

**Monitoring Parents:  
Science, evidence, experts and the new parenting culture  
13-14 September 2011  
Collated abstracts (panel sessions)**

**Therese Andrews, Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, Norway and  
Stephanie Knaak, Alberta, Canada**

***Medicalized Mothering: Experiences with Breastfeeding in Canada and Norway***

This paper explores infant feeding experiences of mothers in Canada and Norway, two countries where breastfeeding rates are relatively high. Based on interviews with 33 Canadian mothers and 27 Norwegian mothers, we examine how mothers feel, think and talk about their infant feeding decisions and experiences, and examine similarities and divergences across their stories. For the mothers in our studies, breastfeeding was seen as a core duty of (good) mothering. The majority of the mothers in our studies accepted all major tenets of the scientific-medical discourse on breastfeeding, and were deeply committed to the practice. Our findings also reveal the existence of a broader culture of pressure, competition, judgement, and surveillance regarding breastfeeding, suggesting that the high breastfeeding rates in these two countries are not merely a result of favourable structural conditions, but of strong cultural expectations towards breastfeeding.

Our findings lend support to arguments that contemporary parenthood is characterized by a process of increasing medicalization. We discuss our findings in connection with the broader argument that medical discourses and medical professionals are becoming the primary authorities and moral gatekeepers of contemporary parenthood.

**Sara Bragg, Research Fellow, Child and Youth Studies, Childhood Development and Learning,  
The Open University**

***"Blame the moronic mothers": parenting and the 'sexualisation of childhood' debate***

Two recent reports on the 'sexualisation of childhood', commissioned in quick succession by the previous and current UK governments, suggest that this phenomenon can no longer be dismissed as hypothesis, conjecture or overblown campaigning slogan: instead, the 'sexualisation of childhood' now appears to denote a fact, an unarguable state of affairs requiring regulation and response.

'Sexualisation' owes its enhanced ontological status to many sources including academic experts and commentators: prominent also are lay voices of parents represented in, for instance, the mumsnet 'Let Girls be Girls' or the Mothers' Union 'Bye Buy Baby' campaigns. These campaigns imply that parenthood in itself bestows authority and voice to some parents, yet necessarily deny these qualities to another group of parents who figure in the debate as the complicit or ignorant sources or perpetrators of the problem: 'blame the moronic mothers' as an online forum respondent put it.

This paper considers the 'sexualisation' debate as, in part, a manifestation of the contemporary 'crisis' of parenting. It draws on research with focus groups of parents to consider both the reach of expertise in promoting moral self-regulation, and its limits – that is to say, the points at which parents resisted or reinterpreted its claims in the light of competing knowledges and values.

**Karen Clarke, Politics, Social Sciences, University of Manchester**

***Poor parents, poor development and early intervention***

Early childhood has increasingly come to be the focus of policies to prevent future social exclusion and the problem of 'the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage'. The evidence to support such policies has come from quantitative, longitudinal studies that examine the associations between parental characteristics and behaviour and a variety of child outcomes. Such studies tend to exclude the consideration of wider social and economic factors on parents and the direct and indirect effects of these on children's cognitive, social and emotional development. The result has been policies that attempt to promote very specific styles and practices of parenting, reducing the care and upbringing of children to a set of highly instrumental techniques for achieving a particular set of measurable outcomes. These policies identify bringing up children as the exclusive responsibility of parents, albeit with direction from the state about how to do this 'properly', and identify 'parenting' as a skill which needs to be taught, particularly to parents who live in poverty. There appears to be a strong political consensus across political parties in the UK, driven by reliance on evidence from psychology and neuroscience, about the need for interventions in parenting in early childhood, which has become increasingly focused on the parent-child dyad, and which explicitly sees material circumstances as relatively insignificant. This paper examines the content and theoretical perspectives which informed the development of New Labour's early intervention policies with parents of pre-school children, from the introduction of Sure Start to the targeting of pregnant teenagers through the Nurse-Family Partnership, and the continuity with Labour's approach of policy proposals under the Coalition government. It argues that the new parenting science draws selectively on a narrow range of evidence and that the individualisation of responsibility for children's care is used to absolve the state of responsibility for continuing social inequality in Britain, while justifying a high level of scrutiny of parents living in poverty.

**Claire Edwards and Etaoine Howlett, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland**

***The new professionals? 'ADHD parents' and the evaluation of alternative therapeutic regimes***

Parenting a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can be a moral minefield, given the prevalence of parental blame narratives which permeate public discourse. ADHD is often cited as an example par excellence of the increasing medicalisation and pathologisation of everyday life. A number of commentators have noted how, in a process characterised as 'medicalisation from below', parents have themselves become active promoters of ADHD as a medical category, deploying scientific evidence to counter possible perceptions of their risky identity. Based on research carried out with organisations representing parents of children with ADHD in Ireland, this paper explores how parents are seeking to negotiate and become active producers of expert knowledge on alternative treatment modalities as behavioural management strategies for children with ADHD. In particular, we focus on two examples in which parents commissioned evaluations of specific interventions, one focusing on neurofeedback, the other on a psychotherapeutic intervention. In so doing, we explore how parents' interventions have sought to expand the therapeutic domain of ADHD beyond the exclusive realm of biospsychiatry, by engaging a broader range of 'psy' experts in the field of ADHD. Parents' engagement with this diverse range of professionals provides insights into the identity work of parents at the interface of 'experience' and 'science'.

