From child-rearing to 'parenting' what's new about contemporary parenting culture?
January 8/9 2009, University of Kent

This was the first in the series of four seminars, 'Changing Parenting Culture'. A number of significant themes emerged from the two days of discussion which can be taken forward in future seminars.

1. Questions regarding the definitions of adulthood and childhood and the insecure boundary between the two which seem to be central to many of the developments under discussion.

2. Understanding the way in which parenting is re-moralised through apparently objective discourses such as science and medicine. The need was evident to further interrogate claims to 'expert' and 'evidence-based' knowledge in the field of parenting.

3. Changing definitions of 'the parent': their role and their responsibilities: in particular the twin processes by which the determining power of the parent role is both ideologically inflated and practically diminished.

4. The changing relationship between the State and the parent.

5. The impact of these political and cultural developments on the subjectivities of parents and children.

6. The need to understand more exactly what it is that is being problematised in the parent-child relationship: is it the autonomy of the parent, the spontaneous and private character of the parent-child relationship, does it reflect a relocation of social problems onto the parent-child dyad, does it reflect anxieties about gender shifts, or more nebulously about 'the future'?

A write up of the sessions held over the two days of the seminars follows.
AV recordings of these sessions can be found **here**
Papers and PPT slides can be found **here**

Day 1

Session 1
Introduction and welcome to the series
Ellie Lee [convenor of the seminar series] began by thanking the ESRC for funding the seminars and those support staff that had assisted in its organisation. She stressed the importance of making a categorical distinction between 'parenting culture' and 'childrearing' and expressed her hope that the seminar series would lead to a more 'parent-led' approach to the understanding of parent-child relationships.

Paranoid parenting: A roundtable discussion
Introduction by Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology, University of Kent
Frank Furedi began by challenging the claim that there is now a 'backlash' against the 'paranoid' trend in parenting culture. He said there is a mistaken assumption that there

are cycles of ideas, whereby bad will be followed by better. In fact, he argued, the situation is worse today than when he wrote his book, *Paranoid Parenting* in 2001 and it is fundamentally flawed to think that things are getting better. What was seen as acceptable becomes redefined as irresponsible and there is an ascendance and institutionalisation of the idea of 'parental causality', a variation of parental determinism, whereby the parent is redefined as the causal agent in many social phenomena. Quoting from the UK *Every Child Matters Report*, he described the wide spread acceptance of a deterministic relationship between parental involvement and a child's success, manifest in the following claims:

- that 'good parenting' mediates the effect of poverty and other social or cultural problems.
- that parenting can be evaluated in terms of children's behaviour and 'outcomes'.

He argued that this represents a fundamental shift in thinking which displaces socio-economic factors with the 'quality of parenting', evident, it is claimed, in the individualised, psychological, and emotional attitudes of parents. This is, he said, a trend which is present in Britain, the USA and elsewhere which redefines the problem of poverty into one of parenting and represents a shift from a sociological to a moral understanding of inequality. The idea of the 'bad parent' is 'widely transmitted' and 'detached from socially comprehensible territory'. He accused policy-makers of employing sub-standard research to substantiate their claims and bemoaned the abundance of dubious research entering the public domain.

So is this the same as past moral condemnations of the poor? Frank argued that the fundamental difference is that today, every parent can fall into the 'poor parent' category, for example 'over-indulgent' middle-class parents. The idea of a 'parental deficit', he argues, has become the default position. In the USA, this takes the form of a more explicit moralizing project because there is 'greater traction' to moralising there, whereas in the UK, there is a more disguised moralising. However, there is much policy cross-over between the two countries, with many policies being 'virtually indistinguishable'. Parents, he said, <u>do</u> exercise enormous influence, but they do so as part of distinct communities, with differing levels of access to resources and networks. 'As mothers and fathers we do not transcend the world we live in'.

Finally, Frank argued that the parental relationship has been redefined as a 'skill' and parenting has been politicised in the twentieth century. The consequence is that policies weaken the authority of parents, strengthening the authority of experts. This 'migration of authority from parent to expert' is accelerated and achieved through the use of scientific research. The 'steady erosion of the authority of parents' undermines the possibility of 'authoritative parenting'. It is assumed that parents cannot learn from their own experiences and require expert support. These developments encourage an intensification of parenting where mothers and fathers question their own abilities to be independent agents and lose sight of their real responsibilities.

