



**Additional paper for information following the Children and Young People's Committee, Tuesday, 19 January 2010.**

By Keith Towler,  
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There has been a general intolerance towards children and young people for generations. Below is a quote from the Stipendiary Magistrate for Brighton in 1898:

"...the manners of children are deteriorating, that the child of today is coarser, more vulgar and less refined than his parents were..."

Fast-forward to 2008 to a poll conducted by YouGov for Barnardo's which suggested that society condemns all children, with more than half of the population (54%) thinking British children are beginning to behave like animals.

This disturbing intolerance is happening against a backdrop of negative portrayals of children and young people by the country's media. There have been negative images of children and young people in the media for decades. In the 1960s there was a fear of 'youth beyond control'; the 1970s saw us describing our young people as a 'savage generation' (*The Daily Mirror*); the 1980s saw *The Sun* describing young people as a 'vicious generation'; and in the 1990s we saw words such as 'nasty little juveniles', 'hooligans', 'freaks', 'bastards', 'worthless' and 'evil' to describe some of the country's children. In more recent times, *Young People Now* magazine reported in 2007 that less than one in four stories about young people in the national media are positive and that many items on young people had a 'headline-grabbing' emphasis on problem behaviour including violence and crime. These episodes have all led to the negative stereotyping of children and young people in the media.

Challenging society's view of our children and young people is something the UK Children's Commissioners, non-governmental organisations and the UK government and its devolved administrations have all committed to tackling. Cardiff based 'Goodies in Hoodies' is just one excellent example of how some children and young people themselves are also starting to challenge public's perception and media portrayal of their generation.

A number of organisations and agencies have decided to prioritise the work in light of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's most recent concluding observations, which made mention of media discrimination towards children and young people:

"25. The Committee recommends that the State part ensure full protection against discrimination on any grounds, including by: (a) Taking urgent measures to address the intolerance and inappropriate characterisation of children, especially adolescents, within the society, including in the media..."

My fellow UK Children's Commissioners and I were one of a number of agencies and organisations that drew attention to the increase in discrimination towards children as a whole

since the last set of recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the State Party in 2002.

Within the Commissioners' joint report to the Committee, we discussed the use of the Mosquito device, to the fact the UK has one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in Europe and how the criminal justice system is used too readily.

I believe fuelling society's negative views of children is the media's over-reliance to report on the activities of the minority of children and young people who break the law – Jamie Bulger's killers, the murder of headmaster Philip Lawrence and the murder of Damilola Taylor are perhaps the most high profile examples in recent times.

I am not denying that some children do bad things but the vast majority of children, many of whom I have the pleasure of meeting on a daily basis, are law-abiding and make positive contributions to their communities. But how often do we hear society celebrating children?

I have emphasised time and again that England and Wales' Anti Social Behaviour legislation leaves much to be desired. It has resulted in more children being drawn into the criminal justice system. We are now criminalising children and young people for hanging around in their communities with friends. We are not however providing them with an alternative. The quote below from a 17 year old from south Wales is typical of the things I have heard:

"Everything you want to do costs too much money, the bus costs too much to get places, it's cheaper to buy cider with my mates than it is to go swimming." (*Breaking the Cycle*, Barnardo's, 2008).

The punitive approach to misbehaviour by children and young people has resulted in a system which treats them as offenders first and children second.

Its damage is deep-rooted in society: the British Crime Survey of 2008 indicated that the public felt young people committed up to half of all crime when in actual fact young people were responsible for only 12%. It is the portrayal of this small minority of children that has fuelled the demonisation of the majority.

It is also significant that one of the measurements of anti-social behaviour within the British Crime Survey is the congregating of people in public areas; as if this was somehow inherently a negative thing.

The Barnardo's report – *Breaking the Cycle* – examines how a great number of children who find themselves in trouble are trapped in a cycle of disadvantage:

- they come from the poorest families and communities;
- have the poorest educational experiences; and
- they are more likely to suffer ill health and substance misuse.

It emphasises the necessity for all manner of support services to be in place to ensure all our children have the best start in life.

The UK is ranked bottom of the league table for child wellbeing across 21 industrialised countries (*Innocenti Report Card 7*, UNICEF, 2007), where too many of our children live in poverty, with one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe. Are we really providing all that we can to break this cycle, to make sure our children can lead happy and healthy lives?

There is also a lot of talk of intergenerational work but are we really promoting understanding and respect between generations?

I for one have committed to working with agencies, including major media outlets in Wales, to do all I can to influence the general public's perception of children and young people. But this requires a concerted effort from all.

Without question, we are damaging our children and young people's childhoods. Whilst there is no clear evidence to suggest a tipping point when society began demonising our children, there is enough evidence to suggest a need for an immediate cultural shift. We cannot continue damaging our children's childhoods by discriminating; neither can we continue this unjustified intolerance. Our focus should be on celebrating children and young people. We need to start promoting understanding and respect if we want a country of active and engaged citizens of all ages.

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