

**RESPECT has become something of a buzz-word—more because of a widespread perception that it is lacking throughout our society than because it is prized. It is a lack of respect for people and for property that lies at the root of the rising tide of anti-social behaviour and violent crime.**

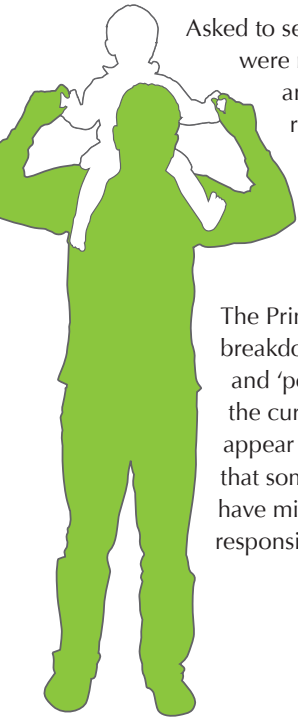
A recent YouGov survey found that 91 per cent of respondents believed that people show each other either 'a lot less respect' (73 per cent) or 'a little less respect' (18 per cent) than they did in the past, and 89 per cent were of the opinion that anti-social behaviour had 'increased a lot' (65 per cent) or 'increased a little' (24 per cent).

In response to mounting public concern, the Labour government has made 'Respect' one of the major emphases of its third term of office and has established a Respect Task Force to promote a 'culture of respect'.

### *What has gone wrong?*

Asked to select two factors that they thought were most responsible for the increase in anti-social behaviour, 85 per cent of respondents to the YouGov survey cited 'parents not bringing up their children properly', with 25 per cent mentioning 'the break-up of so many marriages'.

The Prime Minister has also identified the breakdown of traditional family structures and 'poor parenting' as root problems of the current social malaise, but he does not appear to have considered the possibility that some of his own government's policies have militated against stable family life and responsible parenting.



### *Where is respect learned?*

The family is the first school in which a child is enrolled and respect is among the first and most important lessons to be learned. If children don't learn to respect their parents in the home, they will find it more difficult to respect other authority figures and to grow up as orderly, productive and law-abiding citizens.

As Winston Churchill put it:

*There is no doubt that it is around the family and the home that all the greatest virtues, the most dominating virtues of human society, are created, strengthened and maintained.*

While 'encouraging respect for public servants and services including teachers and schools, health and emergency services and the police' is doubtless a laudable aim, the government's 'Respect' agenda has so far been silent on the need to foster a culture of respect for parents. Yet it is from a proper respect for their parents that respect for other people and their property will naturally flow.

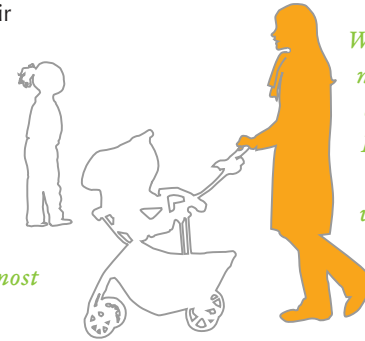
### *What can the government do?*

There is clearly a limit to what the government can hope to achieve, as the Prime Minister has acknowledged:

*I do think there are some very deep seated causes of this that are to do with...family life in the way that parents regard their responsibility to their children, in the way that some kids grow up, generation to generation, without proper parenting, without a proper sense of discipline within the family, and... I can't solve all these problems... I can start a debate on this and I can legislate, but what I can't do is...raise someone's children for them.<sup>1</sup>*

The Minister for Children similarly spoke of the vital role of parents after figures were published showing a rise in the number of conceptions to 13-15 year-old girls:

*We really need parents to now see themselves as making an absolutely unique and vital contribution to this issue... It is a contribution that I don't think anyone else can actually make... We cannot make the deep, sustained progress we want to make, particularly at that vulnerable age group, without fully engaging with parents and getting them on board.<sup>2</sup>*



Yet while the government trumpets the importance of parents, it continues to pursue policies that undermine and marginalise them. On the one hand parents are held responsible for their children's behaviour at school and in the community, while on the other their role is being undermined by growing pressure on mothers to work outside the home, official disapproval of effective methods of discipline, and the confidential provision of contraception and abortions without the knowledge or consent of parents. Increasingly, schools are appealing to the 'right of the child to confidentiality' to justify keeping parents in the dark on all manner of issues.

