

Let's get *Real*...  
Because Everybody Matters



**FULL OF PROMISE**

Policies for Children in Early Years

**UUP**   
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Ulster Unionist Party

## Objectives and Values of the Ulster Unionist Party

- (i) Promote, strengthen and maintain the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under the Crown, and uphold all democratic institutions in Northern Ireland.
- (ii) Safeguard the British Citizenship of the people of Northern Ireland.
- (iii) Support the maintenance of the rule of law.
- (iv) Promote the principles and aims of the Party and, without regard to gender, race or creed, encourage persons who share its objectives to join the Party.
- (v) Promote the good government of Northern Ireland for the benefit of its entire people.
- (vi) Unite the people of Northern Ireland and foster a peaceful, tolerant and meritocratic society where the rights of individuals as equal citizens within the Union are fully recognised.
- (vii) Promote freedom and prosperity of individuals in a stable and growing economy within the Union, where fair education, health and welfare systems ensure equal opportunity for all.

# FULL OF PROMISE

## Policies for Children in Early Years and their Families

### Introduction:

The first years of a child's life can fundamentally determine his or her future. It is a sobering fact that social exclusion and a lack of opportunities in adult life often flow from experiences in the earliest years. Politics in the rest of the UK and beyond has recognised the importance to a competitive economy and a fair society of giving children the best start in life. However, despite Northern Ireland having one of the most youthful populations in Europe, we have been spending 25% proportionately less on children's services than in the rest of the UK<sup>1</sup>.

Working families throughout Northern Ireland face the pressure of balancing their work and family lives, as they are called upon to make investments of time and finance in their children. Government and politics should not be disengaged from these challenges faced by parents. In the most important task society asks of citizens – to be good parents – government cannot stand aloof and unconcerned. This policy paper therefore proposes a range of policies to support parents of younger children and to give all our children the best start in life.



### A healthy start:

Giving children the best start requires giving them a healthy start to life. Healthy choices made by parents during their child's early years can help secure the opportunities flowing from good health in adolescence and adulthood.

Pregnancy and birth bring all parents and children into contact with our National Health Service. It is important that quality ante-natal and maternity care is available throughout Northern Ireland. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party supports the creation of midwife-led community maternity units to provide a local and convenient service for pregnant women. Such units would also facilitate midwives being the point of contact for women throughout pregnancy, ensuring holistic care. An increase in the number of midwifery training places is essential to ensure the well-staffed midwife service that must be available to women during pregnancy.

The BMA has described smoking during pregnancy as “an important cause of ill-health for both” mother and child<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, there is now strong evidence that Government’s advice on the safety of consuming small amounts of alcohol during pregnancy is flawed – as with smoking, women give their baby a healthy start to life when they abstain from alcohol during pregnancy<sup>3</sup>. It is, however, estimated that 30% of pregnant mothers in Northern Ireland smoke and 40% consume alcohol. The impact of this is not distributed evenly throughout our society, which increases health inequalities amongst children from different backgrounds<sup>4</sup>. The Ulster Unionist Party supports targets being set for radically reducing smoking and alcohol consumption during pregnancy, both through targeted public health campaigns and better support mechanisms for women during pregnancy.



The health and bonding benefits of breastfeeding have been clearly demonstrated. It was on this basis that the Scottish Executive included a commitment to increase the incidence of breastfeeding in its social justice strategy for child poverty and social exclusion<sup>5</sup>. In Northern Ireland there is evidence of a connection between a decision not to breastfeed, child health inequalities and social exclusion<sup>6</sup>. Promoting breastfeeding as a healthy choice for new mothers and their children must be part of a wider strategy to promote a healthy start to life for all our children.

The need for a healthy diet during early years has become a matter of public concern in light of an increase in cases of childhood obesity. In the words of a recent study, “it is important to establish a healthy eating pattern early in life. Good nutrition is important for all, and especially for those younger than 5”<sup>7</sup>. Alongside sustained and consistent public health programmes informing parents of the importance of healthy diets for their children, primary care health professionals should be provided with the training, resources and mandate to actively promote healthy diets for children in early years.

## The best start for children with disabilities:

Children with disabilities and their families face particular challenges, and should receive support from birth. The Newborn Hearing Screening Programme exemplifies the potential of early diagnosis. Early diagnosis of disability enables families to respond from the outset to the needs of their child. However, it is essential that early diagnosis is followed by high quality support services.

As noted by *Equal Lives* – the report of the Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability – the experience of too many parents of children with disabilities is of a lack of co-ordination in services, delays in diagnosis and inconsistent interventions<sup>8</sup>. The recommendation in *Equal Lives* of a regional early intervention strategy should be implemented<sup>9</sup>. The Early Years Support programme that operates elsewhere in the UK offers a model for the regional delivery of consistent, multidisciplinary support for children with physical and learning disabilities and their families.

## All children starting strong:

The key importance of ensuring that all children have access to quality early learning is well recognised throughout Europe and beyond. The OECD's 2001 report *Starting Strong* described universal access to early childhood education and substantial public investment in services as necessary for a “strong public commitment to young children and their families”<sup>10</sup>. Such policies are essential to ensure that children from socially excluded backgrounds are given a fair start in life they would not otherwise have. They also are necessary to help parents seeking to balance family and working life, and have confidence that quality and affordable early learning and childcare are available for their children.

