

**A Crown-up  
Child  
Protection  
Policy  
George  
Hoare**



### In short...

Child protection policies are harmful to children, and encourage suspicion amongst adults.

They isolate children, depriving them of the ability to join in group activities and have fun together.

Such policies are based on a depressing view of human nature, which sees each adult as a potential abuser.

We must focus on the positive things adults can bring to children, and confidently take collective responsibility for younger generations.

CRB checks and 'no touch' rules should be scrapped in favour of a policy that supports spontaneous, unregulated interaction between generations.

As adults, we take on, willingly or not, a number of responsibilities for younger generations. Individually, we show children care and respect. We are aware they are by definition still developing, and may need us to make decisions on their behalf.

Collectively, we are responsible for protecting children from the more risky aspects of social life. We think it right to secure the conditions for children's education, recreation and health at the very least; the same things given us when we were growing up, and we believe all children need to develop properly.

Further, some of us may decide to add to these responsibilities, either professionally as teachers or carers, or in our spare time, perhaps volunteering at a sports club or children's reading group.

I teach a number of students (who I wouldn't dare call children) as a graduate student, and have also volunteered to lead a number of activities with younger people. The most recent will see me presenting my research to children at a local secondary school, hopefully teaching them about the wider ideas in social science that engage me along the way. I am still waiting for approval from the Criminal Records Bureau to do so.

This Thinkpiece has developed from my experience working with children over recent years. It is written out of a belief that current we can do better for younger generations.

### **Child protection policies don't protect children**

In one way, it seems obvious that children must be 'protected'; they are by definition undeveloped agents, incapable of making informed decisions and assessing risks competently. With every breaking news story

about another case of terrible child abuse, the felt need for protection naturally increases.

In another way, it is equally obvious that we must reconsider the entire logic of child protection policies. Such policies have been developed as a response to the worst, anomalous cases of human interaction. They have been formed around the exception and not the rule, and signal that we have begun to be reactive.

Our child protection policies show we have begun to block out the possibility that anything *positive* might come from our interactions with children; instead, they simply serve to diminish these interactions further.

We have allowed our underlying view of human nature to focus on the negative, rather than thinking more positively about how we can best fulfil our humanity *despite* the dangers of everyday life. Crucially, we are overlooking exactly how abuse happens and what children themselves get out of relationships with adults.

These are some of the most important, meaningful and consequential questions of (to put it grandly) social philosophy and (to put it accurately) life as a human being. How do we want intergenerational relationships to work? What can children get from adults outside of their families, and are these benefits worth the risks? What responsibilities do we, as adults, as the generalized collective guardians of our youngest generations, owe to the developing members of society?

Similar questions are being asked in the field of education, where the simultaneous processes of commercialisation and a growing lack of trust over teachers' professionalism in self-regulating their relationships with students has led to a hollowing out of the personal basis, and often intimate connections of friendship, that the very best teachers can share with interested students. [1]

It is the purpose of this Thinkpiece to engage with some of these questions. More than to provide answers, it is written because I think it is important that we ask these questions, moreover, we ask them genuinely and with an open mind.

### **Child protection policies reflect our vulnerability, not theirs**

Perhaps the most dangerous idea surrounding child protection is that we cannot engage in serious argument as a society about how our relationships with children should be. It is without doubt within our control, collectively more than individually perhaps, to begin to put

forward a more robust conception of intergenerational relationships, one which more fully represents us as active and engaged human beings.

Indeed, child protection policy never has a neutral conception of human nature. Current policy is generally based on the idea that each and every one of us is a potential child abuser or molester. This underlying view of human nature focuses solely on our shared potential to do bad things, and in fact extends far beyond the confines of child protection policy. It is a depressing view of human nature, but fortunately not the only one.

We must understand that protecting children means necessarily making choices on their behalf. This is a responsibility we owe to children, who are best understood as developing individuals. To make a choice on somebody else's behalf is, in the simplest terms, to weigh up the costs and benefits of the choices available *to them*, and decide accordingly.

However, this could not be further from the logic of child protection policies. Our fear of ourselves, and of the 'bad' potential lurking in each other, has begun to trump any consideration of what children get out of relationships with adults and any attendant risks.

In other words, it is patently clear that child protection policy is made *for adults*. Our notion that any adult willing to engage in a relationship with children is somehow suspicious undermines a more truthful appreciation of the benefits for children when spending time with older generations.

Child protection policies are created, perpetuated and defended from a negative impulse. They are indefensibly insensitive to children's needs and wants. There is no other explanation I can square with my experience of teaching and volunteering with children.

A good example of the distorted response to children's vulnerability is the NSPCC's 'Full Stop' campaign against child abuse. Whilst it is difficult to disagree with the slogan 'Cruelty to children must stop. Full Stop.', an advertising campaign that implies child abuse might be happening in every home is fundamentally wrongheaded.

Suggesting we be suspicious of our neighbours and regularly wonder whether their children are being abused only reflects our fear of one another, not concern about children.