<u>Responses from discussants</u>
<u>Hugh Cunningham, Emeritus Professor of Social History, University of Kent, and author of *The Invention of Childhood and Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*</u>

Hugh said that some aspects of the current developments were similar to those at the beginning of the 20th century when parents, in particular mothers, were cast as the causal agents in infant mortality. Parenting was also politicised then and the State was claimed to be an appropriate co-parent for the child in the name of ensuring the future of the nation. However, there are important differences between then and now. One is the erosion of parental authority which he located as occurring in the mid-20th century. It originated, he claimed, in an economic factor: the end of the assumption that children would hand over their income to their parents. The second difference between the early 20th century and the present day lies in the movement of emotional power away from the parent, towards the child. He cited Young and Willmot's identification of a change in the pecking order within families regarding the distribution of food. Another distinctive feature of the current feature, he argued, is a sense of generational break, of consciously doing things differently from previous generations which he located as occurring in the period 1975 – 1985. The time given to parenting has also changed, with an intensification since the 1980s. He also argued that parenting matters more in unequal societies, and that Britain is a particularly unequal society. The high levels of parental anxiety and children's levels of unhappiness, identified in the 2007 Innocenti/Unicef report, indicate that more emphasis is needed on reducing inequality.

In the ensuing discussion, Frank responded to Hugh's point about continuities with earlier historical periods, saying that is a long-standing 'decline in pre-political authority'. Already in the 19th century, society was moving away from parental authority, but the ruling class and experts were relatively weak at that time and therefore had to tread more carefully. Coercive authoritarian measures were more narrowly focused until the 1970s.

Penny Mansfield, Director, One Plus One
Penny began by defending research output, much of which is very good, for example the Millennium Cohort Study. She also praised professionals who engage with families as people, wanting to 'support their practices' rather than dealing in technical solutions. She agreed that there is a crisis of adult identity whereby children are cast as vulnerable because adults perceive themselves to be vulnerable. New Labour has, she argued, been dogged by avoiding 'family values'. The effects of the Climbie inquiry and *Every Child Matters* unfortunately 'segment people into parents and children'. A more positive development is the 'Think Relationships' initiative which gets at a more fundamental problem, she suggested. The desire to know 'what works' when it comes to family life is part of 21st century culture. She agreed with Hugh about the need to address inequality and also called for us to address our 'child-centred but child-unfriendly' society.

Jennifer Howze, editor of Lifestyle at Times Online, and contributor to Alphamummy, *Times Online*
Jennifer pointed to the discussions going on about parenthood beyond the media-prioritised questions. The blogosphere revealed the conflict and tensions between different positions, and the fixation with determining what or who is a bad parent. She called for parents to be more confident.

There were 4 identifiable themes in the ensuing discussion:

1. How has policy developed so rapidly in the way that it has?

Ellie Lee asked how policy could have such a rapid move from the Climbie/Laming inquiry to *Every Child Matters* and *Every Parent Matters*, in other words, from the specific, highly unusual tragedy of Victoria Climbie's death to policy attempts to address all parents' behaviour.
Frank responded that the Climbie inquiry is not responsible for the developments in policy – rather there was an imperative at the heart of New Labour policy towards a 'politics of behaviour'.
Joanna Williams highlighted how in schools, teachers have a perspective of there being a 'parenting deficit', but that this did not translate into a commitment to compensating for that deficit, rather, attention was paid to improving parents. Why is responsibility pushed back onto parents if parents are perceived as inadequate?

2. The nature of the claims of authority made for 'research evidence' and other forms of expertise.

Responding to Penny Mansfield, Frank called for a challenge to the 'inappropriate use of science' in areas which were 'not susceptible to evidence' and the 'flourishing of advocacy research', he also pointed out that research which runs counter to policy is often suppressed. Family life, he said, contained 'too many variables' to reduce it to one or two factors. Family sociologists have long cautioned about our tendency to reproduce our own experience in our findings because the family is so familiar to all of us.
Jennie Bristow pointed out that the experts to whom parental authority has been outsourced are not really experts at all; their claim to expertise based on their detachment form the immediate situation, not on scientific expertise.

