

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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THE VITAL ROLE OF MOTHERS

At the beginning of September the media was full of reports and comment following a vicious attack by two boys, aged 10 and 11, on two other young boys in Doncaster. These attacks sparked new debates about dysfunctional families and when and if children should be removed from the care of their parents.

Two thought-provoking articles by former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith¹ and Martin Narey, chief executive of Barnardo's², ask questions about early intervention and whether more children should be removed from 'failed' parents earlier.

Iain Duncan Smith's article refers to research linking 'at risk' children and incidences of crime and violence in later life. Neuroscience research on early brain development, and the importance of the first three years of life, is referred to. 'Enough work has been done to narrow down the most important components that must be present if the child is to flourish and its brain to develop properly. At the top of the list is the need for the child to receive unconditional love, empathy and nurture from a parent. It is essential that a mother plays with and talks to the baby, as its brain slowly begins to imitate all that it sees and hears. Reading to the baby also stimulates its capacity to communicate.'³

Evangelical Christians should not need persuading of the importance of a mother's role. We need more preaching on this from our pulpits! But we must also avoid the simplistic view that working mothers are neglectful, and be aware of the benefits which would arise from longer maternity leave and family-friendly working arrangements. We should take an interest in whether the strategies of day care centres are sufficiently aimed at developing activities that stimulate the brain development of children in the way that the research suggests.

In our church crèches and toddler groups we need to do more than just trouble-shoot and manage behaviour. Priority must be given to developing the relationship between mother/parent and child. Perhaps we could work harder at encouraging mothers in singing, talking and playing with their little ones rather than taking over and doing it for them. I know of one church to which

Mums come with their toddlers and the whole morning is taken up with songs and rhymes. A lot more is achieved than just learning *Twinkle, twinkle little star*.

¹ See www.telegraph.co.uk 04 September 2009

² See www.telegraph.co.uk 07 September 2009

³ See online <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/6140487/Schoolboy-torturers-Save-the-mother-and-you-will-save-the-generation-to-come.html>

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