**Rosalind Edwards, University of Southampton and Val Gillies, London South Bank University**

***Who's looking out for your children? Changes and continuities in British mothers and fathers experiences of parenting over half a century***

Much academic and political attention is focused on the nature of transformations in family relationships and parental support systems since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with contemporary family life said to be characterised by a fracturing of traditional support systems and a decline in values of duty and responsibility, undermining good parenting. In this paper we will explore changes and continuities in British mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenting over the past half century, through an historical comparison of in-depth data from our research on the support resources accessed by mothers and fathers in the early 2000s, with material from archived classic studies conducted by leading British social researchers, Dennis Marsden and Peter Townsend, in the 1960s.

In particular, we consider and contrast practices and meanings around children's capacities and judgments about parental responsibility across nearly half a century, as well as in perceptions and use of informal support networks and formal services. We will illustrate how practices condemned as neglectful today could be unremarkable in the 1960s, and those considered a proper exercise of contemporary parental responsibility could be regarded as over-protective nearly half a century earlier. We also show how social class remains a constant mediator across the generations, shaping experiences of support from family and neighbours, and formal services.

Policy debates and broader concerns about contemporary parenting deficits are notably ahistorical in that they fail to acknowledge or engage with these changing understandings and expectations. Our historical comparison makes it difficult to argue that how parents bring up their children has declined from a previous golden apex.

**Adrienne Evans, Coventry University**

***Keeping it in the Family: Sexualization and Figurations of the Responsible Liberal Parent***

This paper examines new parental discourses within the sexualization of culture. Despite a proliferation of family structures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, a particular family form currently holds cultural currency within discourses of sexualization - that of the 'responsible liberal family'. In this paper I argue that this family figuration expresses a crisis within the institution of the family. Drawing on data collected in a study of women's negotiations of the sexualisation of culture, I show how women constructed a notion of family life where sex was sanctioned on the 'opening up of discourses', where family members should be open and not repressive, and where the child figure had 'choice', so long as that choice was 'responsible'. But each time these ideas of the family were deployed, they were coupled with anxiety (Kaplan, 1992). For the family, the neoliberal and postfeminist discourses of autonomy, choice and freedom embedded within the sexualization of culture stood in contrast to the moral panic and motherly concern as the required response to the sexualization of children. A crisis of governance for the liberal parent figure emerged, especially where power relations were overturned and the inquisitive child could demand an incitement to discourse on behalf of the parent. Being a 'good' parent within the sexualization of culture became, for these women, an inherently unstable, anxious and uncertain discursive space.

**Charlotte Faircloth, Leverhulme post-doctoral fellow, University of Kent**

***'What science says is best': Full-term breastfeeding, scientific authority and maternal identity work***

Based on research in London with mothers from a breastfeeding support organisation this paper explores the narratives of women who breastfeed 'to full term' (typically for a period of several years) as part of a philosophy of 'attachment parenting', an approach to parenting which validates long term proximity between child and care-taker.

In line with wider cultural trends, one of the most prominent 'accountability strategies' used by this group of mothers to explain their long-term breastfeeding is recourse to scientific evidence, both about the nutritional benefits of breastfeeding and about the broader cognitive and developmental benefits of attachment parenting more broadly. Women's accounts internalize and reflect popular literature around attachment parenting, which is explored here in-depth as a means of contextualizing shifting patterns of 'scientisation'. What follows is a reflection on how 'scientific evidence' is given credence in narratives of mothering, and what the implications of this are for individuals in their experience of parenting, and for society more broadly. As a form of 'Authoritative Knowledge' (Jordan 1997) women utilise 'science' when they talk about their decisions to breastfeed long-term, since it has the effect of placing these non-conventional practices beyond debate (they are simply what is 'healthiest'). The article therefore makes a contribution to wider sociological debates around the ways in which society and behaviour are regulated, and the ways in which 'science' is interpreted, internalized and mobilized by individuals in the course of their 'identity work'.

**Jenny Green, Ph.D. candidate, Faculty of Health and Social Care, University of Hull**

***Midwifery and infant feeding policy***

The ancient practice of midwifery is often described as both an Art and a Science with Midwives viewed as experts in the ante, intra and post natal care of women experiencing 'normal' pregnancy (Silverton 1993). However, over the past century in the UK, midwives have become 'professionalised', regulated and significantly controlled by the medical profession (Heagarty 1996; Kirkham 1996). The vast majority of midwives in England work in maternity services provided by the National Health Service (NHS), a uniquely dominant institution that exerts a profound influence upon the culture of health care in the UK (Klein 2006; Hunter 2008a; Hill 2009).

Current UK Government health policy is particularly orientated towards promoting health (Hunter 2008a; Hunter, Marks et al. 2010) and especially reducing the incidence of obesity and socio-demographic inequalities in health (DH 2010a). Owing to the perceived scientific health benefits of breastfeeding, raising breastfeeding rates has become an NHS 'performance target' and is viewed by the UK Government as a key public health priority that will improve the health and wellbeing of women and children (DH 2005; DH 2007a). As a result, breastfeeding has now become a political issue, with the maxim 'breast is best' legitimately embedded within UK healthcare culture with midwives directed to be significant agents in the UK Government's public health agenda.

Current UK Government infant feeding policy promoting breastfeeding could be viewed as an example of directing parenting behaviour. This paper will present current NHS infant feeding policy from the perspective of midwives and explore the impact of promoting breastfeeding on women and the midwifery profession.

