

MAKING BRITAIN MORE FAMILY-FRIENDLY

We can't go on ignoring the importance of strong families. They provide the stability, warmth and love we need to flourish as human beings, and the relationships they foster are the bedrock on which society is built. Labour's complacent attitude to commitment has done untold harm, and their narrow child-centred approach ignores the importance of strengthening the relationships between all family members – children, parents, grandparents and the wider family. As a consequence, Britain is one of the least family-friendly countries in the developed world. This will change with a Conservative government. We will not be neutral on this. Britain's families will get our full backing.

Good parenting makes a big difference to our future success or failure – the warmth of their parenting is as important to a child's life chances as the wealth of their upbringing. Of course money matters, which is why a Conservative government will help families with their finances. But we also need to help families with all the other pressures they face: lack of time, the impact of work, worries about schools and crime, poor housing. And if we want to give children the best chance in life – whatever background they are from – the right structures need to be in place: strong and secure families, confident and able parents, an ethic of responsibility instilled from a young age.

Together with our focus on reversing educational failure, worklessness, debt and addiction, our support for families will make it much easier for every family to provide an environment in which children can flourish. Strengthening families will also increase social mobility, and play an important part in helping us work towards our aspiration of ending child poverty by 2020.

2.9 REFORMING THE TAX AND BENEFITS SYSTEM TO HELP FAMILIES

Today Labour's tax and benefits system actually rewards couples to split up. So a Conservative government will **end the couple penalty in the tax credit system** as we make savings from our welfare reform plans.

We will **recognise marriage and civil partnerships in the tax system in the next Parliament**. We are one of the very few countries in the Western world that doesn't do so and we will put that right. This will send an important signal that we value the commitment that people make when they get married.

To help Britain's families a Conservative government will **freeze council tax for two years, in partnership with local councils**. This will be paid for by reducing spending on consultants and advertising, and could be worth up to £200 a year for families that benefit.

We support tax credits, which were first introduced in a far simpler form by the last Conservative government. However, under Labour they have become the most complex part of the personal tax and benefit system, causing problems for millions of families through errors, bureaucracy and overpayments. We will **reform the administration of tax credits to reduce fraud and overpayments**, which hit the poorest families hardest.

2.10 A NEW APPROACH TO EARLY INTERVENTION

The Conservative Party is committed to keeping Sure Start but we believe Sure Start needs to work better because the people who need it most – disadvantaged and dysfunctional families – are not getting enough of the benefit. We will **take Sure Start back to its original purpose of early intervention, increase its focus on the neediest families, and better involve organisations with a track record in supporting families.** We will ensure the delivery of dedicated support to disadvantaged and dysfunctional families as part of the Sure Start programme, and this will involve new providers being paid in part by the results they achieve.

Looking after young children can be hard work, and families need the best possible advice and support while their children are young. So, paid for by refocusing the outreach services in the Sure Start budget and from the Department of Health budget, where we have pledged real increases, we will **provide 4,200 more Sure Start health visitors – giving all parents a guaranteed level of support before and after birth until their child starts school.** This extra help will not only provide advice on the physical development of young children, but also support for the emotional health of the whole family – particular the relationships between parent and child and between parents themselves.

Early intervention can make a big difference in turning young lives around, but at the moment funding for these interventions comes from dozens of sources spread across many government departments. This leads to confusion, waste and duplication – we can't go on like this when so many futures are at stake. So we will **bring all funding for early intervention and parenting support into one budget, to be overseen by a newly created Early Years Support Team** within the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

2.11 HELPING FAMILIES TO BALANCE THEIR LIVES

One in five women struggle to find affordable childcare, and yet just a quarter of those eligible for the working tax credit claimed the childcare element. We **support the provision of free nursery care for pre-school children and we want that support to be provided by a diverse range of providers** – including the many childminders and private, voluntary and independent nurseries which are currently being squeezed out of the system. In government we will **review the way the childcare industry is regulated to ensure that no provider is put at a disadvantage**.

Making Britain more family-friendly means helping families spend more time together. That is why we will **extend the right to request flexible working to every parent with a child under the age of eighteen**. We will **introduce a new system of flexible parental leave which lets parents share maternity leave** between them, including taking some of the leave simultaneously, and **ensure that the public sector becomes a world leader in flexible working**.

To support families further we will **put funding for relationship support on a stable, long-term footing through multi-year funding settlements**, and we will **make sure couples are given greater encouragement to use existing relationship support**.