Cameron: Supporting parents

Speaking today at Demos, David Cameron will talk about the importance of supporting parents and families to build a strong and responsible society. He will also reaffirm the Conservative Party's commitment to Sure Start and will outline more details about how to increase its focus on the neediest families and better involve organisations with a track record in parenting interventions.

David Cameron will say:

(Check against delivery)

"Since I was elected Leader of the Conservative Party I have talked often about responsibility.

Responsibility is central to my beliefs, my politics, the change I want to bring to this country. But the trouble with responsibility is that it can either sound like a burden: a negative, difficult, obligatory thing the medicine that accompanies the more sugary, pleasant concept of 'rights.' Or it can sound like a grey abstraction, a dry theoretical concept that's hard to define and make tangible, or specific.

But responsibility is neither. It is the word we give to people doing the right thing. It is people doing good by themselves – through self-discipline and effort and by each other – through kindness, duty and care. That's why responsibility is, I believe, the essential quality of the good society - of a strong society.

In a strong society, people realise that their obligations as a citizen don't simply begin and end with paying their taxes and obeying the law. Beyond that we have a mutual obligation to help each other, to look after each other, to live life not as an island but as a part of the whole. Responsibility is the value that elevates a collection of human beings to a civilisation – and building this responsible society is the avowed mission of the modern Conservative Party.

So how do we do that?

Responsibility is not a value that simply exists in the ether, or can be injected there by government – it is a value that can only find life and expression in the decisions and actions of individuals. To build a responsible society we need responsible individuals. Now you might think that whether people are responsible or not is a matter of chance. You might be a believer in good apples and bad apples.

I am not.

With a pretty good canon of evidence behind me I would argue that while our innate personalities are part-shaped by genetic inheritance, our character can be learned. There are things we can do to help build responsible character in people. So yes: I am going to talk about individual behaviour and character today.

I know this is tricky territory for a politician. We're not exactly paragons of virtue ourselves. But to those who think politics should stay away from issues of character and behaviour, I say this.

First, look at the scale of our problems. When inequality is at a record high and social mobility has stalled. When the number of people in severe poverty has risen by nearly a million in the last ten years despite billions of pounds of extra spending.

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When there are more than 120,000 deaths each year related to obesity, smoking, alcohol and drug misuse. When millions of schoolchildren miss out on learning because their classmates are constantly disruptive. When British families are drowning in nearly one and a half trillion pounds worth of personal debt.

And then ask yourself: do any of these problems relate to personal choices that people make? Or are they all somehow soluble by top down government action, unrelated to what people actually choose to do? Can we hope to solve these problems if we just ignore character and behaviour?

The answer is blindingly obvious. We have a whole host of severe social problems that are caused in part from the wrong personal choices so who can seriously argue that the state should continue to just treat the symptoms of these problems instead of the root causes too?

Now, I want to preface this whole speech with the point that politicians are human and fail, that our relationships break down, and yes we have been guilty of some staggeringly irresponsible behaviour, particularly over the whole expenses mess. And while I'm at it I am not setting myself up as some model husband, parent, citizen or even Member of parliament. But I believe that for all that, this issue of responsibility is too important to bottle out of a proper debate about things that really matter.

So the question I want to try and address today is: how do we help build responsible character in people? There is overwhelming evidence that the seeds of our strongest character traits are sown in childhood.

Research by Leon Feinstein has shown that the extent to which positive attributes have developed by the age of ten has a profound impact on a child's success in adult life. So I believe that to build responsible character we need to focus on the three areas where character is formed in our early lives – in the family, at school and through the influences of wider society – and take action to ingrain responsibility through each.

This is relatively new territory for the Conservative Party. In the past we've been guilty of giving the impression that to build a responsible society, all we needed was freedom for the individual plus a strong rule of law from the state. We didn't talk enough about what happened in between. And we were unwilling to intervene more directly in issues of behaviour and character for fear of being intrusive – for twitching the curtains, as it were.

But if the modern Conservative Party's mission is to build the strong society – which it is, if we believe that a strong society is the sum of the goodness and character of millions of individuals – which we do and if we accept that goodness and character are formed through nurture and not just fixed by nature – which the evidence shows to be the case, then it is not just right but essential that we take a view on how responsible character is formed, and what government can do to help build it.

