

## Seminar 4 summary

### Changing Parenting Culture, 16 February 2010, The British Library

Ellie Lee, the seminar series organiser, opening the seminar by thanking the British Library for their wonderful facilities and help with organising the event. She also thanked colleagues from Parenting Culture Studies for their input to the programme for the day, and made some comments about the aims of the seminar series and previous events in the series. Following some comments from Jude England of the British Library about the social science collection held by the library, Ellie introduced the speakers for the first session.

#### Session 1

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

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

**Papers:** Diane M. Hoffman, Associate Professor, Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Policy, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia: 'What's wrong with parenting in America? The cultural politics of "Other People's Kids" '.

Ciara Doyle, lecturer in youth and community studies, University of Greenwich: 'Who gets a seat on the bus? Or- why don't parents sit with their children in their laps?'

Zoe Williams, columnist *The Guardian*: 'Observations on the politicisation of parenting: the case of food'

#### **Diane Hoffman, *What's wrong with parenting in America?***

Diane described the formation of parenting 'tribes' which provide support, a sense of belonging but also reveal anxieties. They are a source of identity – setting parameters and providing ideological security. Researchers tend to blame parents, parents blame schools, other institutions and other parents. A common theme is that children are either out of control or over- controlled. Blame is a central theme and parenting is characterised as competitive. This discourse is not all about perfection – there is something of a backlash against hyper-parenting with claims that bad parenting is cool, and some claiming a 'bad mother' identity. But this is only cool in the context of the privilege to protect from intervention.

Mary Douglas wrote that blame is usually connected to concepts of risk and danger and with a 'mutual coercion' to contribute to the common good. The coercive aspect connects with the 'narratives of control' and anxieties about control or lack of it – which are central to the parenting discussion. Related to this is the mantra of choice – where all parents are free to choose. Anxieties over getting control right relate fundamentally to the kind of selves we want to produce. The anxieties about a perceived lack parental control are anxieties over what constitutes reasonable risk and responsibility. There is the question of control in relation to other people's children which raises fundamental questions of social connectedness. There has been a move

away from diffused authority and communal discipline. The new discourse is about controlling adults, not just children. This raises fundamental questions of privacy.

The pedagogical reform of parenting – for example, the literature on social and emotional learning suggests that there is now a perception that parents need to be taught explicit cognitive labelling and strategising. The therapeutic approach is inauthentic and self-defeating – it legitimates only verbalised emotions and requires that parents must exercise self-control at all times. Affluence affords no protection for mental health problems.

The focus on identities is about meeting adult needs for security and belonging, not about meeting children's needs. The cultural politics of parents' self-definition have eclipsed a concern with the needs of children. In the culture at large, this is fundamentally a problem of self and other. Pursuit of individual interest is often at odds with collective interests, there is a disconnection between ideology and practices.

**Ciara Doyle**, *'Who gets a seat on the bus? Or- why don't parents sit with their children in their laps?'*

Ciara described how she set out to record interactions between parents with children and strangers on public transport, following descriptions on blogs and in focus groups by non-parents of challenging parents about their parenting behaviour. In particular, she described the use of rain covers on buggies – is this to shield babies from the eyes of other adults? Is the mother guarding the child? In London, this contrasted with Ireland. With older children, are mothers guarding children from interaction with strangers?

She was struck in her focus group research by young women using the term 'dirty' with regard to parenting – this related to physical touch between parents and children, e.g. a child in bed with a parent. The implication was that this kind of touch threatened the child's development. There seems to be a growing fear amongst younger women of 'dirty' interactions between parents and children or children and other adults. There are precedents historically – in 'Dream Babies', early 20<sup>th</sup> century, adults seem afraid of their children, children mastering technology ahead of their parents. There is a fear of children's hygiene and touch. Why might this be apparent today? Some possible explanations:

1. We have social policy obsessed with who we allow to interact with children. Norms of touch are not set up by law, view that smacking is illegal, despite law.
2. Mary Douglas, in 'Purity and Danger' talks of pollution rituals, where the moral framework is blurred and there are not consequences for actions deemed immoral. E.g. where adultery is not illegal, seen as polluting – disease. Today, moral ambiguity, pathologising of adult – child interaction, disease – e.g. self-esteem.
3. Today's society is in shock from previous revelations about child abuse. Broken trust, destroyed lives. Did people know or not of institutional abuse. Everybody knew? Can we argue that it is new knowledge? Not as new as we would like to believe.