SureStart has been a groundbreaking programme – but the scheme in Northern Ireland is neither as extensive as that in GB nor funded to the same degree. The Scottish Executive has recently increased its SureStart budget from £35m to £53m<sup>11</sup>. A commitment to at least parity is required for Northern Ireland, in order to ensure that families and children in communities experiencing social exclusion can benefit from early learning and childcare.



# UUP Policies for Chi

## A healthy start:

- ⟨ Midwife led community maternity units
- ⟨ Midwives to be the point of contact throughout pregnancy
- ⟨ Reversing under-funding of the midwife service
- ⟨ Targets to radically reduce smoking and alcohol consumption during pregnancy
- ⟨ Promotion of breast-feeding as the healthy choice for new mothers and their babies
- ⟨ Active promotion of healthy diets for children in early years

## The best start for children with disabilities:

- ⟨ A new emphasis on early diagnosis followed by consistent support for children with disabilities and their families
- ⟨ A regional early years support programme



# Children in Early Years

## All children starting strong:

- ⟨ SureStart implemented and funded to same degree as in rest of UK
- ⟨ 20 hours pre-school education as a universal entitlement
- ⟨ Common funding arrangements and common standards for the childcare sector
- ⟨ Investment in children's centres - as in rest of UK
- ⟨ Implementation of the childminder's strategy
- ⟨ Early Childhood Unit to be created in Department of Education



## Stronger families and child-friendly communities:

- ⟨ Enhanced pre-natal care to provide relationship support, parenting skills and financial literacy
- ⟨ Child Trust Fund uptake to be increased
- ⟨ Family and Children's Unit formed in OFMDFM
- ⟨ Equality Commission to promote family-friendly working practises
- ⟨ Implementation of *Tackling Violence at Home* strategy
- ⟨ Early intervention programmes to address neglect of children in early years

The Ulster Unionist Party is also committed to pre-school education being a universal entitlement: we support a guarantee of 20 hours pre-school education for children in early years. Common funding arrangements (to replace the existing disparate and *ad hoc* funding streams) and common standards should be put in place for the voluntary, community, statutory and independent sectors. Children's centres – such as the 3,500 that are being rolled-out through the rest of the UK – would facilitate and equip local childcare providers in all sectors to deliver quality early learning. Implementation of the Northern Ireland Childminder's Strategy (including an increase in the number of registered childminders) must be an important part of investment in childcare and early learning<sup>12</sup>. Parents could then exercise real choice concerning the form of childcare best suited to their family's needs, while being confident of the quality of care and learning. The considerably lower uptake of Working Families Tax Credit in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK also needs to be addressed, so that families are supported in the investment they make in childcare.

As the OECD has demonstrated, the capital investment required for this new approach will benefit Northern Ireland in both social and economic terms: "equitable access to early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of life-long learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families"<sup>13</sup>.

The Ulster Unionist Party will support the implementation of the forthcoming Northern Ireland Play Strategy, recognising that learning and much social development in early years occurs through play. The BookStart scheme has been successful in encouraging positive attitudes to early literacy. Libraries have the potential to build on BookStart through family literacy projects and services encouraging parents of younger children to use libraries<sup>14</sup>.

To ensure that the delivery of early childhood education and care is given strategic coherence, the Ulster Unionist Party supports the creation of an Early Childhood Unit within the Department of Education.

## **Stronger families & child-friendly communities:**

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the different forms of family life in contemporary Northern Ireland. Whatever their circumstances or family structure, all parents of children in early years should be supported by the government in their role as parents. There is also compelling evidence that committed, harmonious two-parent families contribute to children's emotional and social development. Family breakdown is always a painful experience for parents and children – but it also has wider implications for our society. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party supports the implementation of a strategy for marriage and relationship support, as advocated for England and Wales in the *Hart Report* (1999) and *Moving Forward Together* (the report of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Group on marriage and relationship support in 2002)<sup>15</sup>. Instead of resources being focussed on

counselling after relationship breakdown, they should be invested in preventative marriage and relationship support to help secure stronger families for children in early years.

An enriched and enhanced ante-natal programme which includes the delivery of relationship support would be a key means of strengthening families for children in early years. Parenting skills should also be a major component, helping mothers- and fathers-to-be prepare for the challenges of parenting. It is equally important that such an enriched and enhanced ante-natal programme address key pressure points facing couples during early years. Financial literacy should therefore be a component, recognising that debt problems are often associated with the increased costs to a family of a new child – and that debt problems have a role in many cases of relationship breakdown<sup>16</sup>.

As indicated by *Moving Forward Together*, while the statutory sector should develop this strategy for enhanced ante-natal programmes, the voluntary sector is best placed to deliver the relationships, parenting and financial literacy aspects of the care programme.

