

The invention of childhood



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Discuss the experiences of evacuees during World War 11 and consider what problems they, their families and their hosts experienced.

Brown (2000) believes the seeds of the Evacuation came from World War 1 when the bombing of towns and cities killed many civilians. By 1938, war looked inevitable. Thousands of lives would be put at risk because of the power of the German air force. The nations children were the future of the country and had to be protected from danger. The big cities like London with large populations were seen as being at the greatest risk of bombing so it was decided that all the parents of city children should be encouraged to evacuate children to the countryside where they would be safer. Evacuation involved moving thousands of children, mothers with babies and teachers from their homes and putting them into the homes of strangers. It is debateable whether this was a good idea. This essay aims to consider the experience of evacuation on the host families, the parents of the children but most importantly on the children.

According to Holman (1995) in September 1939, the Government started large- scale evacuation of children and young mothers from cities to the countryside. Planning had started as early as 1925. Inglis (1990) writes that the children arrived at railway stations carrying a bag with a gas mask, a snack for the journey and a few items of clothing. Each child wore a label with his/her name written on it. She says many children saw it as a great adventure and there was an air of excitement. Some were bewildered and resented being sent away. Children who travelled with their school friends and teachers had continuity in their lives but those travelling alone reported feeling isolated and frightened.

According to Richard Titmus in Inglis (1990) the mothers of the children were pale and fighting back tears as they waved their children off. They were torn between looking after their children's safety and putting lives at risk.

Government posters were designed to make them feel guilty if they kept the children in the city. It was the first time many had been parted from their children. Inglis (1990 p37) says 'those parents who did let their children go... often felt nearly bereaved by the cruel but apparently necessary separation'.

The misery of being separated was made worse because parents had to make a means tested contribution towards the children's keep as well as funding normal living costs. This put a burden on poorer families. Parents were given one rail ticket per month to visit children. These visits also upset the mothers because they found their children dressed in clothes chosen by foster mothers because they were considered inadequately dressed for the country. 'Parents resented being made to feel like paupers' (Inglis p55).

Some foster families had good but fair discipline and the children were happier because the household was calm and orderly. Visiting mothers could feel jealous of the harmony. Majorie Allen, an evacuee, is cited in Holman (1995), saying young mothers with very young children were billeted with families. This caused problems for both women, trying to cook and do washing in one kitchen. Sometimes they were expected to stay out of the house all day and had nothing better to do than walk around the roads with young children. This often meant that the children did not get proper meals, opportunities to play or have a quiet nap. Opportunities for noisy play were limited and the children's imagination was poorer as a result. The mothers were bored and this was bad for the children. One said it was difficult to

make lasting relationships with other mothers because you never knew when you were going back home.

Host families had to be found for the Evacuees. After the phoney war of 1939 80% of the evacuees returned home only to return to the country a second time in 1940. Offering accommodation was voluntary at first but by the end of 1940 it was compulsory to take in an evacuee if you had a spare room. Cunningham (2006) says that some people welcomed the idea of giving children from inner cities the experience of living in the country and the children thrived but Brown (2000) says that some people did not welcome the idea of taking in children and claimed they were too ill or had no space. Hosts were paid a weekly amount to feed the children so some hosts did it for the extra money. Some foster mothers crammed too many children into one room just to get money.

Inglis (1990) says there was not much effort put in to match children to families. Children were often paraded round and foster parents picked one. Naturally the clean children were picked first. Some siblings were split up. Often there were problems associated by the lack of matching child to family. Religion was sometimes an issue. Children had been told by their parents to do as they were told which sometimes meant going to a different church or in the case of Jewish children eating non- kosher food. There were reports of the very young being placed with very old foster parents who could not cope. Some foster mothers were 'child haters' according to Inglis. One evacuee claimed she had to shop, clean and look after a 3 year old. Holman (1995) says some children suffered physically and emotionally at the separation from mothers and fathers and some children were beaten and

starved. One boy spent his days scrounging for food and as a result he did not go to school. By the time he was noticed by the police he was so emaciated that he had to be hospitalised. Inglis reports that children often returned home after a very short time because they were unhappy. One went back to London after 6 months because she preferred the bombs to being in North Devon. Some however were away for 5 years.

Smith (1996) states that lots of families who took in children lived in large houses and the system highlighted the differences in the class system, 'Evacuation often led to class tension as middle-class hosts and working class evacuees struggled to co-exist under one roof' (Smith 1996 p9). Hosts were shocked by standards of hygiene and behaviour. They had not realised that people lived in such poor conditions. Hendrick (1997) says that Angus Calder said the host families seemed to forget why they were taking in children and accused them of being bed wetters, bad mannered and infested with bugs. Cunningham (2005) believes these problems were signs of mental stress. Michael Aspel recounting his thoughts about being evacuated in Inglis (1990) says that 'one of the most profound effects of the evacuation was to bring to the nation's attention the shocking disparity in childcare in Britain and the extremes of wealth and poverty that divided the nation'.