4. Separation of public and private sphere. New divisions with late capitalism. Politicisation of touching and kissing as they are being re- defined as private acts, therefore not tolerated in public spaces and public discourse.

Ciara ended by proposing that we reclaim that the 'personal is political'.

**Zoe Williams**, *'Observations on the politicisation of parenting: the case of food'*

The 'Change For Life Programme' from the Department of Health suggests that government is searching for reasons for intervening in adult lives – but that this is justified through children. Children are used in bad faith as a route to intervention. This pollutes the relationship between adult and child. Zoe cited a number of examples where weak evidence and 'bad science' is used as a justification for government advice or intervention. There is a drive to make middle-class orthodoxy self-evidently the healthiest. She argued rather, that the only issue for govt should be what people can afford.

Government also preaches to the middle-classes their own habits. The child provides a doorway into private lives in their innocence. This fractionalises parents, atomising parents from one another, and creates a legitimate mistrust of govt policy.

## **DISCUSSION**

Ellie – It does seem to be the case that children have become the primary focus for attempts to morally regulate society.

Diane – There is a proliferation of social categories – child abuser, foodie mothers, some good categories, some bad, risk of falling into the bad ones, desiring is squashed because of threat of abuse.

Zoe – Are we also protecting other people from our children?

Ciara – With reference to her bus example, perhaps the mothers are protecting other adults from their children – the vulnerability of 'shattered' adults.

Marianne Kavanagh - Disagreed with Ciara's interpretation of the bus example – there are notices on buses stating that the buggy must face wall.

Nancy McDermott - There is a move towards child-free public spaces. Where the family is seen as a lifestyle choice, there is the potential for conflict. Kids in public spaces forces adults to be adults.

Jane Sandeman - Parenting policy can be more flaky than other policy claims. There are not parental institutions to be consulted on policy, unlike, for example, education where teaching organisations will be consulted.

Josephine Hussey - In contradiction to the healthy meals impetus in school, adults are not allowed to enforce vegetable consumption by making a child take vegetables on their plate. This suggests a lack of authority of the adult.

Jennie Bristow - There is a stigmatising of touch in public and private. There is a growing self-consciousness whereby we act as if being watched. E.g. baby massage. Between children and children – school massage.

Helen Reece - Gave examples of parents being told off to suggest that there is an assumption that parents must be doing something wrong; parents are not following the 'recipe' correctly. With reference to Diana's 'tribes' – there is also a division between people who don't like children or people who do like children and a sense of children being out of place.

Angie Hart - Are there any examples of sensible govt informed advice.

Bruce McEwan - Food has come to be viewed as a threat – there are increased levels of reporting of abuse via media that come into the home, anxieties of parents are increased – parental attempts to protect themselves from pollution. Good-enough parenting is not a media story, unlike threat.

Stuart Waiton - We are all more fragile when we are with the public because we are no longer part of the public. The novelty of someone talking to us about our kids in a negative way means that therefore we are more fragile when it happens. Parents are self-conscious that to be a good parent is to be a safe parent. The current model of self-develop means that people 'act' safe – are not ourselves.

Pam Lowe - How was 5-a-day picked? Another example where there is no evidence base. Fear of strangers influences parenting, but also increased monitoring of children is also important. Range of professionals that are allowed to interact with children has expanded e.g. national child measurement study. Children cannot say no to these measures. Children become a tribe in themselves, disconnected from the public, like an endangered species.

Zoe - There should be more rigour in the construction of policy.

Diane - There is an obsessive focus on choice - everyone is unique. There is only a superficial level of engagement with what is going on in parenting. Anthropological understandings theorise the formation of certain dispositions of self. Today there are strong pushes to conformity. Science as a rallying point for these positions.

Offra Koffman - Although we focus on the parenting aspect, when it comes to the self and food, single twenty-something people are also concerned to make 'healthy choices'. There are evident 'psychological scripts' – where does the cultural trend come from, how does it become widespread?

