

Your family, your choice

April 2010



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Families are where most of us find the love and support for happy lives. Families matter a great deal to us all as individuals – at every stage in our lives – as well as to our society. Much of who we are and what we become begins at home. It's from our parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, partners and children that we learn our values and find out about the world.

Looking after your family is the most important job in the world and that's why we've always tried to support families and the choices they make. Tough financial times are putting extra pressures on families. Coping with everything that needs to be done - looking after a home, caring for children and sometimes for elderly or disabled relatives too - is an even bigger daily challenge as a result. We recognise these pressures often fall hardest on women in families, especially if they are working full or part-time.

We think it's important to listen to all families, giving them the flexibility to draw on financial support and services such as childcare in the ways that suit them best. We won't judge families: families come in different shapes and sizes

and we don't think it's fair to favour one way of family life and penalise another. And we believe in universal public services on which all families can rely; we reject the Tory approach of cutting children's services, Child Trust Funds and Tax Credits for middle class families.

In the weeks ahead, you'll be making a big decision about the kind of future you want for your family and for Britain. There is a stark choice ahead – a choice between creating a future that is fair for all, or a change that puts the economic recovery at risk, threatens public services, and makes life tougher for families. We're fighting for a fair future for all.

Our record of supporting families



Helping families with childcare

Being able to rely on good childcare means parents with young children can go out to work if they want or need to, knowing their children are being well cared for and learning as they play. Labour has transformed support for families with children under five by investing over £25 billion in early years and childcare services.

We have created over 3,500 Surestart children's centres from scratch – one for every community – to provide childcare, parenting advice, healthcare and help in getting back to work for parents. More than 2.8 million families are reached by the centres already; as they develop we expect them to be at the heart of local life.

Our extra investment has allowed us to double the number of registered childcare places since 1997. These are now in lots of different settings, such as nursery classes in schools, with childminders and in local playgroups, as well as in children's centres - giving parents choice.

Every three and four year old can have at least 12.5 hours of free nursery education if their parents want it, and we'll extend this to 15 hours from this September.

We've raised the quality of childcare and early education by investing in training and higher qualifications for staff, and by bringing in a play-based framework for learning, development and care, covering all providers who look after children from birth to age five.

Helping with family finances

We want more families to be able to take advantage of good, local childcare and that means making it affordable. So we've made sure that working parents on low incomes can get the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit to pay for childcare. This is helping 470,000 families receive up to 80 per cent of their childcare costs through tax credits.

In April 2009 we supported families on low incomes through a £50 increase in the child element of the Child Tax Credit. Some 5.7 million families receive tax credits, benefiting over ten million children, and all families with children get Child Benefit, which we increased to £20 a week in April 2009. From 2012, we will bring in a Toddler Tax Credit of £4 a week for families with children aged one and two years old.

We have changed the law so that part-time workers – many of them women caring for children or elderly or disabled relatives – have legal rights to equality in pay and pension entitlements.

We have increased the National Minimum Wage so that it will be £5.93 per hour in October this year – a 22 per cent real terms increase since 1999 to help low paid workers.

Young people staying on at school or college now get Education Maintenance Allowances worth up to £30 a week. And we have introduced the world's first savings policy for young people - the Child Trust Fund - which has given five million children a 'nest egg' for the future.

Helping balancing work with family time

Labour has transformed family friendly rights at work. We have more than doubled statutory maternity pay and maternity allowance - from 18 weeks to 39 weeks. Maternity leave has also been extended, so mothers can now choose to take a year's leave away from work around the birth of their child.

We have helped many more mothers to take advantage of statutory maternity pay and maternity allowance by reducing the time you have to be in a job before you are entitled to them: from two years when we came into government, to six months now.

We have introduced ten paid 'Keep in Touch' days for mothers on maternity leave, making it easier to return to work.

We brought in statutory paternity leave and pay for the first time. Fathers are now entitled to two weeks of statutory paid paternity leave and 90 per cent of fathers now take time off work at the birth of their child.

We changed the law to allow parents of all children under 16 (or disabled children under the age of 18) the right to request flexible working to help them balance work and home. Ten million employees now have the right to ask to work flexibly.

We brought in 13 weeks' parental leave per parent per child, to be taken up to a child's fifth birthday, or 18 weeks up to the 18th birthday of a disabled child, as well as leave to deal with emergencies.

