

Regarding young children as an unfortunate interruption in the workings of a political economy radically disregards the building bricks through which a society is constructed

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*At the end of November the coalition announced changes to parental leave, allowing up to a year of leave to be shared between those caring for the baby. It is discouraging that this idea is still resisted by captains of industry who see the scheme as producing 'chaos', a threat reliably produced by anyone who feels that their comfortable arrangements with the world are about to be threatened, writes **Mary Evans**. Sadly, and perhaps disastrously, child centred education, indeed, the very idea of the toleration of a state called childhood, appears to be under attack.*



The coalition government has just announced changes to the arrangements for parental leave after the birth of a baby and an adjustment – which has had considerable press coverage – that now allows the period of leave, of up to one year, to be shared between those caring for the baby. The details of the scheme contain any number of caveats (no paid time off, for example, for the father/other parent to attend pre-natal medical appointments) and a reading of the various terms and conditions of the scheme on the ACAS web site makes the mind reel.

But of course any acknowledgement that two people are involved in the birth and care for a baby is a good thing, although it is discouraging that this idea is still resisted by captains of industry who see the scheme as producing 'chaos', a threat reliably produced by anyone who feels that their comfortable arrangements with the world are about to be threatened. However, it is this mountain of resistance to any pattern of childcare that involves anything other than the full time presence of the mother and the absence at work of the father that needs examination. Through this we could think about how we have come to regard the care and education of young children in the twenty first century and why, in a rich society we still cling so firmly to fantasies about childcare which were never universal.

In the second half of the twentieth century much of Europe came to accept the idea that the provision of care for very young children should be shared between the state and the parents. During and just after the Second World War the mass market weekly paper *Picture Post* regularly produced features about happy children enjoying state run nurseries and the benefit to all of this provision. Some exaggeration was at work in the description of these nurseries but what was important was the idea that babies, young children and mothers had the right to support and – especially for the children – a good time. This idea, that childhood was a place for nurture and for pleasure, was enshrined in the [Plowden Report](#) of 1967: not a hint of testing and even, metaphorically if not literally, the acceptance of the idea that young children might sometimes be found 'running around with no sense of purpose' to quote Liz Truss, the present Children's Minister.

The spectacle of massed two year olds running pointlessly around is clearly as alarming today as idleness was to John Calvin in sixteenth century Geneva, since the toddlers might get the idea that at least part of the answer to the question of the meaning of existence is the possibility of delight just as much as duty. Jenny Cornish, of www.parentdish.co.uk, has set out in detail the many occasions when a toddler will reliably fail at fulfilling every expectation of dutiful adult behaviour. Michael Gove might like to imagine that putting every child in a blazer will automatically create an enthusiasm for declining Latin verbs, but the reality of course is that many adults, including senior public figures, are still running around with no apparent sense of purpose and that toddlers are best coaxed towards engaged and competent behaviour by play and forms of investigation inexplicable to many adults.

Sadly, and possibly disastrously, the thinking that informed Plowden (and previous generations inspired by the work of people such as Maria Montessori) would appear to be under attack. Child centred education, indeed, the very idea of the toleration of a state called childhood, appears to be under attack. Panic stricken readers (and believers) of education league tables, such as those produced by [PISA](#), call for more structured work with ever younger children. Lispering three year olds are ideally to be coached in multiplication tables and this, we are told, will ensure our economic survival and the dynamism of our economy. That it will do no such thing is allowed little credence and what is created is a war time sense of the need for every shoulder, however young, to be at the wheel of industry.

In this context, it is all too likely that parental leave could itself to be assessed. Imagine the questionnaire: did you stimulate your baby/toddler enough? What kinds of tasks did you and your baby accomplish whilst you were on leave? Did you instil in your baby a sense of meaningful (even productive) occupation? In the United States, where maternity leave is paltry, I have heard academics rail against it on the grounds that it will give 'mothers an unfair advantage in access to research time'. That this view exists in the homeland of neoliberalism suggests that it is all too likely to cross the Atlantic: hence concern here less about the entirely valid recognition of the second parent in the life of a small child than about the opposition that can even think of opposing this idea. The social value of reducing stress in questions about childcare for many citizens has a value for us all in producing better functioning adults: regarding young children as an unfortunate interruption in the workings of a political economy radically disregards the building bricks through which a society is built. That every toddler knows that bricks are made for building suggests that social understanding is not necessarily confined to adults.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Mary Evans is a Centennial Professor at the LSE, based at the Gender Institute. She has written on various aspects of gender and women's studies and many of those publications have crossed disciplinary lines between the social sciences and the humanities. She was a founding editor of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* and is presently working on a study of narratives – and continuities – of class and gender. Her latest edited book is [Gender](#) (Routledge, 2010).