**Dmitra Hartas, University of Warwick**

***Inequality and the home learning environment: predictions about 7-year olds' language and literacy***

Using a UK representative sample from the Millennium Cohort Study, the present study examined the unique and cumulative contribution of children's characteristics and attitudes to school, home learning environment and family's socio-economic background to children's language and literacy at the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7). Consistently with previous studies, the findings showed that family's socio-economic background made a significant contribution to teacher-rated language and literacy. Moreover, children's characteristics and attitudes to school as well as certain aspects of the home learning environment explained a significant amount of variance in language and literacy. Certain aspects of the home learning environment, i.e., mother-child emotional closeness and mothers' education and reading habits (but not bookreading and homework support), made substantive contributions to teacher-rated language and literacy, pointing to the importance of supporting a culture of reading and learning in the home that goes beyond a mere transmission of literacy and numeracy skills. These findings support home learning not as an extension of teacher input but as an instrumental factor in creating literacy-rich home environments characterised by a relaxed exploration of learning, likely to stimulate more generalised and motivational experiences in children. Despite that a high percentage of parents were involved with home learning routinely, homework support and bookreading were not found to associate with children's language and literacy outcomes, raising questions about home learning as a tool for literacy skills transmission and pointing to the importance of promoting a general culture of learning at home in which children develop positive attitudes towards schooling and feel emotionally secure and behaviourally ready to learn. These findings are likely to contribute to debates regarding the role of home learning in reducing underachievement, drawing important implications for family policy.

**Yael Hashiloni-Dolev & Shiri Shkedi, School of Government and Society, The Academic College of Tel-Aviv-Yaffo**

***On New Reproductive Technologies and Family Ethics: Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) for Sibling Donor (SD) in Israel and Germany***

This paper discusses the policy debate and ethical discussion surrounding preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) for Sibling Donor (SD) in Germany and Israel. Based on an analysis of the regulations and ethical discourse concerning a unique form of NRT – PGD for SD – we complement the scholarly discussion of NRTs in these countries, by pointing to an explanatory factor that has been formerly neglected, namely the hegemonic notions regarding the ideal relationship between the generations, and the mutual obligations between different family members in Germany and Israel. We argue that the fact PGD (in general) and PGD for SD (in particular) has been banned in Germany but endorsed without hesitation in Israel, has to do with different perceptions of family ethics within the two societies. Furthermore, we argue that this factor contributes significantly to the more general understanding of German and Israeli policies regarding NRTs.

**Gillian Hawkes and Angela Cassidy, Centre for Interprofessional Practice Faculty of Health, University of East Anglia**

***Feeding baby: How parents negotiate and manage advice around infant and early nutrition***

Many research, policy, and public health initiatives have focused on promoting the benefits of breastfeeding, alongside encouraging new mothers to breastfeed and to continue to breastfeed for longer. There has however, been less focus on the tensions that parents and health professionals may

experience between competing discourses on infant and early nutrition and parenting. There is considerable diversity of approaches both within and between available advice from public health initiatives; parenting 'self-help' books; information from commercial sources; and experiential advice from e.g. peers and parents. So where do parents turn to for advice, and in what way is that advice constructed and contested? Such information, research and policy has tended to focus on early infant feeding (breast or bottle), meaning that less attention has been paid to nutrition beyond the early stages: i.e. the introduction of complementary feeds and diet into toddlerhood.

This paper is based on interviews with new parents (both mothers and fathers) and will focus on how parents manage and negotiate information and advice about infant and early nutrition during their children's early years. We explore how parents negotiate the risk landscape surrounding parenting and feeding choices. Finally, we also address how parents and health professionals negotiate the category of 'good parent' (or mother) vis-à-vis the cultural discourse around early infant feeding methods (in particular, breastfeeding). Parents' conceptions of themselves as 'good' parents are discussed together with ways in which they negotiate conflicting notions of expertise.

**Maria Jansson, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University**

***Different worlds: breastfeeding, motherhood and HIV in the World Health Organization's policies on infant feeding***

In the 2003 WHO global strategy for infant and young child feeding a healthy wet-nurse is presented as an option for women who cannot breastfeed themselves. This recommendation challenges current western ideas of what it means to be a mother. Further it omits the ideological link between feeding and mothering, a link that is central to ideas about motherhood, as well as to many of the arguments put forth in order to increase breastfeeding rates. The emergence of the wet-nurse in WHO policy documents must be seen in the context of the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The first reports of mother to child transmission of HIV via breastfeeding were published in the early 1990s and presented a major challenge to the WHO work on breastfeeding promotion.

The purpose of this paper is to study how the discourse on breastfeeding promotion, as it appears in documents from the WHO, changes due to the HIV challenge, with a special focus on how breastfeeding is construed, and how mothers are positioned. More specifically I will ask: What arguments are used to promote breastfeeding? What alternatives to breastfeeding are presented? How are mothers positioned within the discourse? What differences between mothers' conditions are acknowledged, and how are they described?

I will argue that the inclusion of the task to prevent HIV, within breastfeeding promotion, gives rise to two parallel tracks of reasoning about breastfeeding. These are divided along geographical and socio-economic lines according to the global and local distribution of wealth. However, the two modes of speaking about breastfeeding are also interconnected. At the intersection negotiations of what motherhood means, and how it should be exercised, arise.

**Tracey Jensen, King's College London**

***Does parental warmth matter more than parental wealth?***

The field of 'parenting science' has already been colonized for some time by developmental specialists, whose psychometric tools permit them to offer an 'objective' account of natural or normal development, even as these accounts are constructions based on normative assumptions (Holt, 2009). Within the context of new parenting culture, the zealotry with which 'parenting science' searches for and declares the causes of good child outcomes has increased tremendously. A significant recent trend has emerged for locating the cause of good child outcomes within a formula of 'parental warmth'. Under the terms of this formula, child outcomes are determined not by their parents' possession or access to

various kinds of resources (wealth) but by the parental style with which they are raised (warmth). This formula permits would-be social reformers to abandon economic notions of inequality, and to advocate a move towards moral interventions into the intimate conduct of family relationships.

