

British state betrayed its children – these countries can teach us how to set things right

October 24 2018, by Sir Al Aynsley-Green



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Children are the UK's most precious resource. More older people [are living longer](#), and it is today's children who will provide the wealth to support them. So, from an economic perspective, the UK needs healthy, educated, creative, resilient and happy children. Those who can should be able to develop the life skills to become confident adults and parents.

But if we have any aspiration to be a compassionate society, we must make sure that those who can't – through disability or disadvantage – are supported to develop their full potential. Surely, this aspiration should drive the decisions made in parliament. But throughout my years researching and advocating for children – initially as an academic and later as the first Children's Commissioner for England – I have discovered the uncomfortable truth: it does not.

There are fantastic children all across the UK, many of whom are overcoming difficulties not of their making. Most are supported by loving families and motivated staff in children's services. For many, it is the best of times to be young in Britain. But for too many others, it is the worst of times: this nation has some of [the worst outcomes](#) in the developed world for children's health, [social care](#), education, youth justice and poverty.

The betrayal of childhood

In my new book, [The British Betrayal of Childhood](#), I set out to capture the reality of childhood in austerity-driven Britain today. The devastating impact on children's services is stark. The number of homeless children and those needing protection [is soaring](#). Many authorities are [failing to intervene](#) until complex cases reach crisis point; more than 47,000 children (that's 65% of all looked after children) are in the 63% of councils that regulator Ofsted has categorised as inadequate or requiring improvement.

The appalling [sexual exploitation of children](#) in Huddersfield and other cities points to a catastrophic failure of police and social services to respond to repeated cries for help. The tsunami of [emotional and mental ill health](#) is a national scandal, with one in three children suffering, while less than a quarter of them are able to access the services they need.

The "revolving door" of [youth re-offending](#) shows that programmes to reeducate and reintegrate young offenders back into society are failing. Meanwhile, the debacle of reform to social benefits through [Universal Credit](#) is throwing countless families into hopelessness and despair.

[Education inequality dominates](#): the majority of the nation's top jobs in law, politics, medicine, journalism and the military are held by people who were privately educated, despite the fact that just 7% of the population attend independent schools. And yet politicians cannot or will not explain why this happening in [one of the richest countries](#) in the developed world.

Yet my work reveals that there are clear reasons for all of this. For one thing, the indifference in public and political attitudes toward the importance of children in the UK stands in stark contrast to that I've seen in other countries including Holland, Canada and Finland, where children are at the heart of policy decisions, as well as being visible and welcome in society.



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Government policies are short term, inconsistent and untrustworthy – as exemplified by the Coalition and Conservative governments' dismantling of the world-admired [Every Child Matters](#) policy from the New Labour years.

What's more, there has been a failure of effective political advocacy by professionals, voluntary organisations, academics and politicians for the best interests of children. Meanwhile, bunkers and silos in and between organisations in the children's sectors prevent them from working together to set and achieve common goals.

To counteract this, I argue that the UK needs a long-term cross-political party, evidence-based and well-funded policy programme for children, based on clearly defined outcomes that work in their best interests. "It doesn't have to be like this" should be the mantra.

Building a village

In my view, children need nurture, and this should be everybody's business, as encapsulated in the proverb that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Parents are fundamentally important. But local communities are vital to manage risk and facilitate play and connection with nature alongside sport, music and the arts.

Faiths promote spirituality and purpose of life, while local politics provide resources for statutory children's services in health, education and social care, supported by the voluntary sector. Internationally, there

are tried and tested methods of building such "villages" for children, so that they can reach their full potential.

In Canada, for example, the [Human Early Learning Partnership model](#) offers national, regional and local governments a means of understanding local contexts by "mapping" children's lives using routine data about the population and its demography, spending on children's services, as well as clear descriptions of local services.

This enables authorities to develop a long-term strategy, while beginning with the end in mind – in other words, defining objectives and metrics which measure progress toward clear goals, which have been generated by listening to children, young people and families.

At the end of the day, it is local leadership that will drive progress. Remember [Thomas Coram](#), the 18th-century creator of the Foundling Hospital in London, who had courage in standing up for the children nobody else wanted to know about, compassion for the abandoned babies and relentless commitment over 17 and a half years to create his hospital, against formidable opposition from the society of the day.

It is time to now apply these attributes to improve the outcomes for our own children today. We cannot afford to continue failing so many. So let's have a genuine debate on what we are trying to achieve for our [children](#) and how we're going to get there.

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