

Paranoid Parenting by Frank Furedi (III)

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The code of mistrust

If family life is seen as essentially rotten to the core, which other institution could possibly be perceived as good? If parents, brothers and sisters cannot be entirely trusted, how can we have faith in the integrity of more distant acquaintances? This is the message conveyed on a daily basis through television and popular culture. Not a day goes by without another sordid tale of some professional abusing the trust that has been placed in him or her. The suspicion of abuse that hangs over the family has spread like a disease to infect other institutions from schools to Scout and Guide groups. Where once there would have been an assumption of goodwill, dangers are now seen to lurk.

An editorial in the British Journal of Sports Medicine claims that sport is 'the last refuge of child abuse'. 'I know it is going on from hundreds of interviews with athletes but it is difficult to get any statistical evidence', writes Celia Brackenridge. Many sporting bodies have issued guidelines about how to spot potential abusers working in their midst. In December 1998 the Amateur Swimming Association, in conjunction with the NSPCC, set up a helpline for children on the grounds that their sport might be targeted by paedophiles like the Olympic swimming coach jailed for child sex abuse. In 1999, the England and Wales Cricket Board issued child protection guidelines. At least one commentator blamed the collapse of English cricket on paedophiles who made parents reluctant to allow unsupervised children to play the game.

Predatory paedophiles have also become an issue with the St John Ambulance service, after three of its officers were jailed for the long-term abuse of cadets in 1998. The British Scout Association has been implicated in sex scandals. After a Coventry Scoutmaster was jailed for indecency offences against two boys and a Hampshire Scoutmaster was sentenced to six years for sexually abusing eight boys, the Association adopted a policy to 'safeguard the welfare of all members by protecting them from physical, sexual and emotional harm.

Even religious organizations have been implicated in this, climate of fear. In Australia, Roman Catholic bishops have sought to ban their priests from having any private contact with children. Guidelines drawn up with the approval of the Vatican mean that confessionals have to be fitted with glass viewing panels. Priests are also banned from seeing any child alone with the door closed. Closed doors and private interaction are no longer acceptable to a society fed on a constant diet of mistrust. It is as if by definition the closed door is an invitation to abuse.

Any one-to-one contact between adults and children has effectively been stigmatized. A guideline published by the Salvation Army advises its members to ensure that 'an adult is not left alone with a child or a young person where there is little or no opportunity for the activity to be observed by others'. It adds that this 'may mean groups working within the same large room or working in an adjoining room with the door left open'. Salvation Army members were far from happy with this rule since many of their activities involve musical practice. Since band members play different instruments at various levels of proficiency, a lot of the training took place one-to-one in separate rooms. Nevertheless, the

new order dictates that doors should be left open - and, presumably, ears closed.

A guideline issued by the British Home Office to voluntary organizations recommends that activities 'which involve a single child working with an adult' should 'take place in a room which can be observed easily by others in nearby areas, even if this is achieved simply by leaving doors open'. Scout Association guidelines warn scout leaders to avoid one-to-one situations and contact sports. Guidelines issued by the England and Wales Cricket Board tell coaches not to work with a child 'completely unobserved', and suggest that 'parents should take on the responsibility for their children in the changing rooms'.

The return of the medieval chaperone in Britain provides eloquent testimony to the regulation of adult contact with children. In one case a rector at a village church was forced to disband a choir because of new guidelines on child protection. Up to 20 child choristers met weekly for rehearsals and sang every Sunday at St Michael's Church in Northchapel, West Sussex. The Rev. Gerald Kirkham had to stop recruiting because, under the new code, at least two adult chaperones were needed at choir practice.