This paper examines the production of categories around parental style and the agendas that these 'parenting style' taxonomies serve. In particular, I look at the ways in which datasets such as the Millenium Cohort Study have been used to advance policy arguments for intervening in parental warmth over parental wealth. The paper argues that data does not pre-exist taxonomies, but rather the taxonomies themselves – the ways in which we divide up and classify – create data. The paper highlights key flaws in the production of these taxonomies and situates them within broader failings around child poverty and social inequalities.

**Kristina Alexandra Diana John , PhD-candidate, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research and Daniela Grunow, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Amsterdam**

***The dynamics between expertise, parenting norms and politics: Media-analytical evidence from six European countries***

The proposed paper describes the dynamics between the political discourse about parenting and (leave) policies and the construction of norms and expertise of childrearing in the dominant national media between 1980 and 2010 in cross-national perspective. The paper explores new tools of quantitative content media analysis as well as semantic network analysis of advertisements and editorial content in daily newspapers to describe how ideas about mothers and fathers have changed in recent decades. The comparative perspective highlights differences and similarities of parenting norms between the countries over time. A special emphasis will be on the role played by experts from the field of (neuro) - science in justifying and evaluating changes in the political and institutional framing of mother's and father's roles during the transition to parenthood. The longitudinal data allow to draw conclusions about how norms and the construction of expertise influence the political discourse and finally politics and vice versa.

This conference paper is part of the superordinated research project 'Transition to parenthood: International and national studies of norms and gender division of work at the life course transition to parenthood (APPARENT)' directed by Dr Daniela Grunow (AISSR, University of Amsterdam) and financed by the European Research Council (ERC). The impact of media, norms, welfare states and professionals (gynaecologists, midwives and family councils) on the actual behavior and attitudes of new parents over the lifecourse in the pre- and postnatal phase will be dissected in adjacent research papers.

**Mary Ann Kanieski, Saint Mary's College**

***"They Can't Help It; It's How They Were Raised": Constructing the Ideal Parent***

In much of the discourse on early childhood, parenting is assumed to be influential in determining children's futures. As a result, there have been great efforts to reform parenting practices, especially the parenting practices of poor or working class parents. The purpose of this research is to examine the process of educating parents by studying the ways in which parenting instructors and parenting classes construct the ideal parent. This research is based on data from a qualitative study of parenting classes. Through interviews with parenting instructors, parents, and participant observation of multiple parenting classes aimed at diverse groups, this study finds that parenting classes tend to construct the ideal parent as autonomous. The autonomous parent is understood as someone who can control her emotions, is unaffected by negative childhood experiences, and most importantly, works to attain her own autonomy. As such, it is the autonomous parent who is most able to implement the parenting

advice offered by instructors and classes. Not surprisingly, autonomous parents were more likely to be white and middle class. Parenting instructors often constructed poor and working class parents as lacking in autonomy and consequently parenting skills because of their lack of education, lack of self awareness, and perceived inability to separate themselves from their less desirable upbringings. Implications of parent education will be discussed.

**Stephanie Knaak, Alberta, Canada**

***Medical Paternalism, Risk Averse Parenting, and the Moral Straight-jacketing of Maternal Behaviour: Unpacking the 'no drinking during pregnancy' rule***

Abstention of alcohol during (and even pre-) pregnancy is a clear expectation for expectant mothers, not only according to current health policies, but also according to current social mores. Yet, the scientific evidence does not seem to support a need for total abstention. At the time of this writing, for example, I am aware of four studies from the UK as well as two from Australia showing no increased risk of social/emotional problems or lower cognitive test scores among children born to women who drank lightly during pregnancy. As well, there are few, *if any*, population studies showing a correlation between light drinking during pregnancy and adverse health outcomes.

My paper will engage this issue from a sociological standpoint, examining the (perhaps unintended) consequences of the current 'better safe than sorry' approach for women and mothers. In particular, I will discuss how the 'no alcohol during pregnancy' rule might be considered a specific case-in-point of how protective health policies contribute to our current risk-adverse parenting culture. Also, whether intentionally or by default, the medical community exerts considerable influence over what we deem morally 'right' or 'wrong' maternal behaviour. This matter, too, I will discuss through the lens of the 'no drinking during pregnancy' issue.

**Hanne Knudsen, Department of Learning, Aarhus University, Copenhagen NV**

***Playful responsibility***

The title of the conference is 'Monitoring parents', and in the call for papers the 'scientisation' of child-rearing is emphasized. In this paper I shall contribute to this by suggesting that what is going on may also be described as 'Inviting parents to self-monitoring' and as 'responsibilisation' of parents.

A current topic and goal in public schools, at least in Denmark but with parallel tendencies in UK and USA, is to make the parents take a personal responsibility for the family as a 'school family'. Parents are asked to reflect on questions like 'did I help my child with the homework today?' – pointing to homework as being important. But they are also asked to reflect on questions like 'did I take my personal responsibility concerning my child's schooling today?'. Hereby the school does not take the responsibility for defining the parents' responsibility, and it is up to the parents to monitor themselves, asking whether they are providing their child with a proper 'school family'.

In the paper I am going to describe these tendencies and analyze examples of social technologies used for responsibilisation - mainly different forms of game and play. Drawing on Soeren Kierkegaard and Jacques Derrida I am also going to open up for a discussion on how the tendency of 'responsibilisation' of the citizen may change the form of personal responsibility. I ask if the invitation to reflect in public on the personal responsibility produces an 'ethical temptation'; a temptation consisting of following general rules and norms, freeing oneself from the singular in every responsibility.



