

Science, evidence, experts and the new parenting culture

The effects of damaging myths about children and parenting, including how neuro-determinism has influenced policy and politics, will be the focal point of an event to be held at the University of Kent's Canterbury campus 13-14 September.

Titled 'Monitoring parents: science, evidence, experts and the new parenting culture', the event will feature keynote lectures by Dr Stuart Derbyshire, Reader in Psychology at the University of Birmingham, and John T Bruer (pre-recorded), author of the controversial book *The Myth of the First Three Years: a new understanding of early brain development and lifelong learning*.

Other contributors include: Janet Golden, Professor of History, Rutgers University; Stefan Ramaekers, from the Centre for Philosophy of Education at the University of Leuven; and Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology at the University Kent.

'Monitoring parents' is the latest in a series of events organised and hosted by Kent's Centre for Parenting Culture Studies (CPCS).

Dr Ellie Lee, Director of CPCS and the event organiser, said: 'Our culture and politics is now very strongly influenced by certain notions about the development of small children's brains and related ideas about the need to intervene in the practices of parents. The claim is repeated over and over that that 'the evidence shows' if we really want to address social problems we have to intervene more in 'the early years'. Indeed, following the English riots some argued this is the way to 'get to the bottom' of what is going wrong, and prevent youth behaving in the same way again. Discussion at our event will show that this approach draws more on prejudice than research. We will also explore the problems of a culture that seems determined to turn raising children into an expert-led, professionalised affair.'

John T Bruer added: 'There is nothing wrong with attempts to improve parenting, child care, and social policy through appropriate use of the natural and social sciences. We should look for every opportunity to do so. What we should avoid, however, is selective appeals to science to rationalise what may be only our own pre-conceived policy ends. This is politics disguised as science.'

Dr Derbyshire commented: 'The UK government is being urged to create an early intervention culture that will encourage the right type of environment in the first three years of life to ensure the appropriate emotional and educational development of children's brains. The hope is that early intervention will prevent poor educational attainment, poverty and crime. There is, however, no need to create an early intervention culture. Parents, teachers and other adults responsible for children already provide the right type of environment to support brain development. Apart from situations of sustained or gross neglect, neuroscience provides no evidence of an early environment causing detrimental brain development and preventing educational attainment or causing poverty and crime. It is a mistake to focus on the brain because such a focus obscures the structural and social factors that do impact on education, income and crime. It also facilitates a deeply pessimistic view of human beings as fixed by their early experiences when, in reality, even the victims of severe neglect can often recover.'

Professor Furedi said: 'Experience shows that the concept 'parenting science' is a contradiction in terms. Parenting involves a culturally specific interactive and individual relationship. It is influenced by innumerable social and cultural variables. That is why it is not a suitable subject for expert intervention. The irrelevance of

expertise is demonstrated by the proliferation and of contradictory parenting advice. Parenting science is based on dogma and prejudice and should play no role in the domain of policy making'

Further information is available at:

<https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingculturestudies/pcs-events/forthcoming-events/parenting-science/>

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Notes to editors:

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CPCS info

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Keynote abstracts

Keynote 1: Perspectives on the rise of parenting science

Janet Golden, Professor of History, Rutgers University

The Many Sciences of Parenting

Over the course of the 20th century, phrenology, astrology, medicine, psychology and everyday Science (folklore) all provided advice to parents seeking to understand their children's futures and how to shape them. All of these 'sciences' provided guidance about insuring children's health and their financial and moral prospects. And these 'sciences' served as well the interests of business, religion, and government. What does this history suggest about 21st century 'parenting sciences?'

Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology, University of Kent

Who is to Judge? The unresolved contradiction of the parenting expert

The rise of parenting science can be seen as paradigmatic instance of the rationalisation of everyday life. This paper argues that the dynamic of rationalisation is principally fuelled by the crisis of pre-political parental authority. The scientisation and the instrumentalisation of family life appear to provide a provisional solution to this crisis but in fact merely intensify by diminishing the status of parental judgment.

Stefan Ramaekers, Centre for Philosophy of Education, University of Leuven

The claims of parenting: Reasons, responsibility, society

Underlying the scientisation of the parent-child relationship is a narrow, conformist conception of the relation between the family/childrearing and society at large that basically comes down to parents being expected, through scientifically ratified parenting techniques, to "produce" well-behaved and appropriately functioning citizens. Drawing on the analyses of the forthcoming book *The claims of parenting: Reasons, responsibility and society* (Ramaekers & Suissa), I will argue that this effectively strips childrearing of its potential for offering political experiences, it strips

the family of the possibility of being a space that has a public orientation. That is, within the current “parenting culture”, childrearing has been, in an important sense, de-politicised. What is needed, I will argue, is a due recognition of the political aspects of the family.

