledge in the field of child development would mean gearing them toward ensuring that mothers could spend as much time as possible with their children, particularly within the first three years of life.

Instead of elevating the status of care work, motherhood and family life, key mainstream liberal and feminist approaches evaluate the status of women exclusively in terms of rewards in the labour market. The most critical and skilled aspect of care work, the fostering of relationships, has been discounted. The prevailing view of gender equality denies the significance of biological differences between men and women at the same time as it restricts the choices and silences the voices of women who want to care.

Parents have a strong desire to spend time with their children. The story that most mothers would rather be at work is a misrepresentation of the truth that does the next generation a vast disservice. Employment need not be the only route to financial equality. Other countries have adopted a variety of measures designed to mitigate the ‘caring penalty’ and promote fertility. Women could be given real choice and flexibility if childcare subsidies were decoupled from the condition of using formal care services.

Practical and emotional support for parents

Early years policy has been shaped by the idea that investing in early childhood education outside the home reduces the need for higher levels of spending in later stages of education. Public resources are directed toward incentivising earlier and earlier removal of children from the home and placing them in the charge of professionals. This approach disregards the well-established body of evidence showing that it is not only schools or daycare attendance which have the most powerful influence on children’s cognitive and social development, but the family environment and the quality of interaction that the child has with his or her own parents. Early childhood intervention which actively engages the primary caregiver, usually the mother, produces high returns on a range of outcomes throughout the lifecycle.

The emphasis in early years policy should be on supporting parents to provide good quality care and early education from infancy. It should support child-centredness at a community level, increase consideration of children’s needs and respect for parenting. Both mothers and

fathers should be provided with information about child development and understand the significance of their role in shaping their child's future.

From an economic standpoint, early intervention programmes which work directly with parents and families would be a more efficient investment than policy which focuses exclusively on centre-based childcare. Around the world, home visitation schemes which teach parenting skills and foster family engagement have achieved significant results for disadvantaged children, positively influencing long-term health, productivity and social mobility. Home visitation schemes can be implemented at a much lower cost than large-scale state-funded group care.

Financial security for families

The best way to promote stable relationships is to offer long-term financial security for families. In addition to measures which mitigate the financial penalty disproportionately incurred by mothers who provide care at home, families could be supported by a taxation and benefits system which takes account of dependents and schemes which directly address the cost of housing and facilitate home ownership. While exploring what is practically achievable in the UK, the guiding policy principle should be that unpaid childcare is as much of a public good as paid childcare and equally deserving of public investment.

Alongside GDP statistics, a system of national accounts could involve regular publication of parallel figures and social indicators which attempt to quantify the economic contribution of voluntary care and household activities. Making the social benefit of these activities transparent would be a first step in highlighting the value of parenting and changing the narrative around raising children from negative to positive. In family policy, governments should consider child development and wellbeing the most important household output.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of the conference was that ignoring the basic developmental needs of children cannot be a rational approach in the early years sector or in economic policy.

To build healthy and prosperous nations, governments need to invest in children, which means trusting parents, investing in targeted support for those that need help, and to avoid creating perverse subsidies working against the natural instincts of families and communities in which mothers want to provide care at home in the early years.

The UK is increasingly mirroring trends in the Nordic countries which prioritise parental workforce participation and early institutionalisation of children, creating dispiriting conditions for children particularly the youngest ones. Economic priorities increasingly dominate, forcing mothers to return to work early and governments failing to acknowledge or study the effect of long hours of institutional daycare on babies and young children.

The political climate in the UK seems too eager to look away from the needs of children and the wishes of mothers, but this family-blind orthodoxy cannot prevail for very much longer – it is driving us into a place where the economics of collapsing fertility and the crisis of mental health are like approaching headlights in the middle distance that in a very short time will come upon us with glaring intensity and force a swerve.

Delegates acknowledged that this will entail a shift in cultural attitudes: the rejection of the role and value of mother at the heart of this short-termism will likely be forced to take a dramatic u-turn.

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