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## **NCT Policy briefing: Parents' need to access an adequate income while also being active parents to their young children**

This briefing sets out the NCT policy on the need for parents to be able to access an adequate income while also being active parents to their young children. It covers legislation around parental leave, the need for services that recognise financial difficulties for parents and the potential effect on children brought up in poverty.

### **NCT Policy**

- 1. All services for pregnant women and new parents must support the need of parents to balance their home and work life**
- 2. Appropriate legislation should protect the employment rights of pregnant women and those returning after parental leave.**
- 3. Legislation should also provide for extended paid leave and childcare support for all mothers and fathers**
- 4. Support should be given to voluntary organisations and opportunities for parents to access goods and services at a low cost.**
- 5. NCT supports the promise made by the present government to end child poverty by 2020 and calls on future governments to honour the pledge.**

### **Policy background**

For both mothers and fathers, there are likely to be difficult decisions to be made about supporting a family with a new baby physically, emotionally and economically. Financial pressures can create more stress on parents at a vulnerable time. Government policy, and statutory and voluntary services must acknowledge these pressures and work to minimise the effect on the family.

- 1. All services for pregnant women and new parents must support the need of parents to balance their home and work life**

The NCT wants both mothers and fathers to be able to provide the caring and emotional support their children need and to have the time to sustain and maintain their relationship and generate the income they need to provide for their family. Poverty, broken relationships and lack of warm attention from a consistent carer have a negative effect on outcomes for children.

Postnatal care should be woman-focused and family-friendly, aiming to meet parents' needs for emotional and practical support as well as physical care. Money problems can cause friction between parents, and the symptoms of a struggling relationship can have an extreme effect on the children. Children who are exposed to severe discord may develop a range of emotional and behavioural problems.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Appropriate legislation should protect the employment rights of pregnant women and those returning after parental leave.**

With the economic downturn there has been a rise in the number of cases of women facing maternity or pregnancy discrimination. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) estimates that 30,000 women lose their jobs each year as a result of being pregnant. Maternity and paternity leave payments currently lag behind minimum wage and create a situation whereby time off to care for young children is not available to those with few other resources to rely on. This results in many mothers in low paid jobs returning to work earlier than they might wish, in order to maintain or increase the family's income.

Agencies involved in the Alliance Against Pregnancy Discrimination reported increased requests for advice during 2009 from women who believe they have been treated unfairly at work because of pregnancy or new motherhood.<sup>2</sup> Common issues are unfair selection for redundancy and forced changes to working hours and conditions.

There is evidence indicating that negative attitudes towards pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace remain widespread. In a Government Equality Office survey, 24% of men and 17% of women agreed that it made sense for women on maternity leave to be made redundant first, while 37% of men and 20% of women agreed that it made sense for people working part time to be made redundant first.<sup>3</sup>

## **3. Legislation should also provide for extended paid leave and childcare support for all mothers and fathers**

Families need the opportunity to decide on how to provide and share care for their children and how to take part in paid work. Flexible working practices are helpful in enabling parents to choose what works for them. While there have been improvements in provisions for mothers, leave and paid leave especially for fathers still lags behind. Maternity and paternity payments currently fall below the minimum wage and NCT is calling for these to be increased so that parents from all walks of life feel able to take their full leave entitlement should they wish to do so. Maximum flexibility around the opportunity to take parental leave is important, as families make arrangements in many different ways, and parents may for example benefit from both having some time off work together with their baby later than the immediate postnatal period.

Families' childcare decisions are shown to be related to the families' socio-economic circumstances, maternal attitudes and beliefs about childrearing and the

risks and costs of employment. Only more affluent families are able to afford a delayed return to work beyond the period covered by Statutory Maternity Pay.<sup>4</sup>

The recently announced 'Additional Paternity Leave' is a useful step away from a leave and pay system based on old-fashioned gender stereotypes. Both mothers and fathers are responsible for parenting and it is important that both can share the role of primary carer in the early years.<sup>5</sup>

Help with costs of childcare has been made available by government in a number of ways, including the provision, under certain circumstances, of tax-exempt childcare vouchers.<sup>6</sup> However, it is important that such benefits are widely available and do not widen the gap between better-off and lower-income families.

#### **4. Support should be given to voluntary organisations and opportunities for parents to access goods and services at a low cost.**

Many voluntary organisations have a purpose to offer support and services to new parents. NCT's network of local branches exists to reach and support all parents and parents-to-be during a time of change in their lives. This network is made possible by volunteers, who organise a wide range of social activities and events to enable local parents to meet other parents and access valuable support.

The NCT offers a range of support services for parents, including antenatal education, breastfeeding counselling, and courses for new parents to help them adjust in their new role as parents. There is a charge for antenatal and postnatal courses, but discounted rates are offered to parents on low income. The charity also runs the Pregnancy and Birth Line and the Breastfeeding Line to support parents, publishes a free *Bumps & Babies* magazine for expectant parents, and provides a quantity of evidence-based information via the website.

NCT branches frequently run 'Nearly new' sales which are excellent opportunities for local parents to buy low-cost second-hand goods and equipment, and at the same time meet others in the neighbourhood.

#### **5. NCT supports the promise made by the present government to end child poverty by 2020 and calls on future governments to honour the pledge.**

The UK has one of the worst rates of child poverty in the industrialised world. Ending child poverty would improve the life chances of millions of children and their families as well as representing a saving of an estimated £25 billion a year to Government.

Poverty shortens lives: children from disadvantaged areas have a life expectancy six to seven years shorter than those from affluent boroughs in London. Poor children are born too small; birth weight is on average 130 grams lower in children from social classes IV and V. Low birth weight is closely associated with infant death and chronic diseases in later life. Before reaching the age of two, a child from

a poorer family is already more likely to show a lower level of attainment than a child from a better-off family.<sup>7,8</sup>

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The NCT wants all parents to have an experience of pregnancy, birth and early parenthood that enriches their lives and gives them confidence in being a parent.

Donations to support our work are welcome.

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