In fact, a child protection policy with the best interests of children at heart would provide support groups for child abusers. These are a much more efficient way of preventing future abuse. The 'Circles of Support and Accountability' run by the Lucy Faithful Foundation have

been found to drastically reduce re-offending rates by making offenders feel less cut off from communities, providing positive direction, and combating negative impulses. [2]

However, these support groups are not seen as a viable way of dealing with the danger of child abuse. Instead, groups such as the NSPCC irresponsibly encourage the spread of suspicion, and indirectly demonize offenders.

That child protection policies and campaigns primarily address our own fears and insecurities as adults is a regrettable, though not immutable, aspect of our relationships with children. We should instead think about what good can be done for children if instead of expensive, nation-wide advertising campaigns frightening us about the all-pervasiveness of child abuse, we attempted to tackle abuse through acknowledging that support for offenders can and does work.

It seems immeasurably more humane for us to be driven by a genuine concern for children, rather than a desire for recrimination and punishment.

### **Child protection policies isolate children**

The charge that current child protection policies are insensitive to children was prompted by a research survey I conducted on happiness and well-being in a South-East London secondary school. I found that children are not vulnerable in ways I had assumed. Rather, one primary need of children, in the collective sense, is caring relationships with adults outside of school and the family. Let me explain.

It is a common perception, and academically supported observation, that the rate of adult volunteering is decreasing sharply. [3] Consequently, both adults and children are deprived of one of the most important and enjoyable human activities: engaging in shared activities as a group.

Child protection policies contribute to this trend by encouraging suspicion of adult volunteers. They waste valuable time, costing smaller groups and charities absurd administrative fees. The activities available to children become restricted: insufficient Scout masters means a missed opportunity to go canoeing, tie knots, light fires, and so on. Ultimately, this means barring children from being able to participate.

Less well understood is that the erosion of these associational activities deprives children of an important emotional and personal resource: a relationship with the adults that supervise these groups.

In the school survey mentioned above, a valuable resource one group mentioned was having someone other than your friends, your teacher and your parents to talk to.

Someone, in other words, who understands the way things work, and can give you help and advice if home is making things worse, or it is not the sort of thing you talk about with friends. An adult who has established a relationship with a child on the basis of a shared interest, a church group, an after-school activity, or even a reading programme is an important resource for a child. Children exercise a continually surprising social sophistication in their choices of which relationships to further and invest in. But the absence of adults *willing* to reciprocate these kinds of investments leaves children isolated.

Casting suspicion on every adult who wants to spend time with children – time spent with the open-ended possibility of eventually developing an adult relationship and even one involving reciprocal care – can only serve to isolate children, making them more vulnerable and less self-determining. It means a child becomes dependent on fewer and fewer adults, which increases the asymmetry of power (children may have nowhere else to turn), and ultimately reproduces the conditions for abuse.

Child protection policies and adverts which aim to protect children from abuse by shielding them from the abuser they perceive in everyone seriously and irresponsibly harm those children. They not only remove volunteers for worthwhile activities but, far worse, they isolate children from potentially caring and protective adults, and so can only serve to perpetuate the conditions of the very abuse they fearfully seek to avert.

### **Child protection policies distort adult-child relationships**

The logic of child protection policies is further insensitive to children because it distorts the very nature of intergenerational relationships, depriving children of genuine, caring adults. Accordingly, it focuses us on one aspect of the adult-child relationship: the asymmetry of power between the two, obscuring all the potentially positive dimensions of the relationship. The relationship between adults and children is seen as one between potential abuser and potential abuse. Instead, we need to focus on the positive, enabling and empowering aspects that human relationships of almost any sort can have.

My experiences volunteering with children continue to be rich and rewarding. But sometimes the rules set for volunteers, such as 'no touching', can take something away from this experience. These rules seem almost legal requirements; there is no question of breaking them for a range of reasons. These go from being 'fair' to the children to considerations of professionalism, not to putting yourself at risk of being accused of something. This seems deeply troubling to me.

As a leader on a residential holiday (in a converted Berkshire vicarage) for mostly unruly 10 to 12 year olds from the poorer parts of Oxfordshire, there was a rule that a second person was required whenever an adult with any of the children. You could not be alone with the children. So, when another leader was trying to calm down one of the children who had become upset, I had to lurk by the door, invading what was a private moment and turning the interaction into a staged one for both the leader and child. Nothing, then, was genuinely solved. We simply waited for the child to show signs of being less upset before following the imperative of returning them to the larger group.

The problem is, of course, that children are incredibly adept at picking up on even the smallest signs of artificiality in relationships like this. If the leaders on a holiday are cautious of being alone with the children, they sense it straight away. In the worst case, children are able to distort the rule and even invoke it to generally disrupt group activities.

The 'no touch' rule seems commonsensical because the risks in breaking it, both to children and the leaders, don't appear to outweigh the benefits. But it is almost impossible to measure the effect that regulating a relationship has on the nature of that relationship.

