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From educating mothers to neuroparenting: Ideas and controversies in parenting issues

Claude Martin

Abstract: Since the early 1990s, a specific sector of public action called “parenting support” emerged in many developed countries. This policy should not distract from the fact that the primary socialization carried out by parents, in particular mothers, has been an explicit focus of policy for over a century. In this chapter, Claude Martin proposes to understand the developments and turns involved in this globalized issue of parenting. The first section looks back at the development of these debates since the end of the 19th century, initially marked by public health issues and the fight against infant mortality, then by the post-war development of a market in counselling for mothers, inspired by different theoretical traditions in psychology, and culminating in the 1990s in a specific parenting public policy. The second looks at the parallel development of neuroscience since the 1990s and its impact on this sector through the politicization of a certain number of ideas by decision makers and professionals in the field. This lay use of neuroscience has generated two avenues of development, one concerning children's cognitive development, the other on their emotional development. The third section proposes to grasp the meaning and depth of these changes to determine whether we are facing a simple revival of old methods or a paradigm shift.

The concept of autonomy is a buzzword in the vocabulary of public policy in France and concerns a number of different sectors (education, youth policies, work, ageing and disability). In this chapter, autonomy will be approached from the child's point of view and as the result of parental socialisation. For many stakeholders, children’s autonomy is *in fine* the motivation for adopting a number of measures and guidelines centred on primary socialisation. The idea is to promote children’s autonomy through their families, via the work of parenting. It is supposed that parents may forge the autonomy of their offspring, along with their well-being and social integration, but only under certain conditions – conditions that could justify educating parents to play their own role.

Since the early 1990s, numerous developed countries, notably in the EU, have seen the emergence of a specific sector of public action concerning parenthood and the education and care provided by parents with measures called “parenting support” or, in France, “*soutien à la parentalité*” (Martin, 2014; 2015; 2017; 2018 a & b). These measures have gradually become a component of family policy. Child well-being is the indirect goal of these measures, which centre on parental practices and behaviours. Numerous international institutions have contributed to raise states’ awareness of the issue of overall child well-being, including the United Nations (UN), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the Council of

Europe, which in 2006 published a recommendation on so-called “positive parenting”¹. The signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 facilitated this affirmation of a new viewpoint on childhood. However, this global affirmation still leaves room for wide-ranging differences between countries, depending on whether measures and policies are aimed at children directly or indirectly by giving a more or less central role to their primary socialization agents, in other words their parents, and often more or less explicitly, their mothers (Daly, 2020)².

How far do these elements constitute a completely new paradigm? The “parenting turn” that took place in the 1990s (Daly, 2015; Knijn *et al.*, 2018) should not distract from the fact that the primary socialization carried out by parents, in particular the act of mothering, has been an explicit focus of policy for over a century. In this chapter, we propose to understand the developments and turns involved in this collective and globalized issue of parenting (Macvarish and Martin, 2021). Without going back to the reflections of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Emile: ou sur l'éducation* (1762), our objective is to look at the history of this public problem and its major developments since 1890 in order to identify what has held steady and what has changed. To do so, we follow the policy framing perspectives established by Donald Schön and Martin Rein (Schön and Rein, 1994). These authors propose to mobilize different materials and levels of analysis: policy practices; policy rules (laws, entitlements, resource allocations); the positions and arguments involved in policy debates and struggles, the beliefs and values of institutions, interest groups and stakeholders; and finally, even more generally, the beliefs and values of the members of a societal culture.

Using this analytical framework, we proceed in three stages: the first looks back at the development of these debates since the end of the 19th century, initially marked by public health issues and the fight against infant mortality, then by the post-war development of a market in counselling for mothers, inspired by different theoretical traditions in psychology, and culminating in the 1990s in a “parenting turn” putting forward the idea of a specific parenting public policy. In the second, we look at the parallel development of neuroscience since the 1990s and its impact on this sector through the politicization of a certain number of ideas and results by political players and professionals in the field. This lay use of neuroscience research has generated two types of development, one on the side of children's cognitive development, the other on their emotional development. In the third stage, that of the current period, we propose to grasp the meaning and depth of these changes, maintaining that doing so requires drawing on this historical work to determine whether we are dealing with instrumental reform levels, a simple revival of old methods or a paradigm shift (Hall, 1993).

1- From educating parents to the parenting turn (1890-1990)

The term parenting, coined in the 1980s, and its popularization in public debate in the following decades have tended to disguise the fact that the question of parenting work – parenthood, parental skills, and the “job” of being a parent – has featured on the political

¹ <https://archive.crin.org/en/library/legal-database/council-europe-recommendation-rec200619-policy-support-positive-parenting.html> (accessed on 01/06/2023).