FAMILY

Of course the most important influence on the character we grow into is the family we grow up in. Your analysis here at Demos has shown that there are some things that are key.

The ability to stick at your commitments. The power to bounce back from bad times. The capacity to identify with other people. When responsibility is broken down into different ingredients like this we can see that all of them start in the home.

If we're over indulged we're less likely to be able to stick at things. If we regularly observe anger or rage in others from an early age we might find it more difficult to respond positively when times are tough. If we're treated without care we might find it hard to relate to other people.

So what happens in the home really matters. And let us be clear about something. When I talk about the importance of the home to character I don't mean the material architecture of the place. I mean the emotional architecture of what happens within it – the parenting that children receive.

We all know what good parenting looks like. It means setting boundaries as well as providing love and offering security. These are things that help foster commitment, resilience, empathy – and everything else we associate with responsibility.

Even if you don't buy the idea that good parenting is the key to creating responsible individuals, the evidence shows that it is the single most important determinant of our future success or failure. And I believe that this research produced recently by Demos is truly ground-breaking. It shows that the differences in child outcomes between a child born in poverty and a child born in wealth are no longer statistically significant when both have been raised by "confident and able" parents.

For those who care about fairness and inequality, this is one of the most important findings in a generation. It would be over the top to say that it is to social science what E=MC2 was to physics, but I think it is a real 'sit up and think' moment. That discovery defined the laws of relativity; this one is the new law for social mobility:

What matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting. As Stephen Scott of the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners has said: "Poverty is a factor, but not a central one...It seems to be poverty of the parent-child experience...that leads to poor child outcomes rather than poverty of a material kind".

Now, of course it can and should be argued that it is easier to achieve good parenting when there is material prosperity but the findings in the study seem so significant that they should help us to settle a fierce debate that has been raging for decades about how we build a fairer society.

The left have always argued that the best way to tackle disadvantage is to redistribute money from the rich to the poor. But the assumptions held for so long, that when it comes to fighting poverty, reducing inequality and increasing opportunity, politics should remain neutral on family life and government should concern itself solely with issues of tax and spending, these assumptions have been proved wrong.

Instead, what we find is this: if we want to give children the best chance in life – whatever background they are from – the right structures need to be in place, strong and secure families, confident and able parents, an ethic of responsibility instilled from a young age.

And here I want to pay tribute to one of the people who first understood this – even when it was unfashionable; even when it was difficult in his own party. For a long time Frank Field has been willing

to say the unsayable. He has argued that the welfare state should be more than a money-redistribution system, but rather – in his words - "openly reward good behaviour and ... be used to enhance those roles which the country values".

He has drawn the link between family breakdown and "more instability, more crime, greater pressure on housing and social benefits", arguing that a fundamental "principle of the welfare state should be to support families and children." When he first started talking about these things, no-one quite realised how important they are. Now we do.

His work has been built on by people like Iain Duncan Smith, organisations like Demos and – I would like to think – today's Conservative Party. But let me make it clear again: none of us would argue for one moment that material poverty doesn't matter.

Of course there's a link between material poverty and poor life chances, but the full picture is that that link also runs through the style of parenting that children in poor households receive. Because the research shows that while the style of responsible parenting I've spoken about today is more likely to occur in wealthier households, children in poor households who are raised with that style of parenting do just as well.

And successful parenting style in wealthier families occurs not because these people are intrinsically better, or that they love their children more. It is because with poverty can come a host of other problems that make parenting more difficult. Worse schools, higher crime, bad housing. Unemployment. Problems with alcohol and drugs. Mental health conditions. The wearying grind of worry about debt.

So of course it's vital to alleviate material poverty through fair tax and benefits. We support tax credits – indeed, it was a Conservative Government that first introduced them. But this exciting new evidence from Demos sets us a new challenge: to alleviate poverty of parenting, in the knowledge that it is the best way to help children escape material poverty. That's why I'm delighted to be here to help launch the inquiry that Demos is starting today. I'm sure it will produce much useful analysis and policy that will inform our work in the future.

But for now, I'd like to focus on our work so far. I want to show how we intend to help make Britain more family-friendly and so help build the responsible society.