3. How does policy and parenting culture impact on the lived experience of parents?

Helen Reece asked 'how much are parents talking the talk but not walking the walk'? In other words, to what extent does policy and cultural change is floating above what parents actually do? Don't parents get on with the practicalities of looking after their children, co-operating and making pragmatic decisions?
Jane Sandeman responding to Helen Reece's question, said that parents do internalise and practice policy guidelines, which become moral absolutes in the absence of wider values.
Frank responded to the points made by Helen Reece and Jane Sandeman by saying that it is impossible for individuals to transcend these trends, that rules may be broken, but they are not challenged and therefore can be reinforced.

4. The need to explore what is revealed about shifts in understandings of the categories of 'adulthood' and 'childhood'.
Pam Lowe asked how the lengthening of childhood into the early 20s works with other aspects of the parenting culture?
Helene Guldberg questioned the negative tone of the speakers, arguing that surely some changes have been positive, for example, the emergence of adolescence and the shift in the conceptualisation of the child as economically to emotionally valuable.

On Pam Lowe's point about extended childhood, Frank pointed to US research on emergent adulthood and said there was a close relationship between the new parenting regime and the infantilisation of children. He said we try to keep children childish at all costs and the invention of adolescence was part of this, but it is nothing compared to what is going on now.

Hugh Cunningham said that we cannot look at childhood without looking at adulthood. Today, he said, adults do not like adult life and therefore project onto children, sacralising childhood. He provocatively challenged the 'strong belief that children should be happy' asking, why?

Lydia Martens said that the argument that both adulthood and childhood are collapsing was a more useful way of thinking.

Ciara Doyle argued that we are seeing the reverse of the stretching of childhood, it is the denial of childhood. For example, in Irish policy, people aged between 7 and 35 years are labelled 'young people'. She said there is a terror of childhood. That childhood is gendered and classed and suggested that in working class life, the visual signifiers of age had gone, with boys and their fathers dressing identically. Why is this?

Frank responded that there is an alarming sexualisation of children but we simultaneously marvel at their innocence. This is not a contradiction, but rather both processes are at work. There is a collapse of male authority and ambivalence amongst adults about growing up.

5. How does policy, parenting culture, parental subjectivity interact with the market?
Anthony Beckett raised the question of how 'conscience is mobilised' today, by what mechanism is this mobilised and developed?

Lydia Martens asked how the market relates to the growth of experts, who are actually market-based rather than based in scientific knowledge, for example Gina Ford or Jo Frost (Supernanny). Frank responded to the questions about the market by pointing out that there is a huge market in preying parental fears and on identity formation through parenting, there is a relationship between this and experts, who he compared to missionaries; today we have experts who claim to want to fulfil 'unmet needs' amongst the 'hard to reach' and talk of the need to create demand.

Session Two
Helen Reece, Reader in Law, Birkbeck College, University of London
'Parental responsibility as therapy'

Helen brought a legal perspective to the exploration of shifts in definitions of 'the parent'. The paper had three aims:
1. To trace the trajectory within law from 'parents rights' to 'parental responsibility'
2. To explore the reasons given by the courts for granting 'parental responsibility'.
3. To explore therapeutic development of the concept of 'parental responsibility'.
Helen challenged the commonplace claim that the concept of 'parents' rights' represented a legal construction of children as possessions of their parents. She argued that the idea that children must be cared for by their parents is long-standing (traceable back to 1830) and that 'parents' rights' did not contradict this, in fact, the law treated parents' rights as existing for the benefit of the child. She said that 'parental responsibility' is a much more 'slippery' concept than 'parents' rights' which, in practice means that redefinitions occur. There is a loss of meaning of authority within the concept of parental responsibility evident in the reasons courts give for parental responsibility judgements, in particular, she went on to give examples of cases where unmarried fathers have applied for parental responsibility.

She argued that courts are increasingly emphasising the symbolic aspect of parental responsibility and shifting the basis for legal judgement from decision-making to feelings and emotions. In practice, she claimed, parental responsibility orders do not materially affect children's lives and are increasingly enacted to deal with the child's or the parent's perceived emotional needs. Sally Sheldon's work, which explores how unmarried fathers have come to be constructed as a 'vulnerable group' and Frank Furedi's and others' descriptions of how, within a 'therapy culture', people seek affirmation through the law rather than relationships with one another, were drawn on to make sense of these developments.