**Erik Löfmarck, PhD Candidate in Sociology, Södertörn University and Uppsala University, Sweden**

***Risk and parental feeding practices in everyday life***

“How can we live on the volcano of civilization without deliberately forgetting about it, but also without suffocating on the fears – and not just on the vapors that the volcano exudes?”

Ulrich Beck (1992:76) raises this rhetorical question when elaborating his notion of life in Risk Society. At the practical level of everyday life, this is indeed a valid question to ask. Parents obviously manage to feed their children in the age of risk without suffocating on the fears. How is this achieved? In this article I explore the different strategies mothers use when incorporating information about risk and food into their everyday life practice.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with urban Swedish mothers of children 6 to 18 months old, I find six preliminary strategies. In short, they are [1] *The Cellarer's Strategy* - what is good for me is good for my child, [2] *Dispersion* – a varied intake of food provides for an acceptable dose and level of exposure, [3] *Trusting regulation* – harmful products will be removed from the supervised market, [4] *Adapting* – bringing food practice in line with new information, [5] *Peer review* - making sure that on the whole, food practice is equal or superior to that of other parents, [6] *Counterbalance* – “my view on risks is balanced by that of my partner (the father), and that provides for a more nuanced practice”.

Theoretically, I depart from the risk sociology of everyday life, but also from the growing body of research labelled parenting culture studies. This article is part of a broader research project considering everyday risk construction and management in the empirical field of food and parenting in Sweden and Poland.

**Dr Pam Lowe, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Aston University and Dr Geraldine Brady, Senior Research Fellow, Coventry University**

***Empty vessels? Conceptualisation of 'the child' in parenting discourse***

Parenting has come to be seen as a cause of and solution to a range of social problems. In particular, the growing use of 'science' to explain behaviour and provide interventions focuses on the role of the parents. In much of this discourse, the child appears as malleable, a compliant body shaped by good and bad parenting behaviour whose life trajectory is to be decided by the actions and/or inactions of others. Drawing on simplistic understandings of childhood socialisation, the child appears as an empty vessel to be managed in the 'correct way'. Parents' perceived failure to do so could attract adverse attention and lead to professional scrutiny. Yet children are social actors in their own right. They make decisions about their lives which may agree or conflict with the roles or behaviour assigned to them. These decisions are rooted in their own social worlds. This paper will consider how children are conceptualised within parenting discourse and draw on empirical studies to illustrate how a narrow understanding of children as recipients of adult views ignores the role that children play in shaping their lives and the world around them.

**Dr Jan Macvarish, Research Associate, Centre for Health Services Studies and Centre for Parenting Culture Studies, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK.**

***Contextualising the concern with the sexualisation of childhood within the contemporary parenting culture***

The growing concern with the 'sexualisation and commercialization of childhood' brings together a fascinating range of contemporary anxieties and arguments: traditional sexual puritanism; feminist critiques of sexuality; child protection advocacy; anti-capitalist critiques of the market and fears of new technology. It also frequently brings to the fore issues of taste and class distinctions, clashes of parenting styles, and questions about where the boundary between adulthood and childhood should be drawn.

A somewhat fragile consensus has been created around the idea that the sexualisation of children is a real problem, but attempts by researchers, campaigners and governments to further define what this might mean and why it might be happening have reached hazy and divisive conclusions. Underpinning the consensus is a presumption that parents are naïve and ill-equipped to negotiate the new terrain of a more sexualized world. This growing disconnect between parents and children can only be breached with expert assistance: sex education has therefore become aimed not just at children and teenagers but also at their parents. Expert claims to a greater understanding of the culture and social relationships into which today's children emerge necessarily denigrate the parental capacity to offer moral, emotional and practical guidance through the development of sexual identities and intimate relationships. This paper will explore the development of the idea of the 'sexualisation of childhood' as a social problem in the UK, the USA and Australia to understand key characteristics of contemporary parenting culture.

**Diana Marre & Beatriz San Román, Research Group AFIN (Adoptions, Families, Childhoods), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona**

**Parenting in Adoption**

Largely due to mandatory training for prospective adoptive parents and post-placement follow-ups, psycho-technical speeches are very present on bonding and parenting in adoptive families (Howell, 2006). The familiar triad composed of birth families, adoptive families and their children becomes a fourth by active participation of the professionals entitled to assess and assist adoptive families. Drawing on data collected in an ethnographic study of transnational adoption, which include interviews with families and monitoring several listservers, this paper traces psycho-technical discourses about family and its effects on the formation of family ties and sense of belonging in the adoptive families in Spain. It shows once more the difficulty to include birth families in the family story (Marre, 2009), as well as the emergence of dissenting views that resist the hegemonic model of 'clean break' (Duncan 1993) supported by the Convention The Hague, 1993.

**Amy Murphy, PhD candidate, School of Psychology, University of Kent**

***Sexist ideology and the regulation of pregnancy***

The present research investigates the role of sexist ideology in the proscriptions that are placed on women during pregnancy (as in the official and unofficial advice to abstain altogether from alcohol). Drawing upon contemporary social-psychological theories of sexism, we postulate that attitudes to women are fundamentally ambivalent, and distinguish between benevolent and hostile aspects of sexism. Benevolent sexism reveres women as special, pure, and need of protection, whereas hostile sexism reviles women as manipulative and devious (Glick & Fiske, 1996). We also postulate that in general, proscriptions have two potential functions: they are protective, meaning that they may steer their targets away from harm, and they are derogatory, meaning that they potentially deprive their

targets of autonomy and dignity, and also comprise a basis for social sanctions against those who flout them. Thus, we expect both types of sexism to be positively associated with endorsement of proscriptive rules such as “pregnant women should not drink any alcohol”. We expect benevolent (but not necessarily hostile) sexism to be positively associated with willingness to steer women away from proscribed behaviour (e.g., by not offering pregnant women a drink). We expect hostile (but not benevolent) sexism to be positively associated with punitive attitudes to women who flout proscriptions (e.g., by drinking alcohol moderately). We present a set of empirical studies that support these predictions. These studies use established measures of benevolent and hostile sexism, and new measures of attitudes towards paternalistic attempts to steer women away from proscribed behaviours, women who flout proscriptions, and the proscriptions themselves. The present findings therefore suggest that evidence and reason have not altogether supplanted ancient prejudices as a basis of contemporary attitudes and cultural practices surrounding pregnancy.