'The plight of the evacuees showed how important the family was to emotional security' (Cunningham 2006 p202). The problems of the evacuees were followed up by John Bowlby with his research on the effects of maternal deprivation. This led to a move away from separating children from their main carer. Anna Freud was also against separations and she suggested that the long separations were more distressing for children than the bombings.

She studied young children who had lost at least one parent and noted that children regressed to childish behaviour like thumb sucking, bed-wetting and rocking. She believed evacuating children had the same effect. However, Josephine Barnes' feelings are reported in Cunningham (2006), she believes that moving children to the country benefited them because not only did their health improve but they learnt to be independent and got experience of how people in the country live.

Although there are reports of poor treatment there are many happy stories. Inglis (1990) writes about Mrs Ivy Moore who was evacuated to Dorset with her young son. She thought her billet was like paradise. This experience was not usual but there are many reports of children not wanting to return to the city after the war. Michael Caine states that he was determined to do well in life so that he could live in a big house like his foster home. Some families took children on holidays and taught them to read. There is little doubt that many host families did a good job. Some childless couples looked upon the evacuees as their own. They were very upset to see children returned to their parents. 'Evacuation was a remarkable historical happening because it enabled the 'haves to meet the 'have nots' directly' Cunningham (2006 p 165).

Inglis (1990) says that journalists following up the evacuees reported that the evacuated children never really lost their attachment to the family even though many preferred living in the country to inner city slums. It seems that the children did not forget that foster families were temporary. Hendrick (1997) thinks that thousands of children did suffer and it has affected them all their life but thousands only remembered kind treatment and love.

Susan Isaacs carried out research at the end of the war and reported that evacuees missed the simple things in life like playing in the park even though they had acres of countryside to play in. They missed being allowed to make a mess and being teased by siblings. Some of the houses were very grand. However, Inglis (1990) says children often resented being sent away from home even if the host families were kind. Many were homesick. She tells the story of one of the children who had been given a hair bow by her mother and kept it in her pyjama pocket. She went to sleep stroking her face with it for comfort. One child said her foster mother did not smell like her own mother and she did not like the smell. Susan Isaacs spoke to the mother of one child who had reportedly cried herself to sleep every night and always looked ill because she was so homesick.

However, many children missed their foster families when they went back home. Parents expected the children to be happy when they returned home but some children said they were happier in the country. Some children said they felt claustrophobic because their houses were so small. Those who were dissatisfied felt guilty and ashamed of their feelings. Inglis says children had to adapt to new surroundings and then readapt back. They had to 'remodel their personalities in order to fit in with new surroundings' (Inglis p 149). This is hard for young children. One evacuee states that she is a hoarder and blames this on the fact that she had to leave all her precious possessions at home when she was hurriedly evacuated. Another says she still remembers the feelings of isolation during moments of stress. This suggests that the effects of being separated have a lasting effect even though many bad memories are repressed.

It seems there are many arguments for and against the evacuation programme but there is little doubt that it saved many young lives. It did cause a breakdown in the family and has been blamed for the increase in the number of children breaking the law between 1939-1941. This supports the theory that family breakdown is a major factor in juvenile crime. Tom Harrison, the MO Team Leader at the time is quoted saying in Inglis (1990 p 46) that 94% of parents reported that their children were happy.

Unfortunately that means that 6% were not happy but there were changes for the better that were brought about as a result of the Evacuation.

Hendrick (1997) states that the evacuation programme 'revealed the poor health and living conditions of inner city children. The Government could no longer get away with proposing that children were the responsibility of their parents.... The single most important consequence of evacuation was the centring of the family in all future policies for children's welfare and the problems associated with separating children from parents led to new social policies being introduced' Hendrick (1997 p 55).

References

- Brown, M. (2000) Evacuees, Evacuation in Wartime Britain, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, pp63-113.
- Cunningham, H. (2006), The Invention of Childhood, BBC Books pp191-192, p202, p233.
- Cunningham, H. 2nd Ed. Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500, Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, pp186-187.
- Hendrick, H. (1997), Children, childhood and English society 1880-1990, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp53-55.

- Holman, B (1995), A Very British Revolution: The Evacuation, Oxford: Lion Publishing, pp29-30.
- Inglis, R. (1990), The Children's War, Evacuation 1939-1945, Fontans/Collind, pp
- Smith, H. (1996), Britain in the Second World War: A Social History, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp9-42.