Stuart Derbyshire - We do understand these rules as arbitrary, we joke about these rules, yet we still buy into it. Why? We are peculiarly vulnerable when it comes to arguments about kids – we don't like adults – no alternative vision: focus on minutiae of life, food, bodies etc.

Zoe - Breastfeeding is different to 5 a day, much more intense. Deliberate ploy to stress individual behaviour; it is easy to put responsibility into the individual's court.

## **Session 2**

### **Concurrent workshops**

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

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

**Papers:** Val Gillies, Reader, Families & Social Capital Research Group, London South Bank University: 'Blaming the parents: school experiences of 'troublesome' children and their families'

Rachel Condry, Lecturer in Sociology, University of Surrey: 'Mother-blame and constructions of maternal (ir)responsibility in mothers of offenders'

Stuart Waiton, Lecturer in Sociology, University of Abertay: 'Asocial Not Antisocial: Understanding tensions between the generations'

It was suggested that poor parenting is now seen as the root of crime and disorder and youth justice as at the forefront of the criminal justice system. At the same time, definitions of problematic conduct have widened, so that crime and uncivil behaviour have become indistinct. Waiton described this development as the 'politics of behaviour' and related its rise to the decline of 'the public' in the sense of a collapse of a collective public identity, and the absence of competing visions of society, with

increased fear of youth crime a result of social atomisation. Bad parenting is currently seen as exhibiting a lack of concern and social responsibility, ignorance and incompetence, as well as low aspirations: this is the context which has enabled the criminalisation of inadequate parenting, through the parenting order, non-compliance with which is a criminal offence. While the language of parenting orders is gender neutral, it has predominantly been mothers who have been the subjects of parenting orders, and many more are under threat of parenting orders. Gillies noted that the emphasis on educating the parents is in contrast to the lax attitude to educating the 'troubled children' themselves. Despite these policy assumptions, when Gillies interviewed troubled teenagers and their parents, she found a very high level of concern and aspiration from the parents for their children. Condry argued that these policy assumptions in general and parenting orders in particular overestimate the ability of parents to control their children as they grow older, while Waiton suggested that intervention is also taking earlier and earlier, through the emphasis on 'the early years'. Waiton attributed these developments to a collapse of a collective sense of adult authority, with adults having less relationship with and authority over others' children than in previous generations. The discussion focused in particular on whether parents found parenting classes more helpful and supportive or more punitive and demoralising, and on whether there had been a collapse of adult authority, and indeed what this meant.

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

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

**Papers:** Pat Sikes, Professor of Qualitative Inquiry at the University Of Sheffield 'Problems' with men and 'parenting'

Carol Vincent, Professor of Education, Institute of Education: 'I'm the mum. I don't leave her': Choosing care and education settings'

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

Carol Vincent, author of 'Childcare, Choice and Class Practice' (Routledge 2006) discussed her research into parents' interaction with childcare for young children, and parents' interaction with schools. She examined the way in which the engagement of childcare for young children takes place within the frame of intensive mothering expectations - hence the title of her talk, taken from one of her interviewees: 'I'm the mum, I don't leave her'. This presentation focused on the salience of social class in parents' childcare choices. While acknowledging that the definitions of 'working class' and 'middle class' had some weaknesses, she noted that working-class parents were found to be less likely to trust strangers offering childcare within the private sphere (eg childminders) and felt more comfortable with regulated nurseries with a number of staff. Middle-class parents, by contrast, tended to emphasise the emotional benefits that seemed to be provided by individuals in small, intimate care settings, and had greater confidence to make use of their cultural resources in using unregistered minders who had been recommended to them by friends. In relation to schools, Vincent described parental intervention as taking a number of distinct forms: 'risk managers', 'risk balancing', and 'risk allowing'. Broadly speaking, she said, middle-class parents were less likely to trust the school, and tended to operate as 'risk managers', with high levels of intervention into their children's schooling.

Professor Pat Sikes, co-author, with Heather Piper, of 'Researching Sex and Lies in the Classroom' (Routledge 2008) discussed the problem of trust in relation to her research on male teachers' experiences of false allegations of sexual abuse. She began by flagging up the problem of how men wishing to work as teachers, particularly at a primary level, culturally tend to be perceived: either as 'wimps' or 'paedophiles'. High levels of suspicion of male teachers' motivations coexist, and clash, with a fear that there are not enough men working in schools. She went on to discuss the problem of false allegations in the context of a master narrative that presumes that children never lie about abuse, and to draw out the implications of this for those teachers falsely accused, as well as for the broader cultural context surrounding men's involvement in teaching children.