Discussion

Rosemary Hunter asked about the implications of the promotion of therapy culture for the role of the law and the judge, citing examples from Australia of judges redefining themselves as 'social worker' or 'therapists'.
Helen responded that family law is particularly susceptible to therapeutic intentions.
Jan Macvarish asked how many people could be defined as having 'parental responsibility' and whether an expansion in this number represented a dilution of the concept of 'parent'.
Helen responded that there was no limit to the number of people that could have parental responsibility but that this was often seen as a good thing, with radical implications. However, she suggested this was in fact dangerous, as no-one was really in charge; no-one is a 'buffer between the child and the authorities'.
Jane Sandeman asked whether Helen's findings suggest that law is leading the way in social change rather than following social trends.
Helen suggested that in fact, law is lagging behind but that lawyers are strongly influenced by therapeutic notions. There is also more judge-made law which reinforces the role of the judge as paternalistic/therapeutic mediator.
Jennie Bristow asked whether there were parallels with cohabitation law.

Helen responded that there are parallels in that there is increasingly recourse to the law to forge identities, in an effort to overcome 'status anxiety'.

Marianne Kavanagh asked how parental responsibility can be so flexible?

Helen responded that is a weak and flexible concept because it is much more slippery than the concept of 'rights'.

Val Gillies suggested that this therapeutic development was linked to identity politics more broadly. She also asked whether 'the father' as parent is defined in law and whether these changes indicate a move towards a more biologised understanding of fatherhood.

Helen responded that the father and the parent is defined in law, but that this was not the same thing as having parental responsibility.

Session Three: Monitoring motherhood
Mary Ann Kaneski, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana
'Modernity and the medicalisation of motherhood'

Mary Ann began by stating that from the late 18th and 19th century idealisations of mother love to the 20th century rise of scientific motherhood, mothers' emotions have been both medicalised and scrutinised. Tracing this trajectory through psychoanalysis's problematising of both excessive and inadequate mother love and the defining of 'failing' mothers as ill, to the 1960s naturalised versions of mother love evident in attachment theory, there have been increasingly biological notions of motherhood. A discourse of risk runs through theories of mother love: the medicalisation of childbirth, the isolated nuclear family, the problem of working mothers. In the 1990s, the idea that bonding was particular difficult in a modern society gained strength.

The implication of these developments is that failing mothers are seen as sick rather than bad, all mothers are instructed to monitor themselves and they become the direct target of medical scrutiny. The social context which helps to explain these developments can be characterised as one in which children are cast as innocent and vulnerable, intensive mothering is seen as a remedy for social problems and they are linked to concerns over changes in modern society.

Gayle Letherby, Professor of Sociology, Plymouth University
'Educated for motherhood: natural instincts versus expert advice'

Gayle raised the importance of talking about non-parenthood as well as parenthood as the two are inextricably linked. The strong expectation that women will become mothers leads to the 'othering' of non-mothers.

There is a tension between expert knowledge and experiential knowledge. It is claimed that education is needed to improve mothers. But advice and support is aimed at particular groups. There is no room for ambivalence in idealised motherhood, yet there has always been an ambivalence around motherhood.

Discussant's comments: Charlotte Faircloth, doctoral student, Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge
Charlotte responded to both papers, bringing to bear her own work on intensive mothering. She affirmed the prevalence of the intensive ideal and explored the

relationship between this and maternal identities. There is, in advice to mothers, she argued, a 'misalignment between expectation and realisation' and a confusion between the 'is', which is a description, and the 'ought', which entails prescription (David Hume). This tends to normalise surveillance. Meanwhile, the scientific rationale 'flattens' human relationships, subsuming moral discourse and judgements.

Discussion
Jennie Bristow suggested that the spontaneity of love itself has come to be seen as a problem.
Lorraine Macmillan asked what the objectives were of the animal studies and third world studies mentioned by Kanieski as examples of the naturalisation of mother love. Was it to show that mothering was natural?
Frank Furedi argued that it is important to decouple medicalisation from scientificism, making the point that medicalisation is logically prior to scientificism even though they emerge at the same time. Medicalisation should be seen as amoralising project to do with creating certainty, whereas scientificism is the means through which this project is realised, and which entails a denial of morality and the claim for objective, external authority. He also affirmed the importance of Charlotte's point about the collapsing of the 'is' and the 'ought'.
Helen Reece asked how we could understand the trends described alongside the widespread scepticism of science.

