Introduction

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Is the UK a good place to be a child right now? Just how many of the policies, practices, agencies, institutions and services ostensibly working to promote children's wellbeing actually improve the quality of their lives? Adults are legally and practically responsible for children's wellbeing and their wellbeing is understood to be crucial to the social and economic infrastructure of healthy and wealthy nations. So how can policies and practices improve children's lives?

Promoting the wellbeing of all children requires sustained commitment from many different kinds of people, their governments and their institutions, among whom there will be widely contrasting views about roles and responsibilities towards children and families. Social issues, including the wellbeing of children, have replaced economic issues at the top of the political agenda. Among the core reasons that will make any government and its agencies prepared to make changes to the ways in which they work with children is a belief that supporting the health and education of children, addressing child poverty and providing a protective environment for children will significantly contribute to the nation's wellbeing. There is, however, less of a consensus on the changes needed to the wider economy, society and culture to promote children's wellbeing in the here and now.

Policies that address the lives of children in the UK prominently feature family responsibilities and privacy, and the care and control of children and young people. These policies need to traverse a fine line between upholding parental responsibility and pursuing certain goals; for example, a policy that would introduce universal free childcare is held back by a commitment to maintaining parental responsibility to provide for their children and urged forward by an anti-poverty strategy that stresses employment.

Most governments would like simple, clear-cut answers to questions about what constitutes a good childhood and the extent of the state's responsibilities to contribute to children's wellbeing. Services are developed according to the answers posed to these kinds of questions. So, to analyse policy and practice trajectories is to ask why certain issues are focused on and why certain methods, as opposed to others, are selected. A focus on early intervention, for example, is justified in terms of addressing social and educational disparities as early as possible, preventing or ameliorating problems in families with young children, and safeguarding children. But this leads governments into complex and contested areas. Questions arise, for example, about whether early intervention services can

or should be specifically targeted to reach those children and families deemed 'hard to reach'. Policies and practices involve not only issues of resources, management and outcome measurement, but also political issues, themselves threaded through with particular values and ethics.

While children's agencies and institutions work to improve the lives of children, they undoubtedly also reflect social and economic developments. Yet discussions about children, and the agencies and services that are provided for them, too often end up in narrow reviews of the success or otherwise of the socialisation and education of children. Governments, in particular, seek to measure the success or otherwise of interventions using objectifiable standards. Things are done to or for children, by adults in families or on behalf of the state, with particular outcomes in mind. But what if we were to look as closely at processes as at outcomes? Perhaps it is as important to look at the effects of how we do things as at the things we do. This would mean asking what kinds of characteristics, what kinds of people, do these processes contribute towards developing? If we decide to question and change processes as well as outcomes, what kinds of effects could be achieved? What is possible that is not happening?

Within Western European liberal democracies, the state now has an established and recognised interest in working to ensure that children grow into the kinds of citizens who can be trusted to function within certain social, economic and political structures and authorities. The state, therefore, continues to exercise considerable control over family actions. For UK governments there has also been a social justice agenda which has given rise to a series of strategies and a large number of policies aimed at children and families. Most prominent has been the attempt to improve life chances through education and a focus on children's early years as the foundation for future growth and development. Such overarching strategies mean, of course, that any improvements will be measurable only in the long term. Long-term outcomes versus short-term politics is just one of the dimensions of children's services that make their evaluation so difficult.

Changes around and within families present a complex and ever-changing area in which to work. Current family policy debates tend to centre on three closely related areas. First, the extent to which children and their families can and should look to the state for financial assistance through universal or targeted benefits and tax credits. Second, the extent to which broad and specific social policies can and should be directed at families in order to influence the kinds of families they are and the kinds of children (and adults) they produce. While there are strong financial arguments for targeting the neediest, there are other issues such as the level of intrusiveness associated with state support and how support is available for some families rather than others. Governments have to negotiate a line between interventions in some families and leaving others alone.