The first discussant was Esther Dermott, senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Bristol, who drew upon her research into fatherhood. The key issues raised by the presentations, said Dermott, were to do with how we understand trust, and how trust is developed and destroyed. She pointed to the use of social and cultural capital within this process, and raised the question of whether 'not trusting' allows parents to experience some form of control. She also raised the difference between expectations of mothers and fathers: mothers tended to be trusted to look after children properly, whereas fathers get more flexibility about how they parent.

The second discussant, Alison Garnham, CEO of the Daycare Trust, raised the point that childcare remains a female-dominated profession: with 98% of the workforce being women, and this being a low-paid sector. Garnham noted that some work is being carried out on the need for more men to be involved in the childcare profession, but noted that it is unclear exactly why that should be the case, and that the argument that children need more male role models seemed less than convincing. She also noted the trend towards the use of informal childcare (for example, grandparents) by working parents, partly for reasons of cost and partly for reasons of preference, and said that this is an area in which Daycare Trust is currently conducting research.

The discussion raised several diverse issues, to do with the increasing professionalisation and regulation of childcare workers; the early years education dynamic; the broader context of anxiety and risk aversion among parents and institutions; differences in experience and practice between parents from different ethnic backgrounds and social classes; and the changing dynamics of trust relations to do with the age of the children.

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

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

**Papers:** Stuart Derbyshire, Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham: 'Growing pains in the brain'

Nancy McDermott, New York based writer and mother, chair of the advisory board of Park Slope Parents: 'To Fire Their Neurons: How Neuroscience is Shaping Early Childhood Education Policy in the United States'

Charlotte Faircloth, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge: 'What science says is best': Full-term breastfeeding, attachment parenting and identity work'

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

This session, which explored the use of ‘science’ in public discourses and private narratives of parenting, featured presentations from three speakers, each with a specific academic perspective. The session was chaired by Frank Furedi, who pointed out that the rise of ‘science’ in parenting is a particularly troubling trend, rekindling many of the older debates around (real) science and ‘scientism’, where science was put to moralistic ends.

Stuart Derbyshire gave a presentation on the neuroscientific evidence around parenting and early child development; he stressed the fact that the majority of studies done into child development were done on children who had been severely neglected or abused. Indeed, using this ‘evidence’ to support policy around mainstream parenting practices is highly unethical. He also stressed the plasticity of the infant brain: far from the ‘window’ of development, infants demonstrate considerable resilience. Rather than ‘biologising’ socio-economic problems, Stuart argued that we need to think of humans as more than just brains, but as complex social beings.

Nancy McDermott gave a presentation looking at the ways in which this ‘science’ is being taken up by policy makers in the US, to justify highly interventionist educational programmes in ‘deprived’ neighbourhoods. In line with Iain Duncan Smith’s ‘Centre for Social Justice’, early intervention is held to be the key to eliminating any number of social problems, from recidivism to obesity. As shown with the example of the Harlem Children’s Zone, a science-based approach and neuroscience in particular is held in high regard by both parents and educators. But framing child development in terms of science is problematic, said Nancy “Science” in these discussions has nothing to do with the investigation of the world. In this context it acts as source of cultural authority capable of rendering virtually any educational or parenting practice beyond question. It does not question or enlighten, so much as endorse a particular set of views about child-rearing, poverty while dismissing the potential of adults and older children. Furthermore its neuro-centric focus may also blind us to more complex social and cultural factors at work in the success or failures of these programs.

Charlotte Faircloth spoke about her own work with mothers in London who practice ‘attachment parenting’, typically breastfeeding their children for ‘extended’ periods of time (usually until the age of three or four, but in some cases, up to eight). Women in this sample use ‘science’ about infant brain development to justify their non-conventional mothering practices. This ‘science’ is itself both limited and problematic. Yet what is interesting is that there is a paradox, in that, although these women are skeptical about some sorts of science (e.g, that which shows no link between autism and vaccination) they nevertheless look to science to validate their decisions. Charlotte closed by asking why it is that simply doing ‘what feels right’ is not enough to explain our most intimate aspects of family life?