² Mary Daly makes a distinction between family-oriented policies (whereby children remain in the shadow of the family); childhood-oriented policies (which consider children as beings in the making); child-focused policies (centred on children's needs); and child-centred policies (focused on children's rights, participation and empowerment). In France, the approach is still mainly family-oriented: extending the eligible age to receive family benefits up to a child's 21st birthday; deploying early childhood care solutions to make it easier for parents to juggle their family and working lives; and developing parenting support measures to improve parents' educational skills.

agenda for more than a century. It is also important to remember that before the emergence of the apparently gender-neutral term “parents”, the main issue was mothering. A look back at these earlier episodes, which cover more than a century, raises the question of understanding how exactly these public problems were built up over time, with the support of numerous sets of actors, ideologies, and knowledge making up the ingredients by which public measures and policies have been and continue to be conducted³.

The ambition of public authorities to support and guide parenting is connected to the construction of major social problems in the second half of the 19th century. Scholars, researchers and politicians were mobilized to face the challenge of reducing mortality. The connection between population planning and parental education was essentially enacted by controlling sexual practices, prohibiting abortion and avoiding pregnancy, monitoring mother and child health and creating the first “schools for mothers” in the United Kingdom and *Mutterschule* in Germany. Doctors reached two significant victories at that time: the first resulted from the development of obstetrics and the application of hygiene standards by practitioners during childbirth, enabling doctors to avoid numerous maternal deaths due to postpartum infections; the second followed advances in the sterilization of milk, which rapidly reduced the number of neonatal deaths from digestive disorders.

Different configurations of actors are identifiable in this process of defining the problem(s) related to childhood and primary socialization, depending on the country and national culture. For example, in the case of France, which is an excellent example of this academic and political mobilization, as the country was confronted throughout the 19th century with a demographic deficit, the subject mobilized mainly an elite of male doctors, demographers and senior civil servants involved in the public affairs of the Third Republic. In the United States, however, it was driven by a closely involved female elite supported by large foundations (Russel Sage, Rockefeller) and drawing upon fledgling child sciences, which gradually influenced all welfare states. Although diverse, these approaches came into very close contact at the start of the 20th century through numerous, regular international conferences that provided opportunities to compare ideas and methods (Rollet, 2001).

The interwar period was a hotbed for new ideas in child-rearing methods on both sides of the Atlantic. In France, these include the creation of the “*Ecole des Parents*” (parents’ school), whose objective was to disseminate to parents the main recommendations emanating from child sciences, also with the aim of strengthening their role compared with that of the “hussars of the Republic” (the teachers), who were once encouraged to replace them on certain sensitive subjects, such as sex education. In the period from the 1920s to the 1960s, the model promoted by child sciences and child development specialists clearly had the greatest influence in shaping the dominant vision of childhood and parent education and practices. Harry Hendrick sums up these developments and trends as follows:

Beginning in the 1920s there developed two new approaches to child-rearing: one was relatively short lived; the other proved to be more persuasive over the long term (...) The first was the “scientific” method of baby care, “mothercraft”, which was associated with F. Truby King, a New Zealand doctor, who advocated breast feeding (“Breast-fed is best-fed”), toilet training and sleeping according to fixed timetables, and with John B. Watson, an American behavioral psychologist, who wanted mothers to rear superior children. (...) The other influential and more long-term trend was associated with the “new psychology”, whose components included the nursery school movement,

³ We developed these questions in a recently published chapter and here take up some of the points mentioned (Martin, 2023).

educational psychology, psycho-analysis and child guidance, all of which combined to produce more liberal elements in the parent (usually middle-class)-child relationship. (Hendrick, 1997, 28-30).

An important market for parental advice developed following the Second World War, during what can be considered the golden age of the nuclear family, seen as an institution capable of forging emotionally balanced individuals through parent-child relations. The boom in parental advice was spurred by the popularity of a book by Benjamin Spock published in 1946, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. Spock promoted a permissive parenting culture, in other words, a totally different take on mother-child interactions from that of behaviourists, with an emphasis on play and pleasure in interacting with children, and a focus on mothers' intuitive knowledge with the famous expression: "You know more than you think you do".

The porosity between some theories and their popularization in the media was remarkable. This popular knowledge involved, for example, lessons learned from attachment theory and the works of John Bowlby on maternal care deprivation in the 1950s (Bowlby, 1952; 1958), those by Donald Winnicott regarding "good enough mothers" (1971) and the work of Diana Baumrind about parenting styles, first published in 1966, which pointed to a third model between authoritarian and permissive styles, *i.e.* the authoritative style (Baumrind, 1991).

