

**Seminar 4**  
**Changing Parenting Culture**  
**February 16, 2010**  
**Venue: British Library**  
**Organiser: Helen Reece, Reader in Law, London School of Economics**

This final seminar provides the opportunity for participants to revisit some of the themes and issues identified through the 'Changing Parenting Culture' series as most important. Compared to previous seminars this final event will also include a greater focus on the policy dimension.

Throughout this series policy has been implicated as making a powerful contribution in evolution of a new parenting culture. In the opening seminar it was noted that a very distinctive aspect of 'parenting' is the definition of this activity as not simply what parents do, but rather a problematic task that needs to be shaped or managed by policy interventions. In considering contemporary fatherhood, it was highlighted in our second seminar that policy now seeks very explicitly to 'engage fathers' and influence their parenting style. Policy, it was argued in the third seminar, has played an influential role in formalising and encouraging suspicions about the role of adults in general and parents in particular in caring for and socialising children, by taking terrible but rare examples of child murder and abuse as the starting point for policy development. Seminar four will include a set of workshops in which participants can consider in more detail the nature and effect of parenting policies.

## **Programme**

**9-9.45am Registration / coffee**

**9.45-10.15am Welcome from Jude England, Head of Social Science Collections and Research, The British Library**

**10.15am-12.15pm Session 1**

**What's wrong with our parenting culture? Observations on the politicisation of parenting**

A distinctive aspect of political discussion today is the centrality of 'parenting' as an explanation for and solution to social problems. Where poverty, for example, once featured as a major policy concern in its own right, this problem is now often discussed in contrast as a 'risk factor' for the real problem, 'poor parenting'. More recently constructed social problems, such as the 'obesity crisis', 'anti-social behaviour' and 'educational failure' (for boys especially) are rarely discussed by policy makers without 'parenting' featuring as a key explanatory factor. In this context, the development of 'parenting support' has become central to the policy programmes offered by all political parties. Whether the problem is 'broken Britain' or 'social inequality' the ubiquitous solution is to 'support parents'. This opening session will begin with comments from some who have made an important contribution to analysis of contemporary parenting culture. They will offer their thoughts on the why and in what ways the need for parents to be given professional guidance and support has become so central to political life, and arguably also so accepted by many parents.

**Chair:** Ellie Lee, senior lecturer in social policy, University of Kent

**Panellists:** Zoe Williams, columnist *The Guardian*, Ciara Doyle, lecturer in youth and community studies, University of Greenwich, Diane M. Hoffman, Associate Professor, Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Policy, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia

**12.15-1.15pm Lunch**

## 1.15-3.15pm Session 2

This session will comprise four concurrently running workshops which will look at some central policy problems, and revisit some themes and issues identified in earlier seminars. The workshops, as well as being stimulating for all seminar participants, aim to provide an opportunity for those who are researching and or working in a particular policy area the get together and discuss the relevant issues and consider how research might evolve.

### **Anti-social behaviour and the new parenting culture**

We are currently witnessing the development of a culture in which parenting is blamed for an ever wider range of social problems. We are also currently experiencing the construction of a new category of behaviour, anti-social behaviour. This session will look at the rise of anti-social behaviour in the light of contemporary parenting culture. Is children's behaviour becoming worse or are we redefining children's behaviour? Is the disintegration of adult authority leading adults to be less confident in disciplining children, their own and other people's? And what are the implications and consequences of holding parents to account for their children's misbehaviour?

**Chair:** Helen Reece, Reader in Law, LSE

**Panellists:** Val Gillies, Reader, Families & Social Capital Research Group, London South Bank University, Rachel Condry, Lecturer in Sociology, University of Surrey, Stuart Waiton, Lecturer in Sociology, University of Abertay

**Discussant:** Professor Caroline Hunter, York Law School

### **Childcare, trust and intensive parenting**

The normalisation of working motherhood has led to an increased need for paid childcare for very young children, typically carried out by nannies, nurseries or registered childminders. However, research indicates a marked ambivalence about childcare, even amongst those parents who make use of it. Issues have emerged to do with the extent to which parents trust other adults to care for their children adequately, and which childcare settings (nurseries, childminders) they trust the most. The absence of male childcare workers has been discussed as a problematic indicator of a cultural suspicion of men interacting with children, as has the development of a professional practice that is highly sensitive to touching children. The increasing professionalisation of childcare, for example through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), is viewed by some as a welcome development in the quality of childcare and the status of childcare workers, while others raise concerns about the implications this has for cost, provision and the over-regulation of children's activities. These concerns are underwritten by awareness expressed in particular by mothers that the use of paid childcare for children under the age of three seems to contradict the dominant orthodoxy of intensive parenting, which ideally situates the parent as the fulltime, ever-proximate carer of young children. This session will examine the cultural dynamics and policy implications of the childcare debate today.