The uptake of the Child Trust Fund throughout the UK has to date been disappointing, with approximately 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of parents not availing of the Fund<sup>17</sup>. Ulster Unionists supported this legislation and believe that it offers not only a nest-egg for every child (including children of the poorest families), but is also an opportunity for all families to plan ahead for their child's future. The potential of the Child Trust Fund should therefore be built into the financial literacy aspect of the enhanced pre-natal care programme proposed in this paper.

To provide strategic direction to regional family and children's policy, the Ulster Unionist Party proposes reforming the Children and Young People's Unit in OFMDFM to become the Family and Children's Unit. In order to support the many parents of children in early years facing the challenge of balancing work and family life, this Unit should also be tasked (in co-operation with employers, particularly small-businesses) with promoting family-friendly workplace policies, and to co-operate with the Equality Commission to ensure equality in the workplace for women during and after pregnancy, and while children are in



early years<sup>18</sup>.

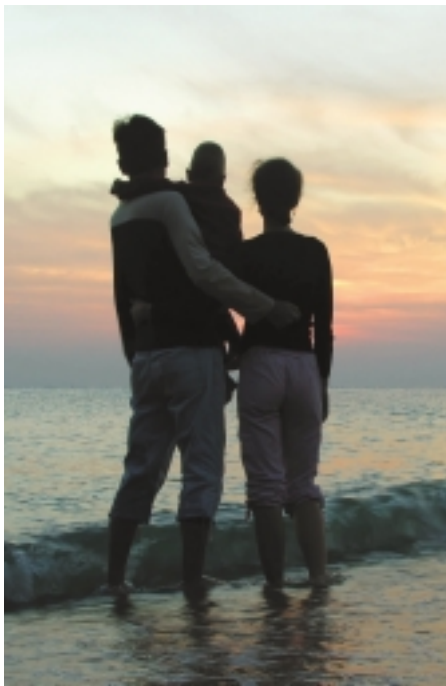
Early years should be a time when children are free from fear, neglect and abuse. Sadly this is not always the case. 30% of domestic violence begins during pregnancy. 11,000 children in Northern Ireland live with the reality of domestic violence – and in 60% of these cases, children themselves are also abused<sup>19</sup>. Implementation of the *Tackling Violence at Home* strategy must therefore be a key part of securing child-friendly communities.

Statistics indicate that a child is at more risk of neglect during the first year of life than at any other time. 47% of all children on the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland are registered under the category of ‘neglect’. Early intervention – supporting families experiencing a range of stresses – has been proven to address both the short- and long-term effects of neglect in a child’s life<sup>20</sup>. Securing resources for such early intervention programmes throughout Northern Ireland will increase the opportunities for these children in early years and beyond to experience a stable family environment, and reduce the need for later and more costly interventions.

## Conclusion:

Parents want the best for their children. Amidst the challenges of parenting in early years, parents strive to give opportunities for their children – and often to secure opportunities that they themselves never had. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that regional

government should be active in supporting parents during these crucial, formative years of a child’s life.



These proposals to give children a healthy start to life, to give the best start to children with disabilities, to guarantee quality pre-school education as a universal entitlement, and to promote stronger families and child-friendly communities are key building blocks in the aim of creating a society in Northern Ireland which supports families with children in early years – and gives every child the opportunity to fulfil their promise.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This figure is quoted by the Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) in *Equal Lives: Review of Policy and Services for People with a Learning Disability Northern Ireland* (2005), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> BMA Board of Science and Education & Tobacco

Control Resource Centre Smoking and Reproductive Life (2004), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> See BBC News “Any Alcohol’ is a risk in pregnancy” 13.09.04.

<sup>4</sup> DHSSPS Equalities and Inequalities in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland: A Statistical Overview (2004), p. 105ff.

<sup>5</sup> See “Every Child Matters” in Social Justice ... A Scotland where everyone matters [www.scotland.gov.uk/library2/doc07/sjmd-08.htm](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library2/doc07/sjmd-08.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> BMA Board of Science Preventing Childhood Obesity (2005), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Equal Lives p. 41. This point is also made in the National Deaf Children’s Society report Developing mental health services for deaf children and young people in Northern Ireland.

<sup>9</sup> Equal Lives p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> OECD Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care (2001), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Labour Party The Best Start for Scotland’s Children (2005)

<sup>12</sup> NICMA A Way Forward for the Childminding Sector (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Starting Strong p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> See Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals report Start with the child: Report of the CILIP Working Group on library provision for children and young people (2002).

<sup>15</sup> Lord Chancellor’s Office The Funding of Marriage Support: A Review by Sir Graham Hart (1999) and Moving Forward Together: A Proposed Strategy for Marriage and Relationship Support for 2002 and Beyond (2002).

<sup>16</sup> The Citizens Advice Bureau NI report Would you credit it? (2001) notes that 54% of CAB money advice clients have 1 or more dependant children.

<sup>17</sup> See BBC News “Low take-up of Child Trust Funds” 17.01.06.

<sup>18</sup> The need for such an approach can be seen from the findings of the report of the Women and Work Commission Shaping a Fairer Future (2006).

<sup>19</sup> NIO Tackling Violence at Home: A Strategy for Addressing Domestic Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland (2005), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> See Barnados Northern Ireland Working with parents to prevent neglect. Policy and practice briefing No. 5

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