

This government talks about empathy while cutting the cuddles already there

Graham Allen's early years report makes the loathsome leap that the poor are worse at parenting while failing to see why that may be

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 - [The Guardian](#), Thursday 20 January 2011
 - [Article history](#)

The headline that's been drawn from [Labour MP Graham Allen's report on early years](#) is, "Politicians to teach parents how to cuddle their babies". And this is perfectly droll, since if there's one thing a politician knows how to do, it's cuddle a baby. There is some point-scoring to be done about this government-commissioned survey, not least that the people who promised a bonfire of the quangos are now gazing thoughtfully at a superquango – an "[early intervention foundation](#)" designed to "co-ordinate cross-government action on the issue". But the ideas underneath all this are not funny at all, and at the moment they seem to unite the left and right, from Frank Field to Iain Duncan Smith, from New Labour to the coalition, in wrong-headedness.

So, it has been noted, repeatedly and by reputable studies (not least the Millennium Cohort Study), that poor children have worse prospects, in education and health, and these differences are as good as locked in by the time they are five years old. Therefore, any money spent should be directed to the preschool bracket, which is what Sure Start was all about. The leap – which Allen, in fairness, is merely the latest in a long line to make – is that poor parents are simply worse at parenting. In Allen's words, they are more likely to be "ill-informed and poorly motivated", which, as a way of saying "thick and lazy" is so thinly veiled it's almost saucy.

Parents "need to be aware of the sensitive period for emotional development in the earliest 18 months and the particular need during that period to avoid stress, domestic violence, physical abuse and neglect". Stress and domestic violence are here portrayed as things you can engage in or eschew at will, like going out clubbing in a sparkly boob tube: you've had your fun girls, but now you've got a baby you really have to put all these indulgences behind you.

There is no concept here of why people who are poor might be more stressed; no acknowledgement of the fact it is inequality itself that spawns these problems, and not just a neat coincidence that people who are poor also have sub-optimal personalities.

On an ideological level, then, I loathe this turn of thought. On a practical level, it very often doesn't work. The last government essayed a majestically expensive attempt to improve the health prospects for these troubled under-fives, [whose results were "disappointing"](#): their word, of course. I would have used something more like "totally predictable", "stupid idea in the first place". And yet, it was pointed out to me and I had to concede that this broad-brush leftist thinking – where the only answer is forcing equality by redistribution – usually amounts to doing nothing. There is always more value in doing something than in doing nothing. And while under-fives were ill-served by the [Healthy Start campaign](#), Sure Start did admirable work, under broadly the same theoretical imperative.

What is so breathtakingly arrogant about this government is that it is commissioning reports like this one into what should be done, while having no idea of what is already being done by the voluntary sector, receiving some, but not much, funding from local authorities.

There's a national charity called [Home-Start](#), where a volunteer spends a few hours a week with new parents, not "teaching them how to empathise", but empathising with them, giving them confidence, fulfilling the aims of intervention that this study recommends without the subtext that these parents are low-lives who don't know how to cuddle their own children. Because it's voluntary, it isn't targeted at poor parents: anyone can have a volunteer, they can self-refer or be referred by the social services or health visitors. Because it's distinct from the social services, there is far less stigma and suspicion attached to it. The work they do is incredible – in 2009, they supported 3,280 children who were either on the child protection register or subject to a child protection plan, and 971 children were removed from the register because of this support. But at the same time, they see plenty of affluent new parents, struggling with depression or just loneliness.

Yet 70 branches of this inspiring charity have had their funding withdrawn since this government came in, and a quarter of those are facing closure.

New cuts are announced all the time. The branch I saw in Richmond last autumn had its funding suspended two weeks later. It was seen as a luxury, even though the number of volunteer hours – Home-Start sees 200 families a week in this one branch – dwarfs any money that is spent administering the scheme.

The country's leading drug and alcohol charity, [Addaction, has exactly the same concerns](#). And in the Midlands, a different early-years charity of 40 years' standing had to sit through the gob-smacking naivety of a new coalition minister telling them to organise meetings for new parents in the local Starbucks, on estates where there are as many branches of Starbucks as there are new parents with £2.50 to spare for a cup of coffee.

It is admissible for a new government to come in and do things fast, make mistakes, change its mind, and there has been plenty of that. But it is inadmissible to talk about a "big society" while at the same time cutting off at the knee the very people who make this society as big as it is.

Article ends.