At the start of this century, there has been an unprecedented flurry of family policy development, with parents occupying centre stage. Increasingly, parents are expected to maximise their children’s educational experiences, control their children’s behaviour, engage in parental contracts and receive parental orders if they fail to manage their children’s social contact. However, what is the impact of all these parent-focused initiatives? And are they likely to undermine parental autonomy, confidence and, ultimately, responsibility? In this chapter, I offer an overview of family policy in Britain at the start of the 21st century, highlighting the trajectory of fiscal and behavioural intervention policy.

**New Labour family policy**

The New Labour government developed its family policy along six main lines: education, care and well-being of children (expanding early care including universal services for three- and four-year-olds; Education Maintenance Allowances – EMA), financial support for families with children (tax credits), services for families (Sure Start expansion of services), parental employment (promoting employment among single parents through the Welfare to Work strategy), work/family balance (extension of maternity leave, introduction of paternity leave) and family functioning (intervention at a family level; increased emphasis on parental responsibility to tackle antisocial behaviour) (see a review in Daly, 2011). A key goal in these policy initiatives was to reduce child poverty and social exclusion through fiscal changes and access to universal services. For example, the introduction of universal services of childcare was particularly important in terms of using education as a...
route out of poverty. Early years’ provision for three- and four-years-olds, that is, 12.5 hours (15 hours from 2010) of childcare, was an innovative development considering that in the United Kingdom, ‘a universal, publicly funded, integrated and equitable childcare uncoupled from parental status, family income level and family investment in care did not exist’ (Lloyd, 2008, p. 483). Also, the EMA (introduced nationwide in 2004 and abolished in 2011 by the coalition government) was designed to encourage young people from poor backgrounds to stay in education longer and was successful in terms of raising staying-on rates, retention and achievement Chowdry et al. (2007a) as cited in Chevalier et al. (2010).

Around 2003, parenting became the cornerstone of family policy. With the Anti-Social Behaviour Act & Criminal Justice Act (2003), the use of parenting orders was extended (the Crime and Disorder Act was introduced in 1998) and parenting contracts were introduced. Parenting Orders compelled parents whose children’s behaviour brought them to the attention of the courts to attend parenting classes and fulfil other requirements deemed necessary by the court. The Respect Action Plan by Tony Blair was aimed at tackling underlying causes of antisocial behaviour to build ‘stable families and strong cohesive communities’. In 2004, with the publication of the Every Child Matters report, the focus on family functioning, and particularly on ‘good’ parenting, increased. What parents do to/with their children emerged as a key factor in mediating the effects of poverty and other social ills on children’s education and well-being, and parenting was to be evaluated in terms of children’s behaviour and academic outcomes.

Placing parenting at the heart of family policy meant that ‘the behaviour of family members, especially parents, could be mobilized to improve social order and in the process (re)fashion the family as an agent of social integration and economic responsibility’ (Daly, 2011, p. 441). This was to be achieved by targeting parents’ individual behaviour and practices (e.g. encouraging parents to become involved with their children’s learning, encourage an authoritative parenting style), especially for parents in ‘problem’ families. The policy emphasis on parenting propelled a number of national pilots to explore the ways in which parenting programmes could be rolled out on a large scale and the cost effectiveness of such practice. In 2006, the Parent Support Advisors was piloted in 20 LAs; Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) (50 projects); Parenting Early Intervention Projects (PEIP) pilots (18 LAs); and the Education and Inspections Act and Police and Justice Act, extending the scope of parenting orders and parenting contracts.