Diane Hoffman, acting as discussant asked the panel to look at the social life of science, and the relationship ‘between’ science and society. What does scientific knowledge do, that other sorts of knowledge doesn’t? Is anything changed in this process? Clearly, much of this ‘science’ around parenting is itself dubious, but what does this tell us about the place of other sorts of morality in social life, that it still holds such sway? She pointed out that one of the effects of the scientisation of

parenting is the ‘flattening out’ of the affective and joyous aspect of raising children, which is increasingly cast in instrumental terms of optimizing development.

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

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

**Papers:** Simon Duncan, Professor of Comparative Social Policy, University of Bradford: ‘Teenage Pregnancy and Teenage Parenting: Not a Problem?’

Ros Edwards, Professor of Social Policy, London South Bank University: ‘Why the Gulf Between Experience, Evidence and Policy?’

Claire Alexander, Reader, Department of Sociology, London School of Economics: ‘Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting: what does the research tell us?’

Jan Macvarish, Research Associate, Centre for Health Services Studies, University of Kent: ‘Understanding Teenage Parenthood in the Contemporary Culture of Parenting’

The session provided an opportunity to launch the book *Teenage Parenthood: What's the Problem?* published by The Tufnell Press and the book's editors, Simon Duncan, Ros Edwards and Claire Alexander provided introductions. Jan Macvarish, a contributor to the book, acted as a respondent. The session was chaired by Clem Henricson.

#### **Simon Duncan** *Teenage Pregnancy and Teenage Parenting: Not a Problem?*

Simon introduced the ways in which the book challenges many of the claims of harm on which the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy is founded. He outlined the ways in which the idea that the age of the mother is determinate of social outcomes has been challenged by recent research, such as that published in the book. Simon argued that the book also challenges the economic rationality which dominates policy by bringing together research revealing that other values are held by the individuals, families and communities who have direct experience of teenage parenthood.

#### **Claire Alexander** *Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting: what does the research tell us?* See paper

#### **Rosalind Edwards** *Why the Gulf Between Experience, Evidence and Policy?*

Ros offered explanations for the gulf between experience, evidence and policy. First, she argued that teenage parents are a policy preoccupation because they symbolically disrupt the regulation represented by the boundaries of adulthood and childhood, second, they are perceived as posing a threat to the national future. She then went on to explore the impact of policymakers' reliance on economic rationality criteria to understand human motivation and actions and how this cost-benefit framework has acquired a moralizing character.

#### **Jan Macvarish** *Understanding Teenage Parenthood in the Contemporary Culture of Parenting*

Jan began by recalling her presentation at the first Changing Parenting Culture Seminar, in which she argued that the teenage parent ‘embodies the confusion and doubts about moral agency and the possibility of adult autonomy’. She suggested the contemporary cultural and political prominence of the teenage mother cannot be explained solely by a blaming of her as an ‘other’, but also requires an identification



with what she is said to represent: in particular her double vulnerability as both adult and child. Teenage parenthood has been at the vanguard of parenting policy, establishing a number of 'truths': the cycle of dysfunction; the problem of not planning' the child as a repository of risk, meaningless as a repository of hope; the idea of individual isolation; the expansion of problem parenthood into older age-groups; a lack of faith in the ability of the older generations to rear the next. In policy terms, the teenage mother can redeem herself by submitting to intensive regulatory frameworks of support, by adopting prescribed parenting behaviour, she can be held up as a model of maternal responsibility. She can then be used as a stick with which to morally beat other mothers, such as older mothers, middle-class mothers, working mothers. Finally, she questioned the strength of the idea of neo-liberal economic rationality, suggesting the current lack of faith in the market was evident in the fact that teenage mums are not really expected to be capable of moral or rational decision-making – the emphasis is more often on their vulnerability and their need for support.