The more the state undermines the authority of parents, the less responsibility parents will be inclined to take for their children. Authority and responsibility go hand in hand. The government can't have it both ways: it can't disempower parents and at the same time blame them for society's ills. If the government wants parents to take proper responsibility for their children, it must first of all respect their authority.

Over recent years there has been a tendency to regard children as the shared responsibility of parents and the state, with the state assuming an ever-increasing role in their lives. Behind the rhetoric about 'supporting parents', the personal responsibility of parents for their own children has increasingly been lost sight of.

## What can we do?

**1** We can impress upon the government the need to show greater respect for parents in the policies they pursue. For example, with regard to:

### Childcare

The government's ten-year strategy for childcare aims to expand childcare provision for children in their early years. The strategy document commended countries like Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Belgium and France, which had 'well developed systems of childcare provision' such that motherhood made little or no difference to labour market participation. Such policies fail to respect the vital role of parents in caring for and nurturing their children during their earliest years.

### Extended schools

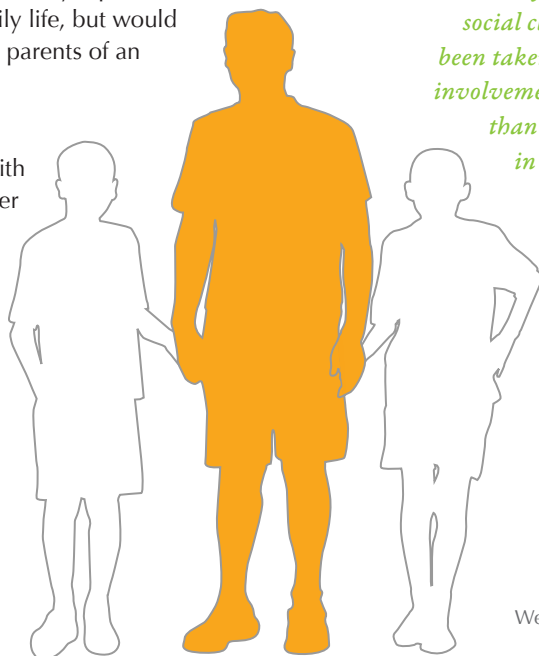
Plans to offer affordable childcare from 8am to 6pm all year round for children under the age of 14 also fail to respect parents as the biggest single influence in their children's lives and their primary educators.

### Discipline in the home

The government has committed itself to reviewing the law on the reasonable chastisement of children. To impose a ban on moderate parental smacking as a method of discipline would not only represent an unwarranted intrusion into family life, but would also harm children and deprive parents of an effective sanction.

### Confidentiality policies

The government is persisting with its view that young people under the age of consent should be entitled to obtain contraceptives and abortions without the knowledge and consent of their parents. Keeping parents in the dark about the illegal activities of their children demonstrates a lack of respect for them as the primary carers and protectors of their children.



**2** We can make parents more aware of how their responsibilities are being threatened and undermined, by writing letters to local newspapers, taking part in radio phone-ins, and passing on literature that encourages parents to fulfil their responsibilities towards their children. Over the next few months, Family Education Trust is planning to publish a series of leaflets to encourage responsible parenting.

**3** We can aim to order our own homes in such a way that our children learn to respect their parents and other authority figures. While we long to see the government showing more respect for parents and for the family unit in the policies it pursues, we don't have to wait for that to start building the true and lasting foundations of respect in our own families.

A literature review published by the Department for Education and Skills confirms the importance of the involvement of parents in the lives of their children:

*Research...establishes that parental involvement has a significant effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors (such as social class, maternal education and poverty) have been taken out of the equation... Differences in parental involvement have a much bigger impact on achievement than differences associated with the effects of school in the primary age range. Parental involvement continues to have a significant effect through the age range...<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister's press briefing, 12 May 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Beverley Hughes, quoted in *The Guardian*, 26 May 2005 and *ePolitix.com*, 27 May 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Desforges C, Abouchaar A, *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review*, DfES, 2003, p.86.