**Francesca Nicola, PhD Candidate, Cultural Anthropology, Milano-Bicocca University Milan**

***‘They are here to teach us’: The case of Indigo children as a new parenting culture***

Since the late 1970’s a small but increasing number of parents claim their children are “indigo”, i.e. possess special traits or abilities, ranging from thinking they are the next stage in human evolution or practice telepathy, to the belief that they are simply more empathic and creative than their peers. Based on New Age concepts from the USA, this pseudo-scientific theory gained worldwide popular interest with the publication of a series of books in the late 1990s and the recent release of several movies, books, conferences and related materials.

The objective of this paper is twofold: to paint the historical picture of the development of this ‘global myth’; to establish a sound theoretical ground for an ethnographic investigation of the parental dynamics related to indigo children in two cultural settings, the USA and Italy.

Focusing on the process of indigo parent’s self-identity construction and life-experience signification through the representation of their children as “special”, a number of specific issues will be addressed: the ideology of normality/a-normality informing parents’ views; the specific nature of the millenaristic aim of the global narrative on indigos; the political value given to children, seen as vectors of political transformations; the sacralisation of children and ‘subordination’ of parents; the symbolic and apparently contradictory apparatus through which parents claim the giftedness of their children (they contest the medicalization of life, e.g. refusing diagnosis of ADHD, autism or other learning disabilities, while talking a neo-evolutionist and super-scientific idiom); the place for race, gender and social class in this narrative.

**Dr Martyn Pickersgill, University of Edinburgh**

***Brainy Kids: Education, Social Care, and the Circulation of Neurologic Knowledge***

A wide variety of discourses and practices associated with education and social care are today underpinned by concepts and knowledge claims emerging from the neuroscience. Such ideas embed particular ontological and sociotechnical imaginaries of children and adolescents, and the institutions within which they learn and are cared for. In turn, the resonance of these imaginaries with longstanding imperatives within education and social care contribute to the embedding of neurologic knowledge within professional praxis. Such processes are at once the products and engines of a wide circulation of scientific facts, theories and reflections, and reify established associations and activate new links between the global and the local. The figure of the developing child or adolescent ‘neurologic subject’ moves within these circulating knowledge, constructed through them and by their instantiation in practice. Interrogating these circuits, however, also reveals resistances from professionals, and casts fresh light on the ‘mundane significance’ of the brain. Neurologic knowledge can, perhaps, transform

education and care; yet, at the same time, its potency is a product of the longstanding focus on psyche and soma within a range of professions that take the child as their locus of expertise. 'Transformation' might yet be better understood as a form of intensification of existing praxis, raising questions about the novelty of knowledge claims, and the moral and ethical issues understood to be constitutive of and emanating from these.

**Heather Piper, Professorial Research Fellow, Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University**

***Sports coaching or parenting: a contradiction in practice***

Drawing on a current ESRC funded project (Hands-off sports' coaching: the politics of touch) this paper will discuss how sports coaches, similar to care workers and teachers, are now deemed to be working *in loco parentis* when coaching children and young (and not so young) people. Coaches are increasingly expected to act in a social and welfare capacity, rather than just get on with the business of coaching. Numerous guidelines and policies exist in order to help them get this right; CRB checks have increased year on year; form filling relating to health and safety can take up to half an hour of a one hour coaching slot; young people (even aged say 28 years) are considered to be 'vulnerable adults' and consequently romantic liaisons between a coach and a young person of similar age are forbidden; touching is proscribed by the use of diagrams which some have likened to the charts on butchers walls describing cuts of meat; texting is often frowned upon; photographs forbidden; coach and parent are often charged with watching each other for signs of impropriety. The consequences of all of these impositions are that balancing the dual role of coach and 'parent' is an impossible and contradictory task for many. The paper will discuss these issues which will be exemplified with empirical data from the ongoing project.

**Nina L. Powell, PhD Researcher, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham**

### ***Moral Development***

The burgeoning area of moral psychology is strongly influenced by the recent rise of infant biological determinism. Psychology researchers such as Renée Baillargeon and Paul Bloom promote the idea that morality and moral condemnation can be understood and assessed by infants as young as eighteen months of age. While often methodologically sound, this research oversimplifies concepts of human morality and over interprets the mechanism behind infant behaviour. One of the most popular techniques for assessing infant morality is to measure eye gaze in response to a puppet show that depicts puppets performing 'helping' or 'harming' actions followed by the puppet being 'punished' or 'rewarded'. Infants typically gaze longer at incongruent situations where the 'naughty' puppet is rewarded or the 'good' puppet is punished. Although these data are compelling, they do not prove the existence of a universal and innate human moral code as Baillargeon and Bloom suggest. Many cognitive mechanisms are necessary to make moral judgements regarding people's behaviour and intentions. It is simply implausible to suggest that these mechanisms are developed by 18 months. There appears to be a desire to instrumentalise difficult philosophical concepts such as morality so that the source of moral problems can be relocated within biology. Assigning morality to 18-month old infants, however, not only fails with respect to developmental parsimony, it also fails to acknowledge the role of socialisation and learning on our moral attitudes.