Keynote 2: Parenting and the ‘new phrenology’

Stuart WG Derbyshire, University of Birmingham, School of Psychology
The Problem of Infant Neurodeterminism

Recent political and scientific commentary on parenting has concentrated on the importance of the first three years for appropriate brain development. It is proposed that necessary brain circuitry for cognition and also empathy and concern develop in the first three years. Stress, deprivation, poor parenting or poverty, even at relatively mild levels, are suggested to hinder brain development and thus undermine learning and moral development. Furthermore, there is no means to later compensate for the loss of learning and moral development because permanent changes in brain organization and brain chemistry greatly reduce the impact of any further educational efforts. Extreme abuse and deprivation can certainly affect brain development, and can cause behavioural problems, but there is little evidence that milder neglect can have negative consequences on the brain or behaviour. There is also no evidence that the brain areas involved in empathy and concern, for example, become fixed during the first three years and much evidence that the brain retains plasticity throughout life. The extreme pessimism of infant determinism is simply unwarranted. In general, the evidence linking negative childhood circumstances with permanent changes in brain function is limited while the evidence for children overcoming serious deprivation, and even frankly abusive environments, is very good. Nevertheless, discourse on the catastrophic consequences of not providing an enriched early learning environment means that parents are instructed to make Herculean efforts to ‘wire’ their children’s brains in the first three years. Such instruction is intrusive to normal family life and is unnecessary.

Glenda Wall, Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University

Powerful cognitive engineers: The social positioning of mothers through brain development discourse

Drawing on the discourses of risk, self-efficacy, and self-responsibility associated with neo-liberalism, current child-rearing advice promoting brain development positions mothers and children in historically unique ways. Children are currently understood as highly vulnerable and passive, while mothers are invested with a great deal of control over child outcomes. In a recent qualitative study of Canadian mothers of pre-schoolers where mother’s experiences with child-rearing advice that promotes brain development was explored, one of themes that emerged was the unquestioning acceptance of maternal control over, and responsibility for, children’s future intelligence and success (Wall, 2010). Here, I argued that both the possibility, and the desirability, of such a level of control were questionable. The current paper explores more closely the social practices and cultural understandings that have come together to position mothers as powerful cognitive engineers, and the particular ways in which mothers in my study engaged with discourses and practices that promoted maternal omnipotence.

Keynote 3: The Myth of the First Three Years (lecture)

John T. Breuer, President of the James S. McDonnell Foundation in St. Louis

In 1999 published *The Myth of the First Three Years*, arguing that advocates of early childhood interventions had over-simplified and over-generalized relatively old results in neuroscience to advance a policy agenda. When this policy argument gained

coverage from the popular press, every middle class parent in (at least) the English speaking world took notice, making brain-based child rearing a growth industry. When it was published, my book was described as “controversial”. A decade later it is useful to review this controversy and its sequelae. At the time, popular reviews were generally positive and supported my argument that developmental synaptogenesis, critical periods, and enriched environments provided neither a neuro-scientifically valid, nor sound, argument for birth to three interventions. The same is true for scholarly and scientific articles that cited Myth. The one exception is scholars within Bowlby’s attachment theory tradition. Here there are some interesting scientific issues to consider on the relationship of attachment theory both to neuroscience and developmental psychology. The dangers of over-emphasizing the notion of critical period is shown in recent work on the effects of therapy provided even late in life to overcome early childhood visual problems. However, in addition to the scientific issues there are significant psychological and sociological questions one must address: Why does the public find biological evidence more compelling than behavioral evidence? How do we account for the power of brain images in the public imagination? To what extent is it appropriate that scientists also be policy advocates? What factors account for the persistence of the myth long after the scientific issues have been settled?

Keynote 4: Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Mankind (lecture)

Raymond Tallis, doctor, retired clinical scientist and philosopher, author Academics, policymakers and the popular press are in thrall to the idea that brain science is the key to understanding human beings and that social policy should be based in neuroscience. This is underpinned by the belief that consciousness is identical with activity in certain parts of the brain, so that ‘you are your brain’. It is, however, mistaken. While the brain is a necessary condition of every aspect of consciousness, from the slightest tingle of sensation to the most exquisitely constructed sense of self, neural activity is not sufficient by itself to explain consciousness. This is evident from the fact that there is no fundamental difference between that small minority of neural activity correlated with consciousness and that which is not associated with consciousness.

The theory that consciousness is identical with neural activity faces numerous problems, arising from the fact that nerve impulses are material events in a piece of matter – namely the brain. First, there is no explanation of intentionality – that in virtue of which contents of consciousness are about entities other than themselves. Intentionality, which points in the opposite direction to that of the sequence of causes and effects that are supposed to bring about consciousness, is not seen elsewhere in the material world. Secondly, the development of the scientific notion of matter is associated with the elimination of appearance, beginning with those ‘secondary qualities’ such as colour and feelings of warmth, that form the content of consciousness. Thirdly, neural activity is unlike the experiences that it is supposed to be identical with. Fourthly, there are properties of consciousness - such as simultaneous unity and multiplicity, and explicit temporal depth and tensed time - that are not seen in the material world.

Acknowledging that the failure to arrive a neural account of consciousness is not a temporary problem which will be resolved by further research will open the way to a necessary fundamental re-think that will help us towards an understanding the difference between brains and people. In the meantime, we should be cautious in appealing to neuroscience to guide social policy.