In political and popular discourse, the family, largely independent of the state, is still seen as the glue that holds a society together. Modern western societies strive to bring about a level of cooperation between the majority of families and the state in relation to economic and social outcomes for children. Liberal political theory rests on a consensual division of responsibilities between families and the state. Around the children and the family is played out a classic paradox of liberal humanism – offering choice and free will, but hoping and sometimes directing people towards the 'right' choices. But while the family is a prime instrument of government, it remains essential that it be experienced as a private institution beyond the intervention of state agents (Parton, 2006).

Third, while the balance of individual, family, government and global responsibility to manage perceived risks remains a contested and important area for children and parents, the particular uncertainties and anxieties of this era have particular significance for our feelings and actions with regard to children (Parton, 2006). Such anxieties include the impact of the internet and technology generally and the possibility of a generation of children growing up to be less healthy than their parents' generation. Modern parents may be experiencing unusual levels of anxiety about children which is reflected in, for example, allowing their own children considerably less spatial freedom than they experienced in their own childhood, with a consequential negative effect on children's wellbeing today.

Children in the UK now experience their childhood in a global context, and the processes of a postmodern society, particularly around the impact of globalisation and individualisation, can generate high levels of anxiety and uncertainty about the future (Beck, 1992). Perceptions of risk, for example, are on a global scale, and yet increasingly people are being encouraged to take individual responsibility for their economic, environmental and personal circumstances (Beck, 1992; Power, 2004). The relative certainties of long-term employment and collective welfare provision experienced by the post Second World War generations may appear less desirable today. But people, as individuals, have to make sense of new issues such as climate change, the internet revolution and the global movements of people and capital.

Focusing on the lives of modern children can be a disquieting experience. It can involve confronting the question of how protected and safe childhoods can exist apart from the economic and social context of children's lives and the wide disparities between children of the better and worse off. The absence of data in some key areas makes it impossible to assess fully the scale of improvement or deterioration in children's wellbeing, not least the absence of a universal definition of children's wellbeing; this could reflect some of the ambiguities within understandings of childhood itself. The extent to which the views of children are now sought, or not, on what contributes to their wellbeing is, however, revealing. At a conference to

discuss the English government's *Every Child Matters*' five outcomes for children (DfES, 2003) children, working with the Children's Rights Office, produced their own prioritised list: staying safe, being healthy, enjoying life and learning, helping others and having enough money (Morgan, 2005). The challenge to government, and indeed to practitioners, is to ensure that children's views and aspirations underpin the development of policy and practice at local and national levels. The issues raised by children as being most important to them and what makes for a good life were family, friends, enough to eat and drink, fun, love, respect and being happy; all of these should figure largely in any government's 'to do' list (Morgan, 2005).

UNICEF's (2007) report *An Overview of Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries* identifies six dimensions of child wellbeing: material wellbeing, health and safety, educational wellbeing, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks and subjective wellbeing. Drawing on forty separate indicators relevant to children's lives and children's rights, the report makes it clear that its purpose is to 'encourage monitoring to permit comparison and to stimulate the discussion and development of policies to improve children's lives' (UNICEF, 2007, p. 2). It describes itself as informed by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), including the participation rights of the child, and so incorporates a dimension solely based on children's own sense of wellbeing. International measurements and comparisons such as these should give an indication of a country's strengths and weaknesses and of what is achievable; children's wellbeing in rich countries is, in reality, policy-susceptible. It would appear that the UK has rather more weaknesses than strengths; the UK, at the time of writing, was in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six dimensions of children's wellbeing in the UNICEF report.

Children's lives are grounded in the diverse cultural, economic and social conditions in which they live. The picture of child wellbeing in the UK continues to be mixed, with the list of improving indicators more or less equal to the list of deteriorating/no change indicators (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005). Living standards and educational attainment are improving, but limitations to children's use of space, their exclusion from schools and aspects of their health are moving in the wrong direction (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005). 'Childhood' is a distinct social category that intersects with other social categories, such as class, gender and ethnicity, and brings with it specific rights, opportunities and, sometimes, barriers. Questions about evolving competence, rights, voice and participation have surfaced, contributing to understandings of what it means to be a child and what it means to be a child in contemporary Western European societies. These introduce a more complex and varied set of causes and consequences for policies and practices for children.