Mistrust of adults, especially of men, has had a destructive impact on working relations between adults and children. Many adults have become wary of volunteering for this sort of work. The British Scout Association faces a shortage of volunteer leaders. 'If a man says he wants to work with young boys, people jump to one conclusion', reported Jo Tupper, a spokeswoman for the Scout Association. A similar pattern is evident in primary education. Research carried out by Mary Thornton of Hertfordshire University suggests that men are turning away from primary school teaching because of fears that they will be labelled 'perverts'. Thornton claimed that men on teacher training programmes 'felt they had no idea how to deal with physical contact'. Some of the trainees asked, for example, whether they 'should cuddle a distressed child'. When physical contact with children comes with a health warning, teachers face a continual dilemma over how to handle routine issues in the classroom. In August 1998, the Local Government Association even went so far as to advise teachers not to put sun cream on pupils because it could lead to accusations of child abuse. Lord Puttnam, the inaugural chairman of the General Teaching Council has warned that when teachers are regarded as potential rapists and paedophiles their authority is seriously undermined.

In November 1999, it was reported that 'Teachers, fearful of accusations of any kind of inappropriate touching, are increasingly wary of direct contact with the children in their charge, even if tears are involved.' One school in Glasgow has responded to this 'affectionphobic culture' by introducing special massage classes for children. The idea is that pupils will stay fully clothed and standing upright while they take turns to massage each other's heads, backs and shoulders. While the teacher reads a story, they will also take turns to massage each other's forearms with plain, unscented oil.' A new ritual for an age that dreads physical contact between adult and child.

Fear of adults victimizing children is fuelled by a child protection industry obsessed with the issue of abuse. The NSPCC's Safe Open Spaces for Children, launched in August 1999, advised parents never to make their children 'kiss or hug an adult if they don't want to'. The justification for this proposal was that it would make children confident about refusing the advances of a stranger. From time immemorial, parents have pleaded with their children to kiss or hug grandmothers and aunts. The call to ban this innocent practice is symptomatic of the intense professional mistrust of adult behaviour towards children.

All this hysteria about physical contact actually does little to protect children. By casting the net so wide and expecting child abuse to be a normal occurrence, there is a danger of trivializing this dreadful deed. A climate of suspicion will not deter the child abuser, but it will undermine the confidence of all parents. And at the end of the day, confident parents are best placed to educate their children to deal with risks and danger.

The flight from children

From voluntary organizations to primary education, well-meaning adults are being put off from playing a valuable role in instructing and inspiring young children. At a conference organized by Playlink and Portsmouth City Council in November 1999, the delegates were enthusiastic professionals committed to improving children's lives through outdoor play. But several of the play workers felt that their role was diminished by bureaucratic rules designed to regulate their contact with children. One play worker complained that she often could not do 'what's right' by the children, because if she did not follow the rules it would threaten her career prospects.

Those who work with children are automatically undermined by new conventions that control their behaviour. If it is assumed that professional carers need to be told how to relate to the children in their charge, why should parents - or children - trust them? But it is not only professional carers or volunteers who are affected by this climate of paranoia. Suspicion towards them reflects and reinforces a more general distrust of adults. It is assumed that none of us can be expected to respect the line between childhood and adulthood: that we need to be told what almost all of us know by instinct - children are vulnerable creatures who need protection. This means comforting a distraught child with a cuddle just as much as it means not abusing those young people who have put their trust in you.

The negative image of adulthood enshrined in the new conventions has far-reaching implications. The healthy development of any community depends on the quality of the bond that links different generations. When those bonds are subjected to such intense suspicion, the ensuing confusion can threaten the very future of a community. After all, relations of warmth and affection are inherent in family relationships, and even in relations between children and other carers. If an adult touching a child comes to be regarded with anxiety, how can these relations be sustained?

Is it any surprise that many adults are literally scared of badly behaved children. Take the following scene on the lawn of one of Britain's leading universities. Over 200 law lecturers and students are waiting for an official photograph to be taken. A young girl cycles up to the group and plonks herself down in front of the group and refuses to move. She is asked politely to move, but still refuses to do so. Not a single adult in this large group dares to intervene, reprimand the young girl or physically move her on. Afterwards, the lecturers justify their paralysis on the grounds that they feared accusations of assault or abuse if they had attempted to move her out of the way. In this stand-off the young girl emerges as the winner. Twenty minutes later, bored with her easy victory over the disoriented adults, the girl leaves of her own accord.

