



The growing professionalisation of parenting is seen as a solution to society's ills. However, critics including Kent's Ellie Lee and Jan Macvarish believe it's damaging to parent-child relationships and helps foster a culture of anxiety. They talk to David Clark, alumni and freelance journalist.



The Parent Trap

When the reality TV programme *Supernanny* hit the nation's screens in 2004, it quickly became one of Channel 4's most popular shows. It concentrated on applying friendly but firm discipline to dysfunctional families, but it also symbolised a growing feeling that we had somehow, as a nation, lost the ability to control our children.

The crisis in parenting confidence had been developing since the mid-1990s. Instead of parenting being regarded as something that happened naturally, there was a widespread perception that we now needed someone to tell us how to do it.

As well as discipline, other worries began to cluster around parenting, particularly in relation to food. They ranged from the importance of breastfeeding babies to the growing obsession with what children are fed, both at home and at school. As the media focus on poor parenting intensified, it was held responsible for a range of social ills, ranging from teenage obesity to youth crime.

In 2007, the founding of the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners, with a £30 million grant from the Department for Education and Skills, demonstrated that the government was also concerned by poor parenting and was determined to tackle it. It established an institution in which formal, professional training was given to those who support and advise parents in the community.

However, a growing number of commentators are concerned by our obsession with child-rearing, and staff members in Kent's Social Sciences faculty are among those questioning the growing cult of 'parent-blaming'. In 2007, Dr Ellie Lee and Professor Frank Furedi introduced Parenting Culture Studies as a new area of academic study, and a landmark conference was held on the Canterbury campus, entitled *Monitoring Parents: Childrearing in the age of 'intensive parenting'*.

Now a new book, *Standing up to Supernanny* by journalist and social commentator Jennie Bristow, offers a lively and robust rebuttal of the 'Supernanny' culture. It aims, in Bristow's words, to 'put an end to the "parent wars" that make bringing up children today so hard to do.' The book includes contributions from Dr Lee and from Dr Jan Macvarish, a research associate in the University's Centre for Health Services Studies. The book acknowledges that parenting experts have been around for a long time, but says that this current generation is very different from previous ones.

'In the early 20th century, we saw the rise of the health visitor, where attention was focused on the poor and those who were seen as inadequate,' says Jan Macvarish. 'However, in the late 20th and early 21st century, we've seen a massive expansion in the way the State and its institutions are addressing a wide range of parenting practices as being problematic. This has really intensified under New Labour.'

'Research suggests that there is an increasingly fraught relationship between health professionals and mothers, because the framework in which practical support with baby-care is delivered has become increasingly rigid and dogmatic.'

Professionals are having to work within guidelines shaped by theoretical and even politicised ideas about attachment, bonding and breastfeeding, for example, and are less able to offer objective, empathic support. Mothers are looking to professionals more, but trusting them less.'

Ellie Lee believes this kind of State intervention is actively undermining the kind of informally-acquired knowledge and skills we acquire from family and social networks. 'If you make parenting style such a focus, you materially begin to undermine the possibility of supportiveness and informal collaboration between parents,' she says.

'It's contributing to the erosion of the idea that, by and large, you can allow parenting to happen by itself and that people will make their own way through it. The value of this informal knowledge is constantly being weakened and people just don't think it's trustworthy anymore. This leaves people much more on their own to raise their children and they are always looking for another source of external authority such as books, television programmes and parenting professionals.'

This growing 'professionalisation' of parenthood, where we are encouraged to behave in particular ways, Lee adds, is also changing the way parents and children relate to each other. 'It puts a gap between us, in the sense that it becomes harder to be natural with your children,' she says. 'Parenting becomes an all-consuming and self-conscious activity and it becomes more difficult to integrate children into the ebbs and flows of everyday life. It also makes parenting less of a relationship and more of a skill to be learned.'

Continued overleaf



So why have the ideas put forward by this new generation of 'parenting experts' gained such wide credibility and support? Jan Macvarish suggests that it's partly to do with our historical relationship to the State. 'In Britain, we have seen the State as very benign,' she says. 'We have a sense, for example, that the extension and expansion of the NHS is a good thing. We also see State involvement in the family as a good thing, which it is, when it provides services for us such as education, health care and childcare. But it also means we're insufficiently critical when the State is doing something quite different to providing services and is more concerned with re-programming behaviour.'

In addition to creating unnecessary anxieties and damaging our relationship with both children and adults, both Lee and Macvarish believe that the focus on parenting is distorting the way we understand society. 'Genuine problems are getting sidelined, and one of them is poverty,' says Lee. Not so long ago, families not having enough money was a problem and the idea was that social policy should try to find ways of making people have more money.

'If you look at discussions about poverty now, they all look at poverty as a risk factor. Poverty is not seen as being about people being poor; it's that not having money is more likely to make you a bad parent. So now, social initiatives are about amending the parenting style of those at risk of being a poor parent. The official view is that poverty is transmitted through poor parenting practices, rather than through ongoing structural dislocation. It's a massive shift in thinking and has huge ramifications.'

The consequences of contemporary attitudes to parenting is being discussed in a series of seminars at Kent entitled Changing Parenting Culture, which continue into 2010. With so much at stake, Ellie Lee believes that it's important that this issue is discussed as widely as possible, not just in academic circles.

'What we're really trying to do is establish parenting culture as a field of study and to begin to ask questions about it,' she says. 'This new culture is affecting everybody's lives and I do think that it's important for academics to engage with the wider public and try to generate and encourage a dialogue about it.'

Standing Up to Supernanny by Jennie Bristow is published by Imprint Academic. For more information on Parenting Culture Studies and its ongoing seminar series, visit www.parentingculturestudies.org

Dr Ellie Lee

Ellie Lee is a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at Kent. She researches, publishes and teaches in the areas of the sociology of reproduction, of health and of the family. She has published works including *Abortion, Motherhood and Mental Health* (2003). Since 2004, she has also developed research projects about motherhood and parenthood. With Frank Furedi, she set up Parenting Culture Studies at the University of Kent in 2007 and in her spare time she co-ordinates Pro-Choice Forum.

Dr Jan Macvarish

Jan Macvarish has been a research associate and lecturer at Kent for the past four years. Her interests lie in the sociology of interpersonal relationships, parenting, family life, sex and intimacy. She is particularly interested in questions of risk culture, de-moralisation and individualisation but is also concerned with policy developments. She is currently working on the Big Lottery-funded Am I Bovered? project, which explores teenage girls' relationships to exercise.