Finance Committee
Inquiry into preventative spending
Submission from Children are Unbeatable

Children are Unbeatable (CAU) is an alliance of organisations and individuals seeking legal reform to give children the same protection under the law on assault as adults, and promoting positive, non-violent discipline. CAU Scotland¹ greatly welcomes the current inquiry on preventative spending to reduce negative social outcomes and is particularly keen to respond to question three regarding which preventative programmes should be prioritized.

Parenting is undoubtedly the most important factor in determining the future health, well-being and achievements of Scotland’s children. CAU considers positive, non-violent parenting - which focuses on positive rather than punitive forms of discipline – as being essential both for better child welfare and for child safety. Positive, non-violent parenting helps parents find alternative techniques to physical punishment and develop better ways of managing their children’s behaviour. Despite the continued legality of physical punishment in Scotland, the Scottish Government strongly advises parents **not to use physical punishment** as ‘it could be dangerous, sets the wrong example and has long lasting psychological effects²’.

CAU believe that the increasing policy focus on early years and the growing range of family and parent support³ initiatives and expertise in Scotland makes this an optimal time to focus a national preventative spending programme on reducing violence against children within their homes.

CAU recently hosted a discussion forum for practitioners and experts working with families and children across Scotland, to explore their perceptions of current parenting practices and identify their priorities in promoting positive, non-violent parenting approaches and reducing violence against children. The forum was attended by 25 practitioners and experts and included representation from health, education, police, social work, SCRA, academia and psychological services, as well as children and families organizations across the voluntary sector. Practitioners and experts spent the day in discussion, identifying priorities in several key areas. This written evidence summarises some of the key issues raised at this Forum that are relevant to preventing negative social outcomes, as follows.

*Scotland’s commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*

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¹ The steering group of CAU in Scotland is made up of CHILDREN 1st, Together (SACR), Aberlour, SCCYP, ChildLine in Scotland and Children in Scotland.


³ For example Sure Start, Triple P parenting programme
Recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2008 stated in order to meet its obligations under the UNCRC, Scotland should “assist parents and guardians in child-rearing responsibilities”\(^4\) and “promote positive and non-violent forms of discipline and respect for children’s equal right to human dignity… and decrease public acceptance [of corporal punishment] in childrearing.”\(^5\) In response, Scottish Government committed to “promote positive parenting” in their UNCRC action plan “Do the Right Thing”\(^6\). Despite this commitment, children’s organisations in Scotland are concerned that Scottish Government is not allocating sufficient resources to positive parenting. Although successful programmes such as ‘triple p’ have been rolled out in some areas of Scotland, there is a patchy commitment to positive parenting across all local authorities\(^7\).

Parenting education is regarded as crucial in promoting positive, non-violent parenting. Practitioners and experts stressed the importance of early parenting education, many advocating a national programme of early parenting education embedded both in school education and at ante-natal stage. Practitioners also stressed the need for research into the outcomes of parenting practices, to inform parent education programmes.

**Cultural change**

Whilst parenting education for young people and prospective parents is vital in laying the groundwork for positive parenting styles, practitioners concluded that Scotland needs to tackle a deeper cultural issue in order to reduce violence against children within the home. Practitioners and experts working with children and families across the country describe Scotland as a non ‘child-friendly’ culture, which does not value children or fully respect them as rights holders. This culture is regarded by experts as underlying public tolerance of aggressive parenting styles and violence against children. General intolerance of children’s behavior, for example, is regarded by experts as putting parents under pressure, increasing the likelihood they will use violent discipline, thus perpetuating aggressive parenting styles and indeed aggression as a cultural ‘norm’.

Practitioners describe the necessity of a cultural shift in Scotland - not simply towards a culture of more positive parenting but towards treating children - and indeed each other - with dignity and respect. In order to promote such a cultural shift, practitioners argued that **change is needed at a population level**, calling for a ‘public health approach’ to this issue.

**Parent support**

Parenting styles are largely determined by the way we were parented as children (reference needed). Practitioners and experts regard parent support as important in

\(^7\) Together (2010) State of Children’s Right in Scotland
helping people ‘break cycles’ of learned parenting behaviour and move towards positive, non-violent parenting. Parent support was described as comprising of accessible information for all new parents and a combination of universal and targeted parenting initiatives.

Research indicates that most parents hit their children because of the way they are feeling, indicating that parent information must include clear, common sense information on alternatives to violent discipline as well as sources of support. Universal information should also include straightforward information on alternative parenting styles such as empathy, humour, praise etc. – as well as their benefits, along with basic information on child development (as above). Knowing what to expect from their children’s behavior at different stages would be liberating for parents, according to practitioners. Practitioners felt strongly that information should be available to all new parents in a ‘highly accessible’ format – for example a DVD.

In terms of parent support initiatives, practitioners felt it was crucial to both strengthen and to build on what is out there already. The spread of universal parenting programmes (such as triple p) would be welcomed, where they are flexible and adaptable to cultural differences. Building and extending targeted programmes – particularly those which build on communities of support – are also regarded as vital for harder to reach groups.

In order to maximize ‘buy-in’ to positive, non-violent parenting, practitioners advocated a national positive parenting campaign, which is positive, humorous and real.

Legal change to promote positive non-violent parenting

In order to ensure that positive parenting is prioritized at local authority level, some practitioners advocated the introduction of a Positive Parenting Bill, which would include duties on Local Authorities, for example, to ensure appropriate information and support for every new parent; universal parenting education and parenting classes.

Practitioners and experts also felt strongly that equal protection for children within the law was needed to better protect children and to give a clear and unequivocal message to the public about the unacceptability of violence against children. Any assault of a child is no longer ‘justifiable’ as Scots’ Law currently states. Whilst accepting that ‘banning smacking’ has been a contentious issue in Scotland’s past, experts argue that there is now widespread public acceptance that young children need protected from any kind of physical assault, especially in the light of recent tragic cases. Achieving full protection from assault in Scots’ law for children under three would, according to experts, help herald in a culture of non-violence against children in Scotland.

We hope the Committee will find these comments useful. We would point out that whilst they represent practitioners and experts views on preventative programmes to reduce violence against children within the home, they do not necessarily represent the views of CAU itself.
CAU would be happy to further oral evidence to the committee if required.

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