

Successful start for parenting research centre



A Kent research centre exploring all aspects of parenting culture is marking a highly successful first three years.

The Centre for Parenting Culture Studies (CPCS) was founded in January 2011 by Reader in Social Policy Dr Ellie Lee – a passionate critic of scaremongering about risks to children – and Charlotte Faircloth (then a Research Fellow in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research – SSPSSR).

Ellie (above right) says: 'I joined Kent in 2004 and started working with Professor Frank Furedi on the perception of risk and its fundamental influence on how people bring up their children. Our initial research focused on the tension mothers feel when they formula feed, but we realised there were many other parenting issues and concerns to explore and so the research centre was created.'

'We wanted to know why the minutiae of how parents raise their children – how they feed them, talk to them, play with them or discipline them – have become routine sources of public debate and policy-making. What we have seen over the past decade or so has been the growth of a new belief system that suggests that "good parenting", based very often on dubious

"science", can somehow solve social problems. This parental determinism has fuelled the rise of the so-called "parenting expert" and the politicising of parent-child relationships and weakening of bonds between generations.'

Aims of Centre

Among the new Centre's aims were to: inspire a genuine interdisciplinary research agenda on contemporary parenting culture; provide an interdisciplinary forum for informed discussion; consider ways practices such as infant feeding are influenced; and to bring together researchers (including early-career stage), parenting organisations and policy-makers from Britain and abroad to inform the public on this issue.

Ellie is based in SSPSSR, but works alongside colleagues from Law, Psychology and across the University, including Professor Furedi, Dr Charlotte Faircloth, Dr Jan Macvarish, and Jennie Bristow. Their research and findings over the last three years have been highlighted in a new book on parenting culture (see far right).

Ellie says: 'Our concept of "parenting culture" has been adopted and used by others working in various disciplines who have similar interests to ours, and who often get in touch to discuss their work and ideas for collaboration. We are contacted by colleagues at various career stages, as well as by a wider public, including journalists, professionals, third sector organisations and individual members of the public.'

Key achievements

Key achievements by the Centre since 2011 include:

- **Publications** on issues from *Parenting in Global Perspective: Negotiating ideologies of kinship, self and politics to Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust: The Jimmy Savile Scandal* and *Child-rearing in an Age of Risk*.
- **Visits and exchanges** including a visit in spring 2013 by CPCS's first Visiting Fellow Joan Wolf. During her visit, she delivered an open lecture which attracted a large audience and significant media coverage.
- **Teaching** including a new module on 'The Family, Parenting Culture and Parenting Policy', as part of a Master's degree within SSPSSR.

Feature

- **Seminars** including CPCS Forums, a twice-termly opportunity for staff and students to meet and discuss ideas. Members of the Centre have also been invited to present their research to seminars at other institutions including the universities of Warwick, Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and Manchester.
- **Conferences** focusing on, for example, 'Feeding Children in the New Parenting Culture', 'The Uses and Abuses of Biology: Neuroscience, Parenting and Family Policy in Britain' and 'Gender, Equality and Intimacy: (Un)comfortable Bedfellows?'. Members of the Centre have also presented their research at annual conferences of organisations including the British Sociological Association, American Anthropological Association and European Association for Social Anthropology.
- **Grants** have included £97,416 from the Economic and Social Research Council for a study into 'Assessing Child Welfare under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act: the new law' and £300,268 (50% to Kent) from the Leverhulme Trust for 'Parenting: Gender, Intimacy and Equality'.
- **Media coverage** for the Centre has also been significant over the past three years, with mentions on national radio and TV including BBC Radio 4, Channel 4 News, BBC Radio 5 Live and Sky News, national press from *The Sun* to the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Times* and more specialist publications including *Medical Xpress* and *Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care*.

'My previous career was as a journalist, but I was keen to research issues in more depth. I began working with Ellie Lee on infant feeding, followed by research with Frank Furedi on intergenerational relations, and from there was inspired to begin my PhD on the problem of generations in the present day. I have gained an incredible amount of insight and support both from my colleagues at Kent and the wider network of CPCS associates, and I am very excited about our work going forward.'

Jennie Bristow

'As a Master's student in Political Sociology, I gained valuable insights from the module 'The Family, Parenting Culture and Parenting Policy' – convened by Dr Ellie Lee. I was particularly interested in the impact and implications of wider societal trends – such as the expanding remit of state intervention and consequent blurring of the boundary between the public and private spheres, and the privileging of expertise that prompts recourse to scientific evidence to justify policy decisions.'

Alicia Liddle

What's next

Looking ahead, the Centre is planning to build on its impressive start and open up new avenues for research on, for example, the social history of parental determinism, the problem of generations, and differences and similarities in the development of parenting culture worldwide.

Ellie adds: 'We are pleased with what we have achieved over recent years. We hope, however, we can go much further in encouraging searching questions to be asked about the ways our culture restricts and limits parents, and other adults, from taking on responsibility for developing the next generation.'

'Most of all, we hope we can encourage others who have the opportunity to do so to use the tools and insights of sociology and other disciplines to bring the study of parenting culture to bear on intellectual life and public debate more widely.'

Find out more about the Centre at:



<http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingculturestudies/>

New book on parenting culture

Parenting Culture Studies, published by Palgrave MacMillan in March 2014, highlights the way that "good parenting" has come to be seen as a panacea for social problems.

Featuring the research findings of four members of the University's Centre for Parenting Culture Studies (CPCS) – Ellie Lee, Jennie Bristow, Dr Charlotte Faircloth and Dr Jan Macvarish – the book has key chapters covering the intensification of parenting, the rise of the parenting expert, the politicising of parent-child relationships, and the weakening of bonds between parents.

It also contains five essays detailing contemporary obsessions with different aspects of parenting, including drinking and pregnancy, attachment theory, neuroscience and family policy, fathering and "helicopter parenting".



<http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingculturestudies/resources/cpcs-book-parenting-culture-studies/>

PARENTING CULTURE STUDIES

ELLIE LEE, JENNIE BRISTOW
CHARLOTTE FAIRCLOTH AND JAN MACVARISH



FOREWORD BY
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