

## Youth, parenting and public policy

Policy initiatives affecting young people and their families are proliferating. A comprehensive review of legislation in the UK, by Gill Jones and Robert Bell, examined the implications of policy for economic and social dependence in youth, and then looked for equivalent legal provisions defining parental responsibility. The research found:

- f** Particularly over the last two decades, a range of policies affecting different areas of young people's lives has effectively extended the period during which they are economically dependent on their parents or carers.
- f** Different policies define youth in different ways.
- f** Social security policies use age as the main indicator of vulnerability and dependence. In practice, however, the transitions young people make to adulthood are not wholly based on age. Some other policy areas, such as health, use other measures based on notions of maturity and competence.
- f** The current policy emphasis on social citizenship, empowerment, participation and consumer rights is not matched by policies that allow young people full economic independence.
- f** Responsibility for young people has shifted from the State to the family, as State support has been eroded. Parents or carers are now expected to exercise some parental responsibility for the first twenty-five years of their children's lives and to provide economic support where necessary.
- f** Policies in one area of legislation sometimes conflict with those in another, so that young people and their parents can receive confused messages about what is expected of them. Even within policy areas, young people can be treated as dependent children and independent adults at the same time.
- f** Policies that imply young people are dependent in some way are not balanced by policies that define the parental responsibility for that dependency. This puts many young people at risk.

## Issues for policy

This review of policy legislation over the last 50 years focused first on how policies have constructed particular patterns of dependence and independence in youth, and secondly on how they have defined parental responsibility. It shows considerable inconsistencies between and within policy areas as to whether young people are treated as independent adults or dependent on their parents or carers (see Table 1). Youth policies contain many implications for family life and parental responsibility, but these are not explicitly stated. Even within family law, there is no clear statement of the responsibilities of parents or carers for young people making the transition to adult life.

Policies construct 'youth' as a period of economic semi-independence during which young people gradually become independent. But it is difficult to design policy and legislation which is responsive to this transition. For example, should provisions be directed at young people or at their parents on their behalf? This has always been an issue for social security benefits and is currently a concern for those developing Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) for 16- to 18-year-olds remaining in education. Should EMAs replace Child Benefit (and be paid to the mother) or supplement it (and be paid to the young person)? Do parents actually support their children by passing on benefits such as accommodation, or do young people pay for their accommodation in the form of board money, when they can?

The fundamental problem for youth policy is that transitions to adulthood are highly complex. There is wide variation in both the age at which key transitions are made, and in their ordering. Individuals can become 'adult' in one area of their lives while remaining dependent in another. Vulnerability and need are not wholly associated with age. Policy attempts to reduce complexity in regulation and provision are therefore at odds with the real complexity in young people's lives.

An important issue for policy-makers is how to ensure that young people can obtain support from their parents or carers where policies have reduced the role of the State. The assumption that parents or carers will always support young people by providing a home and financial help is not backed by research evidence. There are many cases of hardship where parental support is not present. One of the problems with the policy of targeting vulnerable groups for support is that many young people not so defined might be equally at risk.

## Becoming an adult

Education and employment policies over decades have continually extended the period of youth. As a result of recent changes, policy-makers now expect all young people under 18 to be wholly dependent on their parents, while the age of full economic independence has been raised to the mid-20s. For example, minimum wage legislation arranges for a 'transitional' wage to be paid to under-22s, while adult levels of housing benefit or social security benefits become payable at 25 years.

The policy assumption that under-18s are dependent is based on an expectation that they will be in education or training, rather than in employment and able to earn an independent wage. This leads to a further (frequently expressed) assumption that they can turn to their parents for help with housing and economic support.

Changes in legislation have brought traditional criteria of success, such as getting a job on leaving school, into question. The school-leaving age has effectively been raised to 18 years. New opportunities in education and training are replacing opportunities in paid work. This trend presents a challenge to the traditional working-class model of transition to adulthood. If new models of transition to adulthood envisaged by policy-makers are to be accepted, it is therefore not only young people, but also their parents, who will need to be 'won over'.

More and more benefits are subject to contracts between young people and the service providers. Young people are increasingly expected to understand what is required of them, since opportunities under the New Deal, or for housing, will depend on their agreeing to abide by conditions set by policy-makers.

The current policy emphasis on social citizenship, empowerment, participation and consumer rights is not matched by policies which allow young people economic power (Table 1). For example, higher education students are treated as independent, responsible consumers and expected to take out and manage student loans, but are still dependent on their parents paying tuition fees. Benefits paid direct to young people are still frequently means-tested on their parents' incomes. Thus Education Maintenance Allowances are likely to be means-tested on the basis of parents' income, in contrast to Training Allowances which are not. Both, however, assume that young people can live in the parental home for free.