**Chair:** Jennie Bristow, journalist and author of *Standing Up to Supernanny*

**Panellists:** Carol Vincent, Professor of Education, Institute of Education, Heather Piper, Professorial Research Fellow, Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University

**Discussants:** Alison Garnham, CEO, Daycare Trust, Esther Dermott, senior lecturer in sociology, University of Bristol

### **The rise of 'parenting science'**

In the wake of news in September 2009 that in Edlington, Yorkshire, two boys had horrifically tortured and injured two others, Iain Duncan Smith, former Conservative leader, and head of the think tank, the Centre for Social Justice called for greater levels of 'early intervention' in problem families. "These children are conditioned to become violent by their family life," he said. Drawing on studies linking early abuse with limited brain development he said that "we need to intervene when the children are very, very young to break the cycle."

While it is true that extreme abuse can damage children's development, the evidence that it is family life in general that conditions behaviour is limited. Nevertheless, the same logic is being rolled out to all parents, generally under the guise of 'scientific research'. Sue Gerhardt's book, *Why Love Matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain*, for example, draws on a

wealth of psychological and neuroscientific research to remind parents of the need for 'attentive' parenting:

When parents respond to the baby's signals, they are participating in many important biological processes. They are helping the baby's nervous system to mature in such a way that it does not get overstressed. They are helping the bioamine pathways to be set at a moderate level. They are helping to build up the prefrontal cortex and the child's capacity to hold information in mind, to reflect on feeling, to restrain impulses, that will be a vital part of his or her future capacity to behave socially (2004: 210).

This workshop will explore this recent 'scientisation' of parenting and examine the relationship between science research and wider public advocacy and policy formation regarding 'parenting'.

**Chair:** Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology, University of Kent

**Panellists:** Stuart Derbyshire, Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Nancy McDermott, New York based writer and mother, chair the advisory board of Park Slope Parents, Charlotte Faircloth, Doctoral Student in Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

**Discussant:** Diane M. Hoffman, Associate Professor, Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Policy, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia

### **Teenage Parenting - What's the Problem?**

Policy makers and media claim that teenage parenthood ruins young people's lives and those of their children, as well as threatening wider social and moral breakdown. Yet research increasingly shows that parenthood is not necessarily a disaster for young women and men, and indeed can sometimes improve their lives. Why is it that becoming a mother or father can make sense and be valued by some young people? And why is it that policy makers ignore the research evidence that teenage parenthood is not an inevitable catastrophe?

**Chair:** Clem Henricson, Director of Research and Policy, and Deputy Chief Executive of National Family Planning and Parenting Institute

**Panellists:** Simon Duncan, Professor of Comparative Social Policy, University of Bradford, Claire Alexander, Reader, Department of Sociology, London School of Economics, Ros Edwards, Professor of Social Policy, London South Bank University, Jan Macvarish, Research Associate, Centre for Health Services Studies, University of Kent

### **3.15-3.45pm Coffee**

### **3.45-5.15pm Session 3**

#### **Changing parenting culture: rescuing adult authority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In more or less overt ways, it is widely recognised that the precondition for successful childrearing is a shared sense of responsibility for the next generation among adults in general, and the existence of a sense of trust between the generations, in which adults are viewed as having authority. This final discussion will, in this light, explore an issue identified in the course of this seminar series as central to the problem of contemporary parenting culture; namely the erosion of the ability of adult society to socialise children. Frank Furedi, co-author of *Licensed to Hug, How Child Protection Policies Are Poisoning the Relationship Between the Generations and Damaging the Voluntary Sector*, and author of *Paranoid Parenting* and most recently *Wasted, Why Education isn't Educating*, will introduce the session with a lecture. A panel of discussants will then offer their thoughts on what can be done to rescue and restore adult authority and inter-generational trust.

### **6pm onwards informal drink and dinner at local venue**