Our record of supporting families

Helping with better schools

We've more than doubled spending per pupil and raised standards in our schools. In 1997, half of all secondary schools fell below acceptable levels; now only 1 in 12 do and next year we expect it to be none.

There are now 41,000 more teachers and 212,000 more support staff including an extra 123,100 teaching assistants, compared to 1997, increasing the individual attention children receive in school.

Most primary and secondary schools now offer wraparound childcare, breakfast clubs and after school clubs offering drama, sports and music, from 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday - to help busy working parents as well as their children.

We've committed to protecting frontline school spending, as well as frontline spending on Sure Start and 16-19 education, as we take tough decisions to cut the deficit.

Helping with better playgrounds and youth facilities

Families and communities both benefit from attractive, up to date local play spaces and from good local youth facilities. We have rebuilt or renewed 3,500 playgrounds nationally and made them accessible to children with disabilities.

We have reversed decades of underfunding in our youth services, with over £900 million of investment since 1997. We have already opened or refurbished over a hundred new great places for young people to go, and we are building on this through the myplace programme, which will see the creation of seventy new world class facilities for young people.

Two and a half million young people have benefited from taking part in youth activities and from helping to decide how the funding we've provided should be spent in their areas.

Helping those who care for older or disabled relatives

Many people with long-term needs are cared for by relatives, friends and neighbours – there are around six million carers in the UK. We're increasing Carer's Allowance, raising its earnings disregard limit and introducing the Carer's Credit from April 2010 to protect carers' state pensions.

We introduced the right to request flexible working for carers to make it less difficult to combine paid work with their caring responsibilities. Over 90 per cent of requests are accepted.

We've made families with disabled children a priority, with a total of £770 million in new funding for local authorities and primary care trusts to provide new services to disabled children and their families, including short breaks, equipment, childcare, self-help groups and support for disabled teenagers as they approach young adulthood.

A future fair for all

Our manifesto builds on our track record on helping families. We're proud of what we've achieved, but we're determined to do more to support hard working families.

Family friendly public services

More early learning places for two year olds from low income families

We will treble the number of free early learning places available for two year olds by 2015. This will mean more than 60,000 two year olds benefiting each year from 10 hours a week free childcare and early learning. We will retain Employer Supported Childcare Vouchers, but make them fairer by paying tax relief for all recipients at the basic rate from April 2011 for new recipients. This will pay for the expansion of free early learning places for two year olds.

Flexibility for the three and four year old free nursery entitlement

From this September parents of all three and four year olds will have 15 free hours of nursery provision a week for 38 weeks a year. Free nursery education is already popular with parents with high levels of take up – close to 100 per cent for four year olds. But as we continue to develop a comprehensive under-fives service we will improve the offer for parents by making it more flexible.

- Parents will have a minimum guarantee of flexibility of at least three five-hour or five three-hour sessions over a week commencing this September. Now we will look at extending this flexibility so that parents can take the sessions over two full working days, allowing mums or dads more easily to go back to work part time on those days.

- From 2012 parents will be able to spread their free entitlement over a whole year – not just 38 weeks.
- And we will test out allowing parents to carry any unused free hours of nursery provision from year to year; for example, parents who are entitled to the ten hour entitlement for two year olds could decide to save some of these hours up for when their child reaches three if they wish to either go back to work or work longer hours.

Taken together this increase in flexibility will ensure that childcare and early learning is there when parents want it.

Starting school when a child is ready

Parents will have the choice from next year to start their children in full-time schools from the September after their fourth birthday. Parents can also decide to defer their child's place until the term after their fifth birthday if they wish and these children can continue to benefit from their free entitlement in other settings, until they have to start school.

Family friendly public services

A new guarantee to parents of extended services in primary schools

Working parents want certainty that they can rely on high quality childcare to be available, wrapped around the school day. To provide this, we will offer a guarantee that parents will have access to before and after school activities for their children between 8am and 6pm at their primary school or a neighbouring school.

A family friendly NHS

We will ensure that the NHS suits the busy lives of families by expanding the availability of GPs' services in the evenings and weekends and GP-run health centres open '8 til 8' in towns and cities.