Day 2

Session 4
Ciara Doyle, doctoral student, sociology, Trinity College Dublin
'The nuclear family as self-fulfilling prophesy: Representations of kin in TV parenting programmes'

Based on her research on UK and Irish parenting television programmes, Ciara Doyle demonstrated how the focus of these 'reality' TV shows is typically the nuclear family unit, to the exclusion of the extended kinship network. Despite discourses of family change and reconstitution in modern times, representation of the '2.4 children' family as normative has an instrumental effect, she argued, in reinscribing its normality. Extended kin or friends are portrayed as a threat to this normality – they are presented as out of touch with more modern, expert guided forms of parenting advocated by the programmes. This threat is most often mediated through careful editing, which minimises the involvement of extended kin in the life of the children in question. In other cases, kin are 'symbolically annihilated'. Typically, the parenting expert fronting the programme urges a radical change of behaviour in a kin member (such as an uncle or grandparent) lest they undermine the efforts of the programme – if they spoil the child with sweets, for example. If they fail to change their ways, kin are cut off from the child – presented as being in the child's best interests. In fact, frame-by-frame analysis reveals that this is not generally the case.

Ciara pointed out a contradiction in the impetus behind such programmes. They claim that the reason parents (most typically, mothers) need parenting help is because their own mothers have not passed on their own parenting skills, due to the 'breakdown' of extended kinship networks. Ironically however, they impel mothers *not* to trust their

own mothers, who are not conversant with modern methods of childcare. This is a dynamic witnessed throughout a broader intensive parenting culture, endorsing expert guided care.

There is also a heavily gendered dynamic to the programmes, in their representation of appropriate parenting from mothers and fathers. Fathers are presented as 'baby entertainers, bumbling assistants and line managers' (after Sunderland 2007), whilst it is mothers who are shouldered with the burden of enacting the parenting decisions taken by the couple.

Discussion

Frank Furedi commented that a prejudice linking the political left and right is that which holds that the breakdown of social networks requires expert intervention to repair it. A necessary part of the programme is therefore the 'confessional moment' whereby the mother (again, typically) must express her regret at her past behaviour, and accept the support of the expert. The giving over of authority simultaneously edifies the mother's identity as a good parent. Ciara noted that in her work in focus groups of 10-12 people, who discuss their responses to their programmes, there was much empathy generated through this confessional moment.
Jennie Bristow and Jan Macvarish asked about the nature of the expertise of the characters in the programmes – many grandmothers today, said Jennie, might actually be open to the notion of a broader 'therapy culture', being subject to it themselves. Esther Dermott noted that it was a theatrical effect of the programmes that to establish the professional expertise of the parenting practitioner, the experiential expertise of extended kin must be annihilated.

Session 5
Dr Janice McLaughlin, Deputy Executive Director, Policy Ethics and Life Sciences Research Centre, University of Newcastle
'Boundaries of care and parenting'

Janice McLaughlin's paper examined modes of care and mothering, with a particular focus on how notions of citizenship and care intersect in the lives of mothers with disabled children. In a day of discussion surrounding intensive parenting, Janice argued that a very specific form of intensity was required by parents of disabled children, which both deepened and went beyond those expected of other parents. Janice aimed to combine approaches from both feminist and disability rights commentators, looking at points of tension between the two. She focussed her discussion on two elements: early intervention and conditionality.

Janice showed how the transformation of the home into a site of therapy was met my mixed reactions by the mothers in her sample (again, the focus was on mothering, not fathering here). Some mothers welcomed the chance to become accomplished in a range of professional skills required to assist their children; others resented the implication that responsibility for the care of their children had been out-sourced by the medical profession. The professional surveillance that undertaking these skills engenders often left women feeling as though they were open to the charge of not doing all they could to support their children.