Most volunteers are not childcare professionals, but rather are interested amateurs to donate their time and resources to activities they think are worthwhile. Nevertheless, we must think carefully about the genuine risks involved, and whether it is best for children to regulate relationships in this way, given how much they stand to lose.

Children gain enormously not just from participating in shared activities, but from their interaction with adults specifically. At very least, children begin to learn how to behave around adults from outside the school and family environment.

Children pick up which types of authority they think should be followed, and which questioned. They mature through learning the nuanced differences between different types of personal relationship. Without natural relationships with adults, children are unable to develop in this important and complicated way.

Hannah Arendt argues that we must be careful of the child who is,

*'...debarred from the world of grown-ups and artificially kept on his own, so far as that can be called a world. This holding back of the child is artificial because it breaks off the natural relationship between grown-ups and children, which consists among other things in teaching and learning, and because at the same time it belies the fact that the child is a developing human being, that childhood is a temporary stage, a preparation for adulthood.'* [4]

However, it seems we are prepared to hold back children from the world of adults, and even claim this is for their own good.

Instead, I would argue the teaching and learning that comes through unregulated relationships between adults and children is a crucial part of children naturally growing out of the world of childhood and becoming fully adult.

#### **Child protection policies undermine communal activities**

Our inability to develop mutually valuable relationships with children is a serious failing, one we should not allow to continue. It comes ultimately from a negative view of human nature, and is maintained because of the lack of any mechanism through which we can counter this view. Once any potential adult volunteer is seen explicitly in terms of a danger, there seems no recourse but to regulate and vet that volunteer.

The lack of an alternative, more positive, way of thinking about grownups is why arguments for CRB checks seem to make sense. It is the case that the freedom not to be subject to a check is not an overly significant one. It is inconvenient and perhaps intrusive, but it does not (and should not) outweigh the desire to participate on the part of the volunteer.

I do not want to oppose CRB checks on the basis that they restrict freedom, although I think that they do. It seems such an argument tends to cloud the most important issue: that we control the nature and content of our professional relationships with children, and determine those informal relationships to a large extent as well. We need to actively debate and argue over whether shielding children from adults in the way we do is best *for children*.

This Thinkpiece argues that the dangers associated with CRB checks are far worse than the vetting process itself, which represents a lack of both trust and any informal mechanisms for regulating social life. There are other possibilities, such as simply asking for references in the same way as any other job.

CRB checks, then, are not 'just a form'. They represent a creeping bureaucratization and state intervention into our interpersonal lives when we should be actively determining the conditions for nurturing and fulfilling relationships between adults and children throughout society. Putting constraints external to a community on the interactions within that community undermines all that can be most valuable about children and adults interacting.

CRB checks are simply a particularly good example of the regulation of something that shouldn't be regulated.

### **Child protection policies fail children; we must rethink them**

We are failing in our collective responsibility to children in many inter-related ways. I think our inability to fulfil our responsibility is becoming increasingly evident to anyone who works or volunteers with children.

Our resort to regulation *outside* of communities frustrates volunteers and volunteer groups, wasting their time and money. It excludes many willing participants, and discourages people from stepping forward in the first place. A lack of volunteers and activity leaders surely hurts children.

Moreover, we need to appreciate that current child protection policy, and our relationships with children in general, are primarily informed by our fear and suspicion of each other, along with an underlying view of human nature we should reject. Children will become increasingly isolated and atomized, engage in more solitary activities and ultimately become more vulnerable if we bar potentially caring and supportive adults from a place in their lives.

In summary, we do not trust one another enough to give children what they need: unregulated, genuine relationships with adults. Only interactions that are free from evident artificiality can fulfil the needs of children deeper than the requirement of a disinterested supervisor or overseer.

A total absence of regulation is needed to allow children to develop relationally, and in that sense to actually grow.

### **Endnotes**

[1] See for instance A. Patience's defence of "dramatic friendship" as the basis of an involved and involving teaching style in "The Art of Loving In The Classroom: A Defence Of Affective Pedagogy", Australian Journal of Teacher Education, Volume 33, Number 2, 2008

[2] New Philanthropy Capital report, E. Goodall and T. Lumley, Not Seen and Not Heard: Child Abuse, A Guide for Donors and Funders, London: New Philanthropy Capital, 2007

[3] N. Low, S. Butt, A. Paine and J. Smith, "Helping Out: A National Survey of Volunteering and Charitable Giving" London: National Centre for Social Research

[4] H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin, 2006 [First Published 1955], pp.180-81

### About the author

George Hoare is completing his PhD in the history of political thought at Oxford University. He has volunteered with a range of children's activities, from football coaching to residential children's camps, so has a large number of CRB checks to his name. He has also written, as a graduate student teacher, on the need to see teaching as a personal engagement, and of the difficulties with balancing authority and personally (such as enthusiasm for the subject) in tutorials.



Editor: Sarah Boyes  
Design: Tom Mower

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