Some attempts to incorporate into policy sensitivity to the changing needs of young people as they become adult have been abandoned. For example, the distinction between householders (who have housing costs) and non-householders (who do

Table 1: Status ambiguities

<i>Dependence</i>	<i>Independence</i>
<p><b>POST-16 EDUCATION AND TRAINING</b> The means testing of <b>Education Maintenance Allowances</b> assumes dependence on parents.</p> <p>Levels of <b>training allowance and EMA</b> exclude housing costs and assume dependence on parents.</p>	<p>EMAs will be paid direct to young people.</p> <p><b>Training allowances</b> are not means-tested.</p> <p><b>Training Credits</b> treat 16- to 19-year-olds as responsible consumers able to select the most appropriate training package for their own needs.</p>
<p><b>WORKERS</b> <b>Minimum Wage Legislation</b> treats young people (under 22) as dependent or semi-dependent on their parents.</p>	<p><b>Employment protection</b> has been removed from young people, treating them as adults rather than children (i.e. not vulnerable).</p>
<p><b>WELFARE</b> <b>16/17-year-olds</b> are excluded from benefit on the basis that they are dependent on their parents, some of whom may receive benefit for them.</p> <p><b>18- to 24-year-olds</b> are on lower rates than adults on the basis that they can be <b>semi-dependent</b> on their parents, who receive no benefit for them.</p>	<p><b>16/17-year-olds</b> can pay into the NI system, but cannot benefit from it until 18 years of age.</p> <p><b>18- to 24-year-olds</b> contract, as <b>adults</b>, to seek work under the Jobseeker's Allowance, New Deal, etc.</p>
<p><b>HIGHER EDUCATION</b> In assessing the amount of <b>tuition fee</b> payable, the government treats students as dependants (means-testing their parents or spouse). The student is required to depend on his/her parents or spouse to pay tuition fees.</p>	<p><b>Student loans.</b> The student is personally liable for repayment, which is based on his/her income only. The student both enters a contract with a lender and begins repayments as an independent adult.</p>
<p><b>HOUSING AND TRANSPORT</b> Subsidised transport treats those in education as <b>dependent</b>.</p> <p>If they were living with their parents, the family could be housed because it contains <b>dependent</b> children.</p> <p>Young people are deemed in social security terms able to live with their parents.</p>	<p>Subsidised transport treats those in training or low-paid work as <b>adults</b>.</p> <p>Young people are only entitled to local authority housing if they are perceived as vulnerable and in most cases age is not a criterion of vulnerability - i.e. they are treated as <b>adults</b>.</p> <p>Young people do not have a legal right to live in the parental home but can only live there as licensees of their parents.</p> <p>Foyers, in requiring a contract to be signed by residents to confirm that they will seek employment, treat young people as <b>adults</b>.</p>

not) was abolished in the 1980s, on the basis of an assumption of dependence among all young people living in the parental home. Policy-makers have reverted to age criteria for determining benefit needs. In other policy areas, criteria such as competence (as in determining young people's rights to request or refuse health care), or capacity (as in determining the right to enter a legal contract) are increasingly brought into play when needed to stress the welfare principle over straight age criteria.

### Parental responsibility

Policy legislation has implicitly shifted responsibility for support from the state onto the family, but does not spell out either what parental support should look like or who should undertake it. It seems unlikely that modern parents realise that they are implicitly (as a result of youth policies) expected to be able to have responsibility for their children for the first 25 years of their lives, and to stand by to provide economic support where necessary. The emphasis of family law,

and of 'parent education' has tended to be on the parenting of younger children.

There is virtually no legislation defining the responsibilities of parents or other carers towards young people, who therefore have little basis in law to claim a right to help. Policy-makers and legislators have withdrawn state benefits from 16- to 18-year-olds but, in failing to spell out parental responsibility for this group, have made them particularly vulnerable. While parental responsibility extends until the child reaches the age of 18 in England and Wales, parents are not required to care for a child over the age of 16 years. Beyond the age of 16 in Scotland (18 in England and Wales), young people have no right to live in the parental home. There is no legislation suggesting that parents should be responsible for supplementing the 'transitional' National Minimum Wage, or youth levels of welfare benefit, or for providing a home, or, more broadly, to fill the social protection gap left by a withdrawing welfare state.

Legislation in this area of family law would be technically difficult, as the Law Commissioners have found. How can definitions of parental responsibility be responsive to the changing needs of young people as they become more independent or to the variation in family practices? It would also be politically difficult, as family life tends to be seen as private and immune from state intervention except in extreme cases.

## Conclusion

Youth can be a complex and difficult period for both young people and their families. It also creates particular problems for those designing policies.

The researchers conclude that the disparate range of policies affecting young people and their parents may compound existing uncertainties and anxieties about what is expected of each. They therefore highlight the need for consistency between policy areas. In particular, they question whether the current emphasis on 'active citizenship' is compatible with the withdrawal of economic independence in youth.

Secondly, the research highlights the need for policy-makers to consider the impact of youth policies on family life. Young people are likely to need to depend on their parents for economic support and, perhaps, a home for longer. Policy-makers need to consider the impact of extended parental responsibility on family cohesion and family poverty, as well as to consider how to explain to parents what

their newly extended responsibilities are. Whether this should involve legal provision or parental guidance and education is a matter for debate.

## About the study

The research was undertaken by Gill Jones (now at Keele University) and Robert Bell (now at South Bank University), and was based at the Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge. The study was based on a review of legislative provisions and policy statements covering the UK, or separately covering England and Wales, and Scotland.

## How to get further information

The full report, **Balancing acts: Youth, parenting and public policy**, by Gill Jones and Robert Bell, is published for the Foundation by YPS (price £13.95, ISBN 1 902633 48 2).

A chronology of the legislative provisions affecting young people is available separately on the web. It covers most of the main provisions over the last 50 years (<http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/so/research/youthchron.htm>).