Throughout the 1960s and up to the 1980s, this psychological culture continued to gain ground and was disseminated in a wide range of media: manuals, radio and television programmes and press specializing in family and childhood, all of which gradually developed into a booming market. This "psychological culture" marked a very clear shift from a preoccupation with the survival of children, mostly targeting working-class mothers, to a concern for psychological well-being, mainly involving middle-class mothers. However, not until the start of the 1980s did a new term gradually take hold, with the transformation of the noun "parent" into a verb, giving the neologism "parenting" in English and "*parentalité*" in French.

This new term, "parenting", was politicized in the 1990s to group together the different types of action directed towards parents, some inspired by this long legacy of policies, others exploring new avenues. Most of these parenting measures in fact resembled previously identified actions, whose purposes included educating parents on their role by promoting good practices, regulating incapable parents or those not equipped with the skills required to look after their children, supporting them to assist with schoolwork, creating opportunities to talk about their everyday parenting difficulties in discussion groups and informing them about the latest parenting methods at public conferences, etc. These parenting support measures completed the traditional family support policy such as early childhood education and care.

Besides the creation of a new word, does "parenting" simply constitute an extension, or even a revival, of a long-established public concern or a significant change in perspective? On the one hand, a clear continuity with the past is visible. As it was the case with previous policies, these parenting support interventions can be grouped into three main areas: health-related interventions for both parents and children, child protection and education and support for parents. On the other hand, however, a few points make the argument for a new parent education regime. Firstly, although numerous initiatives were run by non-profit organizations and volunteers in the late 20th century in many countries, public authorities decided to provide new impetus by supporting these organizations officially, including financially, and provided institutional recognition with the title "parenting support" (Neyrand, 2011; Martin, 2014; Daly, 2015). Another significant element concerns the crucial role played by international bodies such as the Council of Europe, as already mentioned, but also UNICEF, the European

Network of National Observatories on Childhood and the European Commission, in the framing of these policies.

The development and marketization of evidence-based programmes (using randomized control trials), and their international commercialization are another feature of this turn during the 1990s. With these programmes, the behaviourist model got a second wind. The new parenting programme market aimed to equip parents with parenting skills with demonstrable effectiveness. The wider development of evidence-based policies (both in education and medicine) and the associated review culture led them to be financed and adopted by numerous countries, at international and more often local scales. Examples of such developments are numerous, both in English-speaking countries, which were the key providers of this type of programme (USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), as well as in Western and Northern Europe (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden) (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2012; Knijn and Hopman, 2015; Lundqvist, 2015). Many authors interpret the expansion of parenting programmes and experts, financed by public and/or private funds, as an expression of neoliberal social policies that put the responsibility for turning out well-adjusted children on parents, even going so far as to undermine the cause of social problems faced by post-industrial societies (Furedi, 2008; Gillies, 2008, 2012; Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012; Richter and Andresen, 2012; Hartas, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2014 ; Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2012).

But the main result of these recent developments is the reinforcement of a two-tiered social treatment of parenting issues. Concerning working-class families, the key question remained guiding practices and behaviours judged to be “dangerous” and damaging to children who needed protection. Concerning the middle classes, the aim was to disseminate and popularize norms and messages to improve the work of mothering and parenting, with the implication that this parental investment, known as “intensive parenting”, and these good practices were likely to guarantee children’s success and happiness. The rise in unemployment and job insecurity in the 1990s and 2000s, with its particularly deleterious effects on the integration of young people, only reinforced parents’ concern to create the best possible conditions for their children. With the end of the social ladder, *i.e.* the fear that their children would not manage to occupy social positions at least equivalent to their own, parents were eager for advice and methods likely to counteract this tendency towards social downgrading. In the USA, Annette Lareau used the strategy of “concerted cultivation” to describe these practices of parental investment or intensive parenting (Lareau, 2003).

2. Neuroscience, a success story

Neuroscience also experienced a boom at the turn of the 1990s, sometimes referred to as “neuromania” (Tallis 2011). For Nikolas Rose and Joelle Abi-Rached, neuroscience, or knowledge about the brain, changed our conception of personhood (Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013). Fascination with the progress of research in this area, in particular following the development of brain imaging (MRI and PET - Positron emission tomography - scans), pervaded both the media and public opinion and influenced political decision-makers. This spilling over of neuroscience beyond the perimeter of research was notable in numerous fields, starting with education, and including the field of parenting and support for mothers, which interests us here.

This neuroscience success story calls for a distinction between:

- on the one hand, the knowledge that research has acquired in a great number of medical or “hard science” domains and specialities (molecular biology, biochemistry, medical biophysics, brain lesions studies, imaging, animal models, clinical and pharmacological research centred on brain or neurodegenerative disorders, etc.) but also in human and

- social sciences (psychology, philosophy, law, ethics, education, economics, marketing, etc., disciplines that have gradually taken on the prefix “neuro-”);
- and on the other hand, the use of this knowledge by a certain number of actors in the fields of education, family policy and parenting, as well as political or public decision-makers to back up their proposals and recommendations.