REVERSING FAMILY BREAKDOWN

We must start by asking: how can we help families stick together. Of course, nurture, affection, discipline and security – the ingredients to a good start in life – can be provided within any family, whatever its shape or size. But the evidence shows that children are more likely to do well when both parents are there for them, together providing the love and the discipline.

Now I don't believe government can make families work and stick together. But I do believe that the state can support families as they deal with all the different pressures they face. That's what our family-friendly reform plan is all about. Right at the heart of it is our commitment to...commitment.

I think it is essential to say loudly and proudly that commitment is a core value of a responsible society and that's why we will recognise marriage, whether between a man and a woman, a woman and a

woman or a man and another man, in the tax system. And yes, that is a commitment.

We will also end the couple penalty in the tax credits system, which disgracefully encourages parents to live apart, by using savings realised from our welfare reform programme. But I don't want anyone to think I have a simplistic view of these things – that a tax break for marriage or reform of the benefits system will stop family breakdown in its tracks overnight. It won't.

These changes are about the message, more than the money. The message they send is that our society values commitment. But this is just the start of the support we'll offer families. Families need help to spend more time together. So we'll extend the right to request flexible working to all parents with a child under eighteen.

Families need childcare that fits in with the patterns of their life. So we'll support the individual choices that parents make. That could mean staying at home, it could mean working part time, it could involve using state services, private nurseries, the voluntary sector or grandparents, friends and neighbours.

Families need extra help to cope when their children are babies and toddlers. Evidence shows that parents are most likely to split up in the first year after their child's birth. So we'll introduce Flexible Parental Leave, meaning both parents can share the responsibilities of caring for a new baby. And we will increase the number of Sure Start health visitors by 4,200, giving families a much greater level of personal, professional support in the home when they need it most.

And some families need emotional support. So we'll make sure that couples are directed to the relationship counselling they need. Of course, relationship support isn't just about helping couples stay together. It's also for when couples break apart.

Real life isn't a fairytale. Sometimes a split is unavoidable, even necessary. When that happens, it's so important that there is the least amount of disruption for any children involved. Because for a child, there's only one thing worse than family breakdown – and that's badly handled family breakdown. Organisations like Relate already do great work in bringing separated parents together for the benefit of their child – and I want to see them do more.

GOOD PARENTING

But a real responsibility agenda must go beyond simply supporting families and helping them stick together, to the complex territory of helping to develop parenting skills. I know people will say this is not the business of politicians. After all, we're not perfect parents ourselves. But that doesn't mean we should remain silent on the issue. In fact to do so would, in my view, be incredibly irresponsible.

Politicians are the ones who take taxpayers' money and write billions of pounds worth of cheques to deal with educational failure, crime, anti-social behaviour. So I think politicians have a responsibility – to the taxpayer and to society – to do what we can to bring these costs down. And that means looking at the evidence, recognising that parenting has a massive part to play, and doing something about it.

Our Sure Start health visitors will have a vital role here. The substantial increase in the number of health visitors will mean that families get more support - from properly trained professionals. Health visitors will be able to spend time with families, have the opportunity to spot parenting issues, and build the

trusted relationships needed to help with them. For instance, if they feel a mother is not bonding with her baby, and recognise the cause as post-natal depression, they might gently recommend that she visit her GP, or steer her towards a local counsellor.

DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

The increase in health visitors will benefit all families. But we also need to recognise that some families need extra help. Perhaps they are not functioning properly or – in the worst case scenarios – are in such a bad way that the development of their children is being harmed.

We can't just stand by for fear of looking judgmental, and we can't pretend that our other family-friendly policies are enough here. It is our duty to meet the urgency of these cases with active intervention. Labour understood this. Sure Start was conceived as a way of helping the most disadvantaged children in their earliest years.

But the truth is that today, it isn't working as well as it should. There is little accountability in how Sure Start money is spent so the funding doesn't necessarily follow the support programmes that work. There's not enough diversity of provision, because the voluntary sector and other community organisations have been crowded out. And for those that do exist, Sure Start is just one of multiple funding streams for parenting support from different Government departments - causing confusion and wasting time.