Parents of disabled children become accomplished in a range of skills (from changing an oxygen tank to physiotherapy). Yet the conditionality with which children receive care requires that parents must first and foremost be excellent administrators. The meticulous detail required on forms for disability support was used by Janice as a means of examining the relationship between care, subjectivity and identity. Whilst this had a positive effect for some parents (in the sense of becoming an advocate, involved in public debate) many also found this burden exhausting. To this end, Janice urged reconsideration of the notion of dependency as a threat to citizenship (viz. autonomy) thereby reconstituting public debate around parents of disabled children.

Discussant's comments: Rosemary Henn-Macrae, from Kent County Council's Disabled Children's Service

Rosemary noted that the assumption of expertise by parents of disabled children did open up new avenues for their own 'identity work', but that this could leave parents 'high and dry' if the situation changed (that is, if the child's condition deteriorated, or similarly, if it improved). This was noted as a more pronounced example of the 'empty-nest' syndrome witnessed in a broader parenting culture which encourages parents to construct their identities through their chosen parenting methods.

Discussion

The trend of defining children in terms of brains and bodies, which parents should maximise, means that all children are now considered through the lens of risk, or 'pathology in waiting', argued Ellie Lee. The suggested that parents of disabled children did not 'follow the rules' during pregnancy or infancy, means that they internalise this trend twice over.
The congruence between the wider parenting culture with the behaviour expected of parents with disabled children was noted by Jennie Bristow – the obsessive monitoring of children, the notion that the parent can 'fix' the problem, and the awareness of judgement of other parents being just three examples. Pam Lowe noted that the only parents who are considered 'experts' are those that agree with the diagnosis of professional experts; again, this is not a trend confined to parents of disabled children, although they embody a more intensive version of it.

Session 6: Changing constructions of 'problem' mothers
Maud Perrier, doctoral student, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick
'Being a Good Mother: Morality, Age and Class'

Maud's presentation demonstrated how these categories were almost always intertwined, urging nuanced analysis of trends. She noted how mothers in her sample (those younger than 18, or older than 38) would use discourses of inappropriate mothering as a means of establishing themselves as moral actors. Talking of placing the child's needs first was a trope both older, middle class and younger, working class mothers would use to endorse their own practices. Older mothers also tended to speak of their 'intensive' parenting practices in positive terms. Again, highlighting the gendered element to these questions, Maud noted that mothers did not consider child-centred parenting to be central to good fathering.

There were further fault-lines between mothers in Maud's sample that worked and those that stayed at home to look after their children. In both cases, mothers spoke of their decision as determined by what they considered best for their child; in congruence with a wider intensive parenting culture described by Hays.

Dr Jan Macvarish, Research Associate, CHSS, University of Kent
'Teenage parenthood and the construction of the new model parent'

Jan complemented this presentation with her own paper about teenage parenthood and the construction of the 'new model parent'. Speaking of the de-centering of parents from the raising of children manifest in wider parenting culture, Jan showed how the teenage mother embodies a confusion we have about all parents. Previously constructed as health problem, and now a social justice problem, the teenage mother is considered a primary target for intervention by policy makers. The ideal teenage mother is one who recognises her mistake at how 'difficult' having a child can be, and who undertakes an evangelical role in various policy programmes to warn her peers of this reality. In fact, Jan showed how many teenage mothers (like most mothers) find having a baby to be a very meaningful experience and the child is something to be celebrated rather than problematised.

Discussion

Jennie Bristow noted that the idea one has to be 'ready' to have a baby constructs maternal and infant agency at loggerheads, whereby a mother is expected to 'live her life first' and then 'settle down'. This is, she noted, a negative and deprived view of what the parenting relationship looks like. Ellie Lee noted that the idea of finding a 'work-life balance' so prevalent in many of the policy documents surrounding parenting has subsumed the purpose of work into the parenting role. That is, it is no longer good enough to say that one wants to work because it is de facto 'A Good Thing', but because it is best for one's child. This is, the Ellie noted, quite a worrying step with respect to the social enterprise, and a society which has thus far valued work as an end in itself.

Corinne Wilson and Geraldine Brown, who have conducted research into teenage pregnancy highlighted the need to challenge the construction of the 'teenage mother' as a homogenous phenomenon. They questioned Jan's claim that there had been a 'demoralisation' of teenage sex and pregnancy, suggesting that the New Labour administration pursued and 'old-fashioned' conservative agenda which had a moral problem with unmarried motherhood and sought to stigmatise the working class.