Neuroscientists often point out that our understanding of how the brain works is still in its infancy, although some very promising applications have already been made in the field of disabilities (e.g. implanted chips that enable some people to recover their ability to walk and others to recover partial sight), along with scientific and technological developments in the military sector. Researchers maintain that brain plasticity continues throughout our lifetimes, including after accidents that formerly proved fatal or highly debilitating due to slow diagnosis and treatment. They also often underline that transferring knowledge acquired in the laboratory and/or from animal experiments is still highly risky, as is equating brain imaging with brain activity. As Bessant argues, “There is no single one-to-one relationship between brain anatomy and mental experience of a behaviour or a perception” (Bessant, 2008, p. 349; see also Damasio, 2006; Moulton and Kosslin, 2008).

For laypeople, it is, however, tempting to draw conclusions from these research results that specialists might consider hasty, premature or even false⁴, or to defend the existence of causalities leading to recommendations for a particular idea or avenue of reform, or such and such method or application, in the name of science. Despite the precautions of some scientists, “neurologic narratives can be located within popular media and self-help books, as well as within policy documents and scientific literature on development” (Pickersgill, 2013, p. 329). These two levels of discussion underline the opposition between a scientific approach and scientism as “an ideological phenomenon in which the authority of science is drawn upon those outside the field” (Tallis, 2011, cited by Macvarish *et al.*, 2014, p. 795).

Faced with the success of neuroscience in the parental education sector, several authors have employed the expression “neuroparenting”, in other words, “a parenting style where neuroscientific insights are used to improve parenting and thereby to foster child development” (Snock and Horstkötter, 2021, p. 387; see also Macvarish, 2016). In taking up, simplifying and popularizing neuroscientific knowledge, some practitioners (doctors, paediatricians, clinical psychologists, social workers and trainers) and political decision-makers have suggested two key moments to intervene in the child development process. The first corresponds to the primary stages of life (from conception and throughout the first three years). Advocates of this option claim that neuroscience shows that parents wield powerful forces to act on the development of their children in order to optimize their learning, mental well-being and psycho-emotional development, provided that they behave in a certain way and respect certain rules – or in other words, follow experts’ advice. This capacity to optimize children, both on the cognitive development and psycho-emotional level, is reportedly more effective when these lessons and good practices are implemented from an early age, with the targeted window of opportunity being “the first three years” or the “first 1,000 days” (Cyrulnik, 2020, for a critic of this argument see Bruer, 1997).

The other key moment or window of opportunity is reportedly during adolescence, with the idea of the “teenage brain”, in particular “the prefrontal cortex, which in the adolescent is considered to be in a state of ripening or maturation” (van de Werff, 2017, p. 214). Because brain development stabilizes only at around age 25, parents apparently have the power to play

⁴ For example, the Royal Society mentioned in their report on ‘neuroscience: implications for education and lifelong learning’: “We urge caution in the rush to apply so-called brain-based methods, many of which do not yet have a sound basis in science” (Royal Society, 2011, p. v).

the role of a “good external frontal lobe” for their teenager by following two moral parenting repertoires: “parents as protective guardians of external stimuli”, avoiding risks in the adolescent environment and, “parents as stimulating coaches”, leaving their teenagers room for experimentation (van de Werff, *op. cit.*). These two moral repertoires work as a sort of double bind, alternating between a protection approach and an empowerment approach.

In addition to these two moments, two outcomes are evoked to justify these interventions: the first concerns neurocognitive development, with the idea that stimulating children from an early age is one of the best guarantees of their successful learning, while for teenagers it is more important to propose pertinent activities (“concerted cultivation” to pick up once again on the term used by Anne Lareau (Lareau 2003)); the second rather concerns neuro-affective development – which explains the distinction between cognitive neuroscience and affective neuroscience.

3. A neuroaffective parenting turn?

In becoming a real movement or lobby, and by making this cause political, the theme of the first three years considerably influenced decision-making spheres and led to a reform pathway in numerous countries, sometimes involving the misuse of so-called probing knowledge, resulting in brain-based policies. This movement of ideas started out in the USA with the announcement by the U.S. Congress of a “decade of the brain” starting in 1989 (see Bruer, 1997), and then gained a firm foothold in the UK at the turn of the 2000s (Broer and Pickersgill, 2015; Macvarish, 2016; Gillies *et al.*, 2017), along with Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Almost two decades later, the same ideas influenced the construction of public policies in France (*Les 1000 premiers jours* report, Cyrulnik, 2020). As pointed out by Jan Macvarish, Ellie Lee and Pam Lowe, “This alliance of child welfare advocates and politicians, which became increasingly vocal and influential from the early 1990s, has drawn authority from the wider excitement about neuroscience to argue that social problems such as inequality, poverty, educational underachievement, violence and mental illness are best addressed through