

When 'support' means 'intervention'

by Jan Fortune-Wood

Home education is essentially family-based education and, in the current political climate, this can subject us to an extraordinary level of distrust. The political impetus to interfere with family life, ostensibly for the good of all children, probably owes more to a corporate agenda for control than it does to real issues of child welfare.

Globalised, corporate culture demands, above all, that governments preside over biddable populations of consumers and what better way to achieve this than to 'school' people from birth in the need to be identified, monitored, and tracked?

European law and the Human Rights Act which derives from the European Convention on Human Rights ostensibly guarantee the rights of parents to educate children in accordance with their own philosophy as well as to enjoy the right to a private family life. Despite this home based education is illegal in countries such as Holland, Germany and Cyprus and a recent judgment against a family in Germany has raised serious questions about any such rights.

Interestingly, remarks in this case about home-education being 'undemocratic' strongly hint that home educators are seen as challenging the monoculture in which everyone receives the same dumbed down education to ensure that everyone becomes equally compliant.

There is a huge pressure towards 'integration' and everyone being the 'same' that is being cloaked by the word 'democratic'. We saw this in France with the ban of wearing any religious apparel in school (largely aimed at Muslims) and we've just had our own absurd display from Jack Straw demanding that Muslims remove religious head-wear when talking to him in surgeries. The sub-text behind all of these moves is that society must be homogenised and home educators, like religious or ethnic minorities to some extent, threaten the picture of an assimilated and acquiescent monoculture.

Children are at the heart of the battle to establish this monoculture. Those who grow up with identity cards, databases, lack of privacy and the notion that everything done by government is for their own good are least likely to rock the boat. Sadly, this means that even where laws are most liberal there is a growing push for more and more intervention into family life and a growing body of experience amongst home educators of authorities overstepping their legal powers.

The current political climate is one in which the family is hailed as the building block of civil society, and yet is also distrusted. The insidious picture being placed in people's minds is that the family is a place of danger for children and young people and the corollary is that safety can only be achieved when children are to some degree in the care of the state.

With the advent of the 'Every Child Matters' policy it has become routine to think that the state is the best defence against parents, perhaps even the best parent per se, despite history teaching us that the state makes a negligent and abusive parent in case after case. In the recent DfES consultation about guidelines to Local Education Authorities on home education we witnessed many LEAs pleading for the right to go beyond what the law allows, particularly demanding access to homes and children.

Similarly requests for help from home educators show an increase in heavy handed tactics used by LEAs in their dealings with families. There is even a growing tendency amongst some LEAs to refer to home educated children who they do not have files on as 'missing' from education and

there have been cases in some authorities of families who refuse home visits being routinely referred to Social Services, thus putting them in danger of being subjected to a humiliating and sometimes traumatising process of examination to determine whether their children are 'at risk' simply by virtue of being home educated.

The truth is that all the intervention in the world is not going to save every last child, but it could destroy many in the attempt. Recent incidents in the UK, in which children have been harmed by those who should have been caring for them, have brought a wave of moral panic that has been echoed in the States with media calls demanding rigorous checks on home educators.

It sounds so reasonable; all that is asked is that families with nothing to hide should allow the authorities into their homes and adhere to more regulations in the name of saving those children who are at risk. It sounds reasonable, but it is not. It is intrusive, educationally destructive and a violation of the human rights we still have remaining. Moreover it would not achieve the stated aim of ending child abuse (though it may go some way to achieving the un-stated and more cynical aim of quashing individual and idiosyncratic family divergences in educational philosophy).

The pursuit of home based education in and of itself is not a *prima facie* signal of possible abuse. For families where autonomy is a key to their educational philosophy, building a private environment in which children can pursue their intrinsic motivations away from mainstream preoccupations with standardised educational outcomes is crucial. Far from being a signal that a family has 'something to hide' there can be a range of valid educational and philosophical reasons for not wanting to expose our homes and children to the mainstream prejudices and stereotypes of educational officialdom.

It is of the essence of a tolerant liberal democracy that we respect people's freedom to present evidence, including evidence that they are home educating, in any reasonable form; not welcoming routine government intrusion should not lead to the unsubstantiated view that the family is suspect or even dangerous.

Some professionals clearly feel uneasy with this stance, but the fact remains that even if they had the legal power to enter every home and interview and test every child, such visits would still fail to consistently or even regularly 'save' abused children. After all many school going children are suffering abuse that goes undetected despite years of exposure to caring professionals. Moreover, it is quite possible that visits conducted with welfare rather than education in mind would only result in an increase in trauma and wrongful suspicion. Amongst the home educating community there already exists a vast catalogue of stories of patent injustice from families who have magnanimously opened up their homes to educational professionals as a way of supplying evidence of their educational provision, only to become prey to an array of bogus 'big brother' attitudes or ignorance about the diverse forms of education that home educators pursue.