**Stefan Ramaekers, K.U.Leuven, Belgium**

### ***What has happened to parental responsibility? Some philosophical notes***

In this paper I want to pick up a particular element of the analysis of responsibility drawn in *The claims of parenting* (Ramaekers & Suissa, forthcoming). In this book we argue that under the conditions of the expert culture within which parenting has come to be defined today – something we call the scientization of childrearing and the parent-child relationship – the notion of parental responsibility is understood in a particular, narrow sense. Specifically, as parents are seen as responsible for ensuring the optimal conditions for their children's growth and for maintaining a firm grip on this developmental process. Parental responsibility is, in this sense, defined narrowly in terms of the "needs" of "the child" (which are determined, largely, by empirical/scientific research in psychology), and is confined to the one-to-one-interaction scheme between parent and child. Parental responsibility is thus in danger of being reduced to a state of "vigilance": parents are positioned in such a way as to be constantly vigilant – for every new day is a day with new challenges – regarding developmental opportunities, risks, etc.

Here I want to develop this further by drawing on Michael Sandel's concept of "explosion of responsibility" and on the analysis of this idea of vigilance by the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler. Drawing on the combined insights of both of these scholars I will show that the way in which parental responsibility is understood today – either explicitly in policy rhetoric or implicitly in conceptions of parenting support – is an impoverished conception of responsibility in the sense that it strips this notion of what is characteristically human about it and thus asks parents to assume a sort of animal-like attitude. Whereas responsibility-as-vigilance is based on the premise that parents need to keep everything under control (whereby every piece of new research is something parents should take in since this adds a further element to have under one's control), responsibility in childrearing (as a deeply *human* notion) has to do with introducing one's own child into a common world. Crucially, this cannot be premised on some form of control but is to be understood in terms of "relinquishing our hold on the world". What this implies is an understanding of the relationship with one's child that is fundamentally different from the way this relationship is understood in the current expert culture on parenting – something I will develop by drawing on the work of Stanley Cavell.

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

***From Authoritative Parenting to Positive Parenting***

In this paper I chart the trajectory from authoritative parenting to positive parenting as the ideal model for child rearing, noting the dwindling role played by parental authority, as well as the disappearance of a place for punishment, in the positive parenting model. The paper locates the current condemnation of smacking in the development of the positive parenting model: I interpret criticism of smacking not as criticism of a particular disciplinary technique but rather as a symbol for criticism of parental authority and punishment themselves. I examine the way in which 'setting a good example' has filled the void left by the vacation of punishment, and conclude that positive parenting is more about disciplining parents than their children.

**Eleanor Jane Roberts, Playwork and childcare advisor**

***Freedom, moral panics, and parenting***

Since I became a parent, 21 months ago, I have wanted to challenge the patterns from my own parenting that I received as a child. Through working in the childcare and playwork sectors for over 20 years, I have developed good observational and reflective practice skills, which are enabling me to parent on my own terms. Through doing this, I am making new discoveries about myself on a daily basis and I am beginning to trust my own judgment when it comes to making decisions about my son and really taking the lead from what I know of myself and my son. This is a very transient approach to parenting, which I feel is quite healthy as thinking in these terms allows me as a parent to 'let go' of expectation of how things should be and work within the framework that has been presented. So I wish to discuss this further and how to embrace 'freedom' as a parent from the moral panics that are rife within society surrounding our children's welfare, well-being and safety. How to take action and have the strength to challenge the 'science' of parenting, by asking;

- What has happened to our internal barometers as adults, as parents?
- What makes us become sanitised by external influences once we become parents?
- Are we destroying children's internal barometers?
- Can, we as parents enable children to: enjoy their childhood and at the same time develop their knowledge and acceptance of the world around them; accept responsibility for their actions; and trust their judgment?

**Alka Sehgal Cuthbert, PhD candidate, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge**

***The Brain Is Not Enough - Education versus Neuroscience***

This starting point for this paper is the claim made by Goswami, that "Modern science is revealing the crucial role of biology in every aspect of human experience and performance" in relation to education. There are five areas, which I subject to critical examination:

1. What developments in modern science tell us about humans
2. The prioritization of biology and environment over human relationships in the family and in schools
3. That education can be improved by transferring knowledge about brain activity
4. That neuroscience can help teachers to identify "educational risk"

5. That neuroscience can provide new, and by implication better, methodological tools to test educational interventions.

The paper concludes that educators need to consider prior questions of educational moral philosophy before deciding whether neuroscience has any role in education. If it does, then educators need to consider carefully what the nature and extent of this role should be.

**Ciara Smyth, Ph.D. Candidate, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney**

***Exploring parental responsibility for children's cognitive development***

This presentation will describe an Australian study exploring *parental responsibility for children's cognitive development*, a responsibility that first appeared in the parenting advice literature in the 1960s. During the 1990s, this responsibility was further reinforced by 'new' research in the field of neuroscience that identified infancy and early childhood as critical periods of development. This research emphasised the importance of the early years for enhancing a child's capacity for language and learning, in effect laying the foundation for future educational success. Since this time, the message concerning the importance of the early years has been taken up by educators, policy makers, the parenting advice literature and infant toy marketers. This study will make new contributions to knowledge by shedding light on contemporary parenting practices in Australia. It will examine parents' beliefs and views concerning their responsibility for their children's cognitive development in a climate where children's educational outcomes have been subject to increased scrutiny through the introduction of a national benchmarking program in Australian primary schools in 2008. This presentation will describe the research questions the study seeks to address and the methods that are being utilised. It will present some preliminary findings from:

- a content analysis of Australian parenting publications;
- a content analysis of Australian government policy and parenting information; and
- In-depth interviews with parents of pre-schoolers.