Finally – and worst of all – Sure Start has lost its focus. The people who need it most – disadvantaged and dysfunctional families – are not getting enough of the benefit. If we fail to address these major problems we would be letting down the millions of children who could, potentially, have their lives transformed by it.

So today I want not just to repeat our commitment to keep Sure Start. But to set out how we will improve Sure Start by taking it back to its original purpose - early intervention, increasing its focus on those who need its help most and better involving organisations with a proven track record in parenting interventions.

The principles that guide our reforms for Sure Start have guided our reforms for health, education, welfare, prisons – even international development. The first is decentralisation. Instead of trying to run everything from the centre, we want to allow independent organisations, operating within a framework of expected standards, to be self-governing.

The second is transparency. We believe that publishing information about the performance of public services enables choice and raises quality by showing what works and what doesn't.

The third is accountability. When someone's actions have consequences, they are more likely to take care over those actions. So, wherever possible, we will reform public services by creating systems that allow a wide range of independent providers to offer services, paid by the results they actually achieve.

These principles will be applied to the way we improve Sure Start. We know what works in terms of parenting interventions – the research has been done by the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners and others. They have identified models with proven success – from family nurse

partnerships, an intensive programme for vulnerable first-time parents that ends when the child is two to parenting support groups for parents with learning difficulties.

So we'll invite independent organisations that have a proven track record in these areas – like Lifeline and 4Children and Homestart and contract them to run children's centres and reach out to dysfunctional and disadvantaged local families. They will then be paid – at least in part - according to the results they achieve.

Of course many things we would regard as success are hard to measure, such as a child's level of happiness and comfort. But as the family nurse partnership has suggested, there are some tangible measurements we can apply: For example, improvements in school readiness and infant mortality.

The responsibility for designing these contracts and making sure they are fulfilled will lie with a newly-established Early Years Support Team within the Department of Children, Schools and Families. And the funding for this work will be through a dedicated Early Years Support Budget, building on the existing dedicated funding for Sure Start by incorporating the many streams of funding directed at early years support that are currently dispersed throughout Whitehall.

In short, we will bring a new focus, and a new spirit of enterprise and innovation to early years support. If you want to picture the scale of the change we hope to bring, look no further than the Academies programme. There, an injection of independence and excellence has increased standards dramatically. We want to go much further in schools – and we see a similar future for early years support.

SCHOOLS

This is how government can help foster a national culture of strong families and good parenting to build responsible character in our children. But instilling children with the right values doesn't begin and end in the home.

The simple fact is that for a large chunk of their waking life, children are in the care of their teachers, not their parents. This makes school a vitally important incubator of responsibility. And just as we know, instinctively, the type of parenting that ingrains responsibility in our children, so we know the type of schooling that does the same.

Disciplined, ordered classrooms, where children understand what is acceptable behaviour and what isn't. An ethos that elevates aspiration, where reward is a fair reflection of how hard you've worked and how well you've done. A respect for authority, with pupils dressing smartly and standing up when their teacher enters the classroom. A culture of mentoring, where pupils get guidance on life and careers. Competitive sport that teaches children about team-work, training and applying yourself. We know these things are vital, but the truth is they don't happen in enough of our schools. That's not to say they can't.

Come with me to Mossbourne Academy in Hackney and you'll find a school with some of the best discipline and strongest results – in one of the poorest areas of the country. Or the Harris Academy in Bermondsey, where pupils have a mentor to raise their aspirations. Or Walworth Academy, where pupils sign contracts promising good behaviour and come to school each morning in the smartest uniforms.

There's one thing that unites all of them. They are independent. Not-fee paying. Not private. But independent.

They are all academies, established free from bureaucratic control. They have had the freedom to set their own curriculum, the freedom to pay more for good staff, the freedom to enforce more rigorous discipline policies and the freedom to develop excellent extra-curricular activities.

Just like private schools, these schools have made the most of their independence – they know that success depends on making themselves popular with parents. That's what our school reforms are all about.

Yes, we will take urgent action to bring order to the classroom. Giving head teachers the final say when it comes to excluding disruptive children. Allowing schools to draw up binding home-school contracts, where failure to sign will mean no admission and failure to adhere to its rules could mean exclusion. And a moratorium on the closure of special schools, and restoring balance between special and mainstream so that every child gets the tailored support they need.