It should really come as no surprise that some children have begun to play off this general distrust of adults to make life difficult for those they don't like. Most children are enterprising creatures, for whom adult insecurities provide an opportunity to exercise their power. Every year hundreds of teachers face false allegations of abuse. A teacher wept openly at the April 2000 conference of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers as he recounted his three months of agony after being falsely accused of punching a 12-year-old pupil. Other teachers recounted cases of false accusation and demanded that school staff should not be treated as guilty until proven innocent. It is tempting to blame malicious children for making life hell for some of their teachers. But it is not really their fault. They are merely manipulating a dirty-minded world created by obsessive adults.

The distrust of adult motives has encouraged a flight from children: a distancing between the generations. In some cases it has led to an avoidance of physical contact, in others the reluctance to take responsibility. The flight from children expresses adult confusions about how to relate to younger generations. Elderly people in particular are often unclear about what is expected of them in dealing with children. An 82-year-old man with numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren provides a classic illustration of this dilemma:

I was in a shop and this woman came in who the wife knew, with her little granddaughter. I was eating a sweet, and this little girl looked up at me, so I said, 'would you like a sweetie, duck?' She got all scared and jumped back. And I said, 'well that's the best thing you want to do. Never take a sweetie off nobody'. She done right, but it made me feel cheap, like. It made me feel awful really, to think I was offering a little girl a sweet. And I love kiddies. In the paper you hear there's horrible people about and it's awful, but it made me feel right cheap.

This octogenarian has internalized the new mood of suspicion towards adult motives. His mental retreat from following his well-meaning instincts towards the young girl is part of a general pattern. Sadly, this flight from children means that adult collaboration in raising the young rests on a fragile foundation. Parents of course cannot flee from their children. They are left to deal with the damage caused by the erosion of adult solidarity. They are truly on their own. The decline of adult solidarity means that parents must pay the cost for society's estrangement from its children.

Parents on their own

More than ever parents are on their own. According to Professor John Adams of University College, London, we live in an age of hypermobility, where the car has facilitated a new level of social dispersal. Adams believes that hypermobility has led to the increased anonymity of individual households, a decline of conviviality towards our neighbours, a less child-friendly environment and the emergence of parental anxieties towards children's outdoor safety. His concerns are echoed by numerous studies that confirm a palpable sense of social isolation. A survey published by the Royal Mail in 1999 revealed that people now live further away from relatives - though the majority still live within an hour's journey. A quarter of respondents aged under 35 rarely or never spoke to their neighbours. Nearly a third of these respondents said that they would only offer to help neighbours if it was absolutely necessary, and did not want to know them any better. This indifference towards the fate of neighbours underlines the absence of communal affinity. We often live in neighbourhoods without neighbours. The absence of an obvious network of support has important implications for the way that adults negotiate the task of child-rearing.

The theme of social isolation is a familiar one to most parents. Mothers and fathers complain about an uneasy sense that they are 'on their own'. Many mothers, especially those who work, are preoccupied with what could go wrong with their childcare arrangements. When there are no relatives near, and you are not on first-name terms with your neighbours, who is to pick up your child when your meeting runs late? Who can stay home and nurse a child off school for two weeks with chickenpox? The absence of an obvious back-up, the tenuous quality of friendship networks and the difficulty of gaining access to quality childcare all helps to create the feeling that life is one long struggle, increasing tensions within the household.

The fragmentation of family relations and the diminished sense of community have inevitably helped to make parents feel insecure. Not knowing where to turn in case of trouble can produce an intense sense of vulnerability - especially among lone parents who feel that they are literally on their own. The isolation of parents is not simply physical. The erosion of adult solidarity transforms parenting into an intensely lonely affair. A climate of suspicion serves to distance mothers and fathers from the world of adults. In turn, this predicament invites parents to be anxious and over-react - not just to the danger they see posed by strangers, but to every problem to do with their youngsters' development. As we shall see, paranoid parenting now embraces almost every aspect of child-rearing.