

Dangers' testing parents' skills

Children in England are growing up in a "terrifying" world of pressures and dangers, says a parenting expert.

The need for good parenting advice, with the decline of the extended family, has never been greater, says Mary Crowley of Parenting UK.

Her organisation is in a consortium, with King's College London and the Family and Parenting Institute, that will train parenting advisers.

It has won a £30m National Academy for Parenting Practitioners contract.

Announcing the three-year contract, Children's Minister Beverley Hughes said: "The role a parent plays is integral to a child's development and their future life chances, which is why we want to help parents get it right.

"This academy will be an international and national hub for the exchange of ideas and shows learning, providing the very latest research and training in supporting parents."

The chief executive of the Family and Parenting Institute, Mary MacLeod, said that since the charity's launch in 1999, parents had been telling it they wanted tailored advice based on evidence and research when they faced challenges in raising their children.

'Shock'

Parenting UK's chief executive Ms Crowley said support for parents had been increasing but in a fragmented fashion.

The Department for Education and Skills had commissioned a review of research which had found that parents' influence on the outcome of their child's schooling was greater even than the influence of the school.

"That was a shock to them, I think."

So the official approach now was "every parent matters", echoing the "every child matters" remit to England's schools.

"Nobody sets out to be a bad parent," she said.

"But it's quite hard to get real advice. You get advice about what sort of buggy to buy."

Ms Crowley said she herself had decided to take a parenting course some years ago for work reasons and it had proved enormously useful.

"My reaction was, I wish somebody had told me all this before I had my four children."

But the role had become more difficult.

Violence

Part of the problem was undoubtedly the decline of the extended family.

New parents were not familiar with young children: the Royal College of Midwives had pointed out that typically these days the first baby anyone holds is their own.

Ms Crowley added: "But also the world is a different one to the one we grew up in.

"I really worry about the violence and the dangers out there and how street-wise our children have to be - and are, by and large, but it's terrifying."

Children also exposed to relentless pressures to buy things.

"The younger ones, the first thing they do when they go into a room is to turn on the TV."

Lack of men

She expected the academy's courses to appeal to a range of people such as early years and youth justice workers, social workers and educational psychologists.

But also "all those beavering away in village halls" providing courses for parents or one-to-one help and support.



Parents' influence is crucial in children's attainment, research

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It was good that fathers were much more "hands on" nowadays - prepared to "read the manual" and get on with it in raising their children, she said.

But this was not reflected in applications to be parenting practitioners.

"We are overrun by women," Ms Crowley said. "We want more men. Half the world's parents are men."