But our long-term reforms are about spreading freedom and parent-power across the state system so more schools provide the kind of education we need to help raise the kind of responsible citizens we want. So we will end the state monopoly in state education, meaning that any suitably qualified organization can set up a new school and any parent who isn't happy with the education their child is receiving can send their child to a new school.

This means when a new school opens down the road, and parents see smartly dressed, well-behaved kids walking to that school and getting good results others around it will have to improve. It means more good schools and more good school places. Ultimately, it means better educated, more responsible children.

COMMUNITY

Strong families. Better schools. These are vital for developing responsible character in young people. But we cannot place the entire burden on the shoulders of parents and teachers.

The truth is children are not brought up or initiated into society – and all its complexities, duties and obligations – by just a handful of people. They are like sponges, remarkably receptive to the influences. Whether it's the music videos they see on television, the adverts they hear on the radio, the celebrities they follow avidly, the passer-by talking on their mobile phone, children are tuned in.

They're constantly watching, listening and learning. That's why the wider community must play its part in ingraining a culture of responsibility in young people. And by that I don't just mean neighbours or the people you pass in your local parks and public spaces. I mean all of us – all of society.

We all have a duty to ensure that children and young people are absorbing influences that encourage responsibility. Clearly, that must begin from the very top. Government must expect responsibility from others. It needs to send out the right messages on welfare, policing and criminal justice – if you do the responsible thing, you will be rewarded. If you don't, you won't.

But as well as this more traditional role for government – of expecting responsibility, I see a new one. It's the one I described in my Hugo Young Lecture last year. I believe government has an important role to play in directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising responsibility in every part of our wider society. That means working with the voluntary sector to spread their ethic of service to young people in our society.

Our plan for National Citizen Service for Young People will be led by charities and community groups and will bring together sixteen year olds from across the country in a programme of social engagement. There they will learn what it means to be socially responsible, to serve their community, and to get on and get along with people from different backgrounds.

It also means working with business to reduce the cruder elements of commercialisation in our society. Children today are being sold the idea that the path to happiness lies through excessive consumption.

It's high time the children's market and advertisers show much more restraint in the way they operate. We don't want to resort to regulation. But we will make it clear that if business doesn't exercise some corporate responsibility, we will not be afraid to impose it.

The media needs to show some restraint as well. The premature sexualisation of our children has already gone way too far. There is way too much arbitrary violence in the lives of children too young to understand irony or fantasy. Businesses have got to understand that parents don't like it and want it to stop.

Shortly, we will be publishing our family green paper - a drawing together of all our policies aimed at making Britain more family-friendly. And I have asked my colleagues to consider all options in pursuit of our aim of stopping the premature sexualisation and excessive commercialisation of our children.

Government also has an active role to play in getting all of us in society to assume our proper role as the guardians of other people's children. All adults have an awesome responsibility for children in our society – whether we have them or not; whether we like it or not. We're the ones they look up to, the ones they hope to turn to for guidance, the ones they believe can offer them the safety and security they need to learn, play and grow. So, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has said, "if we want to give children a chance of experiencing childhood as they should ... we have to face the demands of being adults ourselves".

Today, the opposite is happening. Commercialisation and the culture of children's rights means that children are treated like adults while a great knot of rules and regulations and over-the-top bureaucratic nonsense means that increasingly adults are treated like children. With a culture of suspicion and paranoia that is increasingly preventing adults from even interacting with young people. We can't go on like this. It's time we gave children back their childhood and got adults to behave like adults.

CONCLUSION

Some people will always think politics should stay out of so-called softer issues like parenting and relationships, and stick to more gritty subjects. But if parenting is the coal-face of creating character, and responsible characters are the building blocks of a strong society, then government must not just have a view on this – it must act on it too.

Strengthening families and providing parenting support through a new strategy for Early Years Support, because responsibility starts at home. Reforming schools, because education isn't just about academic learning, but also about social learning – how to behave in community with others.

And government, charities, business, media – all of us as individuals, all of society – setting an example of responsibility, with an awareness that children are watching, listening and learning. Because it is only through instilling responsibility in the next generation that we will create the good society that is fundamental to the good life for everyone."

ENDS