We all know that abuse can take place in households that are spotlessly clean or where parents can pleasantly charm any stranger, including experienced professionals. We also know that children virtually never disclose abuse to strangers (unless there is some anonymity as with phone lines), so even if an abused child had ten minutes alone with a friendly official he would be unlikely to give anything away. What is more likely is that officials, perhaps feeling pressurized to meet targets for discovering a certain number of abuse cases per annum, would put 2 + 2 together to make 100.

Are homes where children wear pyjamas at 10.30 in the morning or where no one remembers to open the curtains some days 'suspicious'? The variety of home educating lifestyles is enormous, to some they may even seem strange, but that does not amount to abuse (unless we have already

reached the sad stage where any hint of non-conformity is re-defined as abuse). Why shouldn't the spectrum of lifestyles be as varied and creative as the families living them?

Even if some home environments do appear 'strange' we need to bear in mind that some of the alternatives offered by the state are much worse than 'strange' – institutional care, for example, has its own appalling statistics of abuse and very high rates of tragic outcomes (including prostitution, substance abuse, and criminality).

Of course many professionals really do care about children. I have met many genuinely well motivated officials who fear that if children fall outside their institutional framework then anything could be happening to them. At a national or supra-national level welfare policy may be motivated by an impulse to control populations, but at a delivery level it is usually implemented by people who do want the best for all children.

However, it's still worth noting that in liberal democracies we have not reached any consensus that children need to be in some sort of institutional catch all in order to be safe; pre-school children, for example, are not assumed to be in potential danger simply by virtue of being in their families full time. Additionally, how many children go through the whole of their school life with abuse undetected or grow up in government funded care homes with abuse undetected? Worst still, how many children suffer abuse precisely because they *are* within some institutional setting?

Having an institution with an overview of the child is absolutely no guarantee of safety. Things go wrong wherever human beings are together and scape-goating home educating families is not going to change that.

Most importantly, what kind of welfare checks would actually be needed to pick up **real** abuse in home educating households? Relying on rapidly formed impressions is simply not good enough. Picking up on peripheral issues (such as hazards on the stairs, smoke in the air, a dirty toilet) is clearly discriminatory because these checks are not made on non-home educating homes.

The crux of this is that if we were to concede the validity of welfare checks on home educators then we would have to allow welfare checks of sufficient scope to really catch the serious cases! What would that mean? Perhaps routine interviews with psychologists or full body examinations? Would any of this be consistent with the tolerant liberal democracies in which we live? Could such an abuse of civil liberties ever be out-balanced by the outside possibility of rarely revealing a real case of abuse? Furthermore, what would be the equally, if not more abusive consequences to the home educated children enduring the immense trauma of such routine invasion?

This leaves the uncomfortable possibility that a very few home educated children will be abused and that this will go undetected. Sad though it is to admit that we cannot save all of the children all of the time, the consequences to civil liberties of trying to do so are too appalling to contemplate. The consequences for autonomous styles of home education or for any home educators who put a high value on privacy would be devastating.

This is not an acceptable price to pay for the minimal extra detection that might not even arise and neither is it acceptable to expect home educators to submit to lesser, discriminatory checks that will actually have little or no effect or even produce false accusations.

When we look at the facts we have to admit that child welfare does not justify compulsory intervention into private family life; access to homes and children can be disastrous to some philosophies of education as well as a traumatic experience for some families (especially those who have had previous bad experiences with schools or other officials) and yet the DfES is apparently currently planning a review to implement what one official euphemously calls 'light touch

monitoring'. This review seems to coincide with research commissioned by the DfES into what support needs home educators have. In true Orwellian style, for 'support' read 'monitoring' and 'intrusion'.

An American President once said that the nine most frightening words in the English language are, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." They are words that home educators don't need to hear; not because of what they might be hiding, but simply because family life and alternative education demands privacy, liberty and even risk if it is to flourish. However lofty the motive, intrusion is not for our own good and, in this case I don't believe that the ultimate motivation is lofty at all.

LEA officers may be and often are people who care about children, but the corporations pushing for databases and identity cards and fuelling a culture of panic do not care; they are simply manipulating fear in order to implement control.

There are some terrible families to grow up in and no doubt there are some terrible families amongst home-educators as there are amongst any minority, but routinely seeing home educating families as dangerous and suspect will not bring an improvement in child welfare. The family, in all its varied and creative forms, is the building block not only of liberal democracy, but of learning. Home educators currently offer society a facet of diversity, flexibility and an alternative perspective from which to critique the mainstream. A society concerned to lessen such diversity is on the way to being very unhealthy. Increased monitoring will not be for our children's own good and nor will it be for society's own good.