Policies have to be reshaped to reflect shifting notions of childhood, the ambiguities inherent in childhood and childhood as an important period of life in its own right. The UK state, through its devolved levels of government and its different agencies, will continue to assume a level of responsibility for children based on particular understandings of children, their capabilities and their requirements. Consequently there are wide national variations in how services are delivered, organised, funded and staffed. A critical approach, with an emphasis on evolving competence, rights and agency, means children's services, and the work and relationships that take place in them, can be examined and can evolve. And shifting focus from outcomes to processes means looking more consistently at the ways in which practitioners work with children.

This series of books focuses on the 0–12 age group, but we have omitted children's ages, unless they are particularly relevant, to avoid reproducing the 'age and stage' thinking that has often obscured children's individual capacities and capabilities. In fact, we hope to encourage people with an interest in childhood to look outwards and consider how this important period in children's lives connects with the rest of the life course. We have drawn together writers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines to contribute to this book, and this is reflected in the diversity of language and terminology; both 'disabled children' and 'children with disabilities' are used, for example. We have not standardised language when it reflects a considered and valid viewpoint.

The first two chapters focus on children's emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. Aiming to highlight children's voices, they draw on original work with a focus group of children. Chapter 1, 'Children and identity', explores children's perceptions of identity in general and their own identities in particular. An understanding of the processes by which identities are formed, negotiated and developed over time is important for anyone wanting to develop practice that promotes children's wellbeing. Drawing on research in sociology and psychology, the chapter discusses and applies a model of identity in which both the agency of the individual and influences of the wider society are examined and the relationship between them explored. Chapter 2, 'Children negotiating identities', builds on the idea that children's wellbeing depends, in part, on positive experiences with regard to identity. It explores the development of self-esteem and of resilience. Emphasising a social constructivist perspective, the chapter addresses the issue of labels and the processes of labelling with regard to children's identities. These chapters encourage practice informed by an understanding of children's wellbeing located within a social group, with particular reference to a sense of belonging.

Chapter 3, 'Health matters', addresses some of the key issues of children's health, encompassing emotional and mental, or psychological, health as well as physical health. The chapter begins with a discussion of why child

health and welfare policies remain, nationally and internationally, at the top of government agendas. Having introduced the various paradigms that influence health policies and health promotion, the chapter goes on to examine how health and healthcare are both private and public issues and, at one and the same time, the domains of individuals and of governments. The chapter concludes with a discussion of healthy behaviour and health education in schools as prime sites to promote children's health and wellbeing.

Chapter 4, 'Play matters', explores the common threads within the leading theories around play and asks what characterises and influences the play of children. Here, the focus is on the value of play to children and what kinds of working practices can support the contribution of play to children's quality of life. It is widely understood that play is crucial to children's healthy development and quality of life, but is this reflected in children's services today? This chapter challenges practitioners to consider and perhaps support the contribution of inclusive play to the wellbeing of children. It also introduces an international perspective on the way play is considered and supported.

Children's lives can be strongly influenced by adults' anxieties for and about them. Chapter 5, 'Anxieties and risks', considers what is meant by risk in today's society and what we mean by a 'risk society'. It explores the implications for services offered to children and for practitioners who work with children of how contemporary society perceives and manages risk. Some risk-taking is important to children's healthy development. We ask how perceptions of and anxieties about risk affect children's day-to-day lives, their healthy development, the perceptions of their needs and aspirations, and the promotion of their life skills.

In Chapter 6, 'Staying safe', we look at the development of policy concerning safeguarding children, asking what a protective environment means for children, and those working with children, today. The chapter offers practice principles for people working in both universal and specialist services in order to make considered judgements using the broad concept of 'staying safe'. It asks how those who work with children should respond to the adverse environments of some childhoods. The chapter also examines the importance of feeling safe, and includes a discussion of how to develop skills among children that can help them keep themselves safe.

Finally, Chapter 7, 'Children, families and the law', provides an overview of the evolving legislation that underpins the provision of support and services for the wellbeing of children. It discusses some of the primary sources of law, guidance and regulation, and examines the changing relationship between the state, the family and children. The chapter goes on to outline the history of children's rights and to explore the significance of rights and their potential contribution to promoting children's wellbeing.

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