## **Discussion**

The discussion became very animated around one question in particular. Are the authors being too cynical about policy? Should the teenage pregnancy strategy be acknowledged to have brought about some positive changes despite its overly negative depiction of teenage parenthood? Roger Ingham argued that the strategy was a way of dealing with other problems such as young sex with associated problems of partner violence and ignorance of bodies. There was evidence of additional disadvantage with respect to depression, housing and partnership caused by teenage motherhood. The support networks established by the policy were to be welcomed. That this support had avoided the anti-sex/pro-sex dichotomy. The panel argued that good sexual health services, maternity services and childcare should be argued for without beginning from a starting point of presumed dysfunction and threat. The sense of moral and social decline means that we may get service provision, but we also get a doom-laden, disempowering culture. Lesley Hoggart argued from the floor that although the gains from the strategy may spill over into gains for all women in terms of reproductive control, it fails to value the work that parents do and places little value on what parents gain from parenting. One speaker suggested that teenage parenthood could be understood through the framework of evolutionary psychology.

## **Session 3**

### **Changing parenting culture: rescuing adult authority in the 21st century**

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

**Paper:** Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology, University of Kent: 'Parenting, Schools and Socialisation'

**Discussants:** Anthony Horowitz, author and screenwriter, and Jenni Russell, columnist for *The Guardian* and the *Sunday Times*

**Frank Furedi, *Parenting, Schools and Socialisation***

Frank opened his talk with a vignette: recently, he found himself in conversation with a group of policy makers about the correlation between parenting, child development and 'quality of life' years. This, he said, was a sign of the time, for previously, policy

makers were skeptical about the efficacy of parenting as a target of political intervention, and thought that a focus on socio-economic factors was more important when thinking about social inequality. Today, however, it seems that all political parties have brought into the idea that early intervention is the key means of reducing state expenditure on crime, ill health and so forth. Parenting has acquired the status of a stand-alone causal factor in child outcomes. This is, said Frank, what might be termed ‘parental determinism’, (one of the most rigid and mechanical forms of determinism.) One of the consequences of this, Frank argued, is to make intergenerational relationships really difficult. We have lost the capacity for conversation; parents are targeted as individualized, atomized entities. Parents now see other adults as enemies, not as allies. This has a corrosive impact on adult solidarity.

Once parenting is moralized in this way, mothers and fathers become educational resources. Parents are talked about as adjuncts of children; parental input is increasingly seen as being decisive. Parenting practices therefore become recast from a pedagogic perspective: You no longer talk to kids; you teach them how to learn responsible education. Reading at home is now a holy crusade; there are reports that if you do not read to your child, your child loses nine months in literacy skills; this is represented as irresponsible. The joy of reading is eclipsed; it becomes a chore. At school, homework becomes a ‘shared’ responsibility. Teachers are aware of the fact that parents ‘help out’. Parents and teachers increasingly interact through children.

Whilst these are negative effects in themselves, Frank argued that there is also a more insidious project here: we rely on parental anxieties as a means of putting pressure on schools. This is already prevalent, and devastating for adult authority. In practice, it means that teachers are attacked by parents over ‘why didn’t my child get this mark’ – it is a widely spread phenomenon now that parents now act as advocates for individual kids. There are several consequences to this:

(1) Children are not immune to this culture: they see their mothers and fathers treating teachers as lesser human beings. Kids pick up on this, and it encourages them to adopt the same approach. This erosion of teachers’ authority is very dangerous. We expect teachers to do the right thing in the classroom, but then undermine them. It is now routine, for example, for decisions over discipline to be questioned. In the attempt to use parents to compensate for failure in education, we see an atomization. This leads to an unfairness that would never have existed in the past. i.e., those parents who can afford to spend time on homework/those who will ‘advocate’ for their kids are those whose children will do best. This turns education into a zero-sum game. But this should not be the case, as education is not a resource, like money. My education is not at your expense; it could bind us together, even those from different backgrounds. Yet when it is atomized, and the system relies on pushy parents, then it does become a zero sum game (‘my son gets into the rugby squad at price of yours’). The army of private tutors now routinely used by middle class parents only widens this gulf.

(2) Policy makers appear to like parents, but in fact they think of them as a suspect influence over children, who cannot be trusted to teach children about values. Schools teach ‘happiness’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘empathy’. Schools are charged with teaching the kids values that you would normally expect to happen from communities and families. Teachers struggle with teaching these things as there is no syllabus, and this

is not what they are trained to do. We therefore have a reversal of roles: Teachers teaching values; parents teaching Maths and geography. And the overall picture is that politicians don't trust teachers *or* parents. This undermines authority in schooling, precisely at the point where authority *is* the point of schooling. We have introduced a regime of education where we are too scared to work together. The consequences of this are really bad – we need to focus on altering the division of labour in schools and homes.