We will make radical reforms of maternity services:

- all women will have the right, where it's safe, to a home birth.
- every expectant mother will have a dedicated midwife for continuity of care.
- more new mothers will be offered single rooms and a bed for the father, if they need to stay overnight after the birth of their child.

We will make more children's health services available through Children's Centres, with health visitors, GPs, midwives and community nurses working together with children and their families.

And for the small number of children who need palliative care, and their families, we will ensure that they receive the best possible healthcare and support both in the community and in Children's Hospices.

Balancing work and family life

A new “Father’s Month”

In today’s world, many more Dads want to be involved with their children, particularly around the birth and when they are very young. That is why we are offering a new Father’s Month of four weeks paid paternity leave, building on the current entitlement to two weeks. We also want Dads to be able to take the extra weeks in flexible ways during their newborn’s first year, such as a day a week over couple of months if they wish. So we will work with employers and parents to decide what is the best way of doing this. We’ll also allow mothers to pass three months of their paid leave to the father, so that when a baby is six months old parents can decide which of them should go back to work.

Flexible working for older workers and more help for grandparents

There are 14 million grandparents in Britain, half of them aged under 65. Many combine holding down a job with helping out with their grandchildren - one in four families receives some kind of childcare support from grandparents. To help we’ve pledged to give older people the right to request flexible working, so they can vary their hours to fit in with looking after their grandchildren or caring for frail elderly relatives or friends.

We will also help people over the age of 60 to top up their wages with the Working Tax Credit if they work at least 16 hours a week, rather than 30 hours, enabling them to reduce their hours gradually as they get older. We will end default retirement at 65, enabling more people to decide for themselves how long they choose to keep working.

For those grandparents who give up work to look after their grandchildren, we will top up their National Insurance contributions so that the value of their state pension entitlements is maintained.

Supporting parents

Many parents are concerned about inappropriate advertising and marketing aimed at their childhood. They do not want to be told how to bring up their children, but do they want advice, information and a strong voice when they think there is a problem. We will support parents who challenge aggressive or sexualised commercial marketing. Because retailers must take their responsibilities seriously we will ask Consumer Focus to develop a website for parents to register their concerns about sexualised products aimed at their children.

Family finances

Our pledge is to raise living standards for families, with better jobs and higher incomes, more help to get on the housing ladder, and support to build up family savings and decent pensions, to provide more security for the future. We will:

- help families who want to own their own homes by abolishing stamp duty for first time buyers on all homes purchased below £250,000 for the next two years, benefiting more than nine out of ten first time buyers
- set the goal that the National Minimum Wage rises at least in line with earnings over the period to 2015
- maintain Tax Credits which are vital to millions of families on low and modest incomes, and introduce a new Toddler Tax credit which means an extra £4 a week for all families with a child aged one or two years
- index link the annual ISA limit of £10,200; make available matched Savings Gateway accounts to over eight million families; and develop a new matched savings account for all 18-30s
- re-establish the link between basic State Pension and earnings from 2012.

Balancing work and family life

The choice for your family

Labour is working hard to enable everyone to build a better life for themselves — while the Tories would reward a few and penalise the many. The Tories are a change families can't afford.

See past the warm words and photo opportunities and take a long hard look at what the Tories have actually done when it comes to making life better for families. They:

- voted against increasing maternity leave
- voted against introducing paternity leave
- voted against your right to request flexible working if you have children
- voted against the National Minimum Wage.

The Liberal Democrats would also cut the Child Trust Fund and the tax credits on which families rely.

The Tory threat to families – they would:

- introduce top up charges for nursery education, ending free nursery places for thousands of families, whilst cutting the funding for childcare and early years learning
- refuse to protect your Sure Start children's centre, from cuts and those that remain made to focus on just the most disadvantaged families. This would put an end to the high quality childcare many working families currently rely on in centres, disrupting the lives of children and their parents
- take tax credits away from families on middle incomes
- scrap Child Trust Funds for all families earning just over £16,000
- cut frontline services like schools and the police – where they have refused to match Labour's commitment to protect funding
- give some married couples a tax break – those where one person goes out to work and the other stays at home - making children where parents are not married feel second class, and meaning many millions of other kinds of loving and committed families would lose out
- cut inheritance tax for the richest, giving £200,000 on average to 3,000 millionaires.

