



# Children first

Linda Baston-Pitt urges readers to support the new campaign, led by Children First, for a Secretary of State for Children

*'What sort of society are we becoming when four and five year olds are starting school unable to utter more than a few words, understand basic instructions or even use the toilet?'*

*The Daily Mail, 1 June, 2018*

**O**ftsted head, Amanda Spielman, categorises children as either born 'lucky' or facing 'disadvantage right from the start ... unable to follow what's going on. Unable to keep up with their classmates. Unable to reach their potential.'

Essentially, we are menaced by five 21st century evils:

- obesity and physical inactivity
- adverse childhood experiences
- rising mental health issues
- the dominance of social media and screen-time influence
- socio-economic disadvantage and a cultural / ethnic divide.

Our children may become the least healthy adult population in living memory. If there was ever a time for policymakers to put children first, based on some of the alarming statistics that are emerging, it has to be now:

- one third of our children are overweight / obese. (Department of Health ISCIC, Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet)

- in 2016-17, hospital operations to remove children's teeth increased to nearly 43,000 – up from 36,833 in 2012-13 (The British Dental Association, January 2018)
- a 2016 report from Public Health England estimated that 695,000 children in England aged 5-16 years (10 per cent of all children in England) had a clinically-significant mental health illness
- benefit cuts, freezes and the two-child limit for child benefit will see child poverty hit a record 37 per cent by 2022, thereby reversing all the gains made in the last 20 years (Institute of Fiscal Studies, March 2018).

## New campaign

I passionately believe that wellbeing is everybody's responsibility and if we are to influence change and make a difference, we need to connect across all sectors constructively together. It was the major reason I became an active member of The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on a Fit and Healthy Childhood with a key purpose to inform policy decisions and public debate relating to early childhood.

On a positive note, it's wonderful to be able to share the news of the launch of a new campaign which my APPG colleagues and I

wholeheartedly endorse: Children First – politics in the best interests of the child, led by Children First's campaign manager Phil Royal at phil@royalpa.co.uk. Its aim is to encourage policymakers to put children at the heart of decision-making. The campaign is still in its infancy but we are sure it will prove to be an additional, important voice advocating sensible pro-child policy-making.

This initiative is intended to promote energetically the changes in policy that will be essential to the effective delivery of a world-leading framework for childhood health and wellbeing.

## New Secretary of State

The politicians who prioritise child issues work tirelessly to effect change but are in a minority. Children need political champions from all walks of life and circumstance. The challenge is great and there is no magic wand or catch-all single bullet. The work needed will require determination, careful judgement and a long-term focus.

In order to achieve this, the importance of improving the childhood experience needs to be recognised within Government by the appointment of a Secretary of State for Children with power of audit over other departments. A properly integrated approach looking at the whole child is the only long-term guarantee of success, but there are many single steps that can be taken in the short term.

Please support us now. A full supporting document is available from phil@royalpa.co.uk ■

- Linda is co-founder of The Cambridge Childhood Partnership (W: panco.org.uk) and CEO of PurpleBee Learning Ltd  
E: linda@purplebeelarning.com W: purplebeelarning.com Twitter @LindaEarlyYears



  
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