

Britain is turning into the nanny state.

Kids as young as four could spend most of their waking hours in the care of the state and its agencies under Labour's plans for an 8am-6pm day at school. We will also see more holiday clubs and to keep bored teenagers from drifting into trouble, Labour has announced the naffly-named "Things to do, places to go" initiative.

Of course, not every child will spend all of those hours at school. There will be a spectrum. Some parents will never use the breakfast and after-school clubs. Some will in emergencies. Others where one parent is working full-time and the other is part-time will use it to give the part-timer some flexibility over working hours. However, there will be some parents who make maximum use of it - even when they are at home and could look after their children themselves. The question is then: "Honey, whose are these kids?"

It sounds like the old Israeli kibbutz system where children were raised in common so parents could concentrate on building the community and I think this is close to Labour's motivation: it provides more workers for the economy.

Despite the jobs lost to call centres and factories overseas, we are still short of nurses, dentists, builders, plumbers, bus drivers, fruit-pickers, etc. The "success" of our economy has been built on more workers doing more work - usually by working longer hours. That is why Labour doesn't curb immigration: we just can't get the staff here, although there are many sound reasons for allowing the free movement of people besides boosting our workforce. So while this initiative is dressed up as offering families choice, it is actually about offering businesses choice - a choice of staff.

If the government wanted to give parents a choice, then why hasn't this extra help for parents too work been matched by more help for parents who choose to do most of their child-rearing themselves? What about an increase in the Child's Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit or child benefit? Instead there has been nothing.

This undervalues the role that parents play. Teachers and carers come and go, but parents are always your parents. They teach children how to act. They coax out the things that are bothering their child. They explain things that a child may be too shy to ask in a classroom. This can't be squeezed in on the car journey to the breakfast club. It takes a lot of input. That doesn't mean that I am arguing that one parent should always be at home. Children benefit from mixing with other children. Children benefit from knowing a range of adults who bring different things to their lives. Parents benefit from some adult conversations. However, there is balance to be struck - and Labour isn't striking it.