*Anthony Horowitz's response to Frank Furedi*

Anthony took issue with Frank's criticism of programmes to encourage parents to read with their children, arguing that we underestimate the importance of it. Story-telling and so forth is crucial to the development of kids, and connects us with 'who we are'. Evidence also shows that children who read are better advantaged than those who don't (though Anthony did appreciate that there are several other factors to take into account in these statistics).

On the subject of the erosion of teachers' authority: Anthony agreed that it is adults who are being infantilized. Yet pushy parents are part of life's rich tapestry – we enjoy watching their downfall. As to 'empathy' and so on being taught in schools – Anthony agreed that schools don't have time nowadays for teaching proper subjects, like Maths and English. Similarly, there is a collapse of authority in schools and parents: both are overburdened by the government in what is our business as parents and teachers. The CRB regulations, for example, appears to be laws aimed at trying to separate children from teachers, and separate them from parents. Our authority as adults is being undermined; If we are treated like children, how on earth will we find the authority to teach children?

*Jennifer Howze's response to Frank Furedi*

Pushy parents don't feel that the system supports them – their kids are not getting into decent schools etc. They feel that to not be 'pushy' means gambling with their child's future. People want teachers to have more authority, but we don't really agree with what that means in practice.

*Frank Furedi*

On the subject of programmes to encourage reading, it's not the reading he objects to, but the formalisation of interpersonal experience at home. And indeed, it's not really 'reading' we are talking about here; parents are being told to give children not books, but worksheets. Children have a paragraph from a novel – not a whole book. What happens here is that children don't learn a love of reading, they learn literacy skills.

## **DISCUSSION**

Alka Seghal-Cuthbert - When 'silent reading' lessons in schools stopped, I decided to give up teaching. It seems a great shame that we can't just let children read.

Kevin Rooney - There is a very palpable sense of performance in parenting – people feel a need to conform to certain ideas about appropriate parenting.

Jo Hussey - On the reading question: it seems very prescriptive in particular values; it's not just any old thing that children can read, but 'suitable' texts.

Jane Sandeman - How do we get out of this vicious cycle of not wanting to be 'pushy', yet wanting to make sure our kids get the education they deserve?

*Frank Furedi* - What we are seeing here is socialisation in reverse – using children to transmit values to parents. Today, we even have children being ‘involved’ in the selection of teachers.

Jennie Bristow - Parents sense of caring and well-meaning, becomes part of the corrosive process, almost impossible not to enter this vicious cycle.

Pam Lowe - There has always been a tension between education as a social good in itself, and as a means of producing good workers (with transferable skills and so on). The latter valued more these days. Reason you have pushy parents: idea that it’s a competition for a good life in the future.

Nina Powell - We shouldn’t essentialise childhood; the brain demonstrates huge plasticity.

Rachel Condry - There is a changing relationship between parents and schools; how does class effect this?

Diane Hoffman - The relationship between the erosion of authority and the emergence of the partnership model between home and school: once where school and home were separate, now ‘partnership’ blurs them. This contributes to the problem of erosion of roles which are essential for education.

### **Final Remarks**

*Anthony Horowitz* - New Labour have passed a huge amount of laws, and spent a huge amount of money on schemes which haven’t been at all successful. Power to the family left alone!

*Jennifer Howze* - One of the things robbing teachers of authority is bureaucracy; they now have no time to teach.

*Frank Furedi* - We have very big problems with this country. ‘Partnership’ means private life is not properly private, and it means education is politicized even more.

Hannah Arendt uses the term ‘pre-political’ authority to refer, for example, to that of parents over children when they are young. Today, even this is being questioned, with attempts being made to politicize it. It is being replaced with ‘expert’ authorities.

Frank is not against parents having strong views on parenting... but getting a child on the rugby team who shouldn’t be isn’t good for the child. On the class issue: The pushy parent phenomenon in Hampstead (or any other middle-class suburb) is manifested in different ways in different classes; working class parents also have a lot of animosity towards teachers (with many cases reported of threats of, or incidents of, physical violence against teachers).