**Judith Suissa, Institute of Education, London**

***Parents, Children and the Science of Happiness***

Intervention in parents' lives by authorities and experts promoting a prescriptive account of good parenting is nothing new. As historians such as Rima Apple have documented, advice on how to raise a happy, healthy child can be found in literature for parents as far back as the eighteenth century. Yet in contemporary culture, the notion of "happiness" has been given a far more specific and supposedly scientific meaning. Drawing on empirical research in experimental psychology and neuroscience, and on large-scale statistical social surveys, the new "scientists of happiness" tell us that happiness, as Richard Layard puts it, "is an objective dimension of all our experience. And it can be measured". In thus bypassing all the conceptual and ethical questions about the meaning and value of happiness, this approach implies that happiness is a skill that can be learned, as reflected in the positive psychology-inspired "happiness lessons" now common in schools. It is only a small logical step from the insight that happiness is a fixed quantity within our grasp, to the view that it would be an abrogation of our duties as parents not to apply this knowledge to our children. And indeed, parents are now recruited to the political project of raising the happiness level of the population both through a policy discourse which positions them as responsible, through "positive parenting", for producing flourishing children, and through a proliferation of popular books with titles like "How today's brain research can help you raise happy, emotionally balanced children".

While not disregarding the important questions about the political aspects of this issue, or about the empirical research behind the science of happiness, the focus in this paper will be rather on the conception of parenting and the parent-child relationship that this discourse contributes to. I argue that in implying that there is a predetermined and reachable “end” to the process of parenting that can be established independently of any moral reflection on either the experience of parenting or the social context in which it takes place, the science of happiness contributes to a narrow and ethically vacuous conception of the parent-child relationship that prevents us from seeing and talking about this relationship in other, conceptually and ethically richer, ways.

**Eva Silberschmidt Viala, Department of Learning, Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus**

***Immigrant parents as ‘coaches’ for their children in the Danish school system***

A main goal in Denmark is to encourage parents to take responsibility for their child’s schooling. With parents considered as a cornerstone in their child’s successful school achievements, focus on the partnership between school and home has increased. The partnership between first and second generation (im)migrant parents and the school has proved particularly difficult. According to school teachers, cultural differences, socio-economic problems combined with (im)migrants’ uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness as to the upbringing of their child/children in a new cultural setting constitute major obstacles. The role and the responsibility of the school teachers are therefore to assist the parents in enabling their child to balance between different values and norms within the Danish society, the family and the school.

While the perspectives of the professionals are well-known, (im)migrants’ perspectives are not well researched and understood. Based on theories from social and cultural psychology and drawing on my research on (im)migrant parents’ experience with the Danish school system, this paper discusses these parents’ views on the parenting culture promoted by the Danish state and the school system. Focus is on the following issues: Which expectations to parents and school teachers are created through the school/home partnership? Do (im)migrant parents agree/disagree with the views of the professionals? How do parents and school teachers regard their tasks and which dilemmas do they see? Are prevailing discourses on parental roles as well as the increasing reliance on (Danish) scientific discourses in child-rearing acceptable? The ultimate aim of my research is to provide new insights into how the new parenting culture affects (im)migrant parents’ views and behaviors as well as school/parents relations.

**Luc Van den Berge, PhD student, K.U.Leuven Laboratory for Education and Society, Belgium**

***(Neuro)psychology as a basis for parenting support: an impoverished conception of care***

Many scholars and policy makers argue that easily accessible forms of parenting support should be more and more informed by evidence from developmental- and neuropsychological research. What I want to focus on in this paper is the consequences this has for the way we conceptualize the notion of care for families and especially parental support. I will argue that the use of scientific insights and information impoverishes our idea of care and parenting support. To do this I want to rely on the Heideggerian notion of “solicitude” that reveals how caring for others can take two extreme positive forms, of which one is suppressed by using science as a basis for parental support. Next I will take the hint Ramaekers and Suissa give, viz. that one could conceptualize parenting support in an alternative way. Following up on their work, I will argue that the so-called certainty that is provided by scientific knowledge is not a necessary condition of the kind of support we could give parents. In order to contribute to the descientization of parenting support I will develop this alternative by drawing on the work of the philosophers Cavell and Wittgenstein.



Joan Wolf, Texas A&M University

***Constructing Normal: Social Science, Childcare Research, and Maternal Attachment***

In 'Constructing Normal', I discuss the results of a discourse analysis of the Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD), a twenty-year study sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), in order to explore how language and framing in research can reveal unexamined assumptions about gender, motherhood, and social order. This analysis is part of a larger project in which I ask a series of questions grounded in the philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge (e.g. Latour, Foucault, Harding). In 'Constructing Normal', I pay particular attention to precisely what questions the SECCYD asks, how it defines and operationalizes key terms and concepts, and the conclusions it draws. How do assumptions about the relationship between children's needs and maternal care structure the design, execution, and interpretation of the study? In what ways do the conclusions reflect these assumptions? To what extent does the SECCYD normalize particular family constellations? My contention is that the SECCYD simultaneously demonstrates that 'non-maternal care' does not have a deleterious effect on child development and affirms that healthy children need a strong *maternal* attachment. Monomathy is assumed rather than proved, and this reinforces what I have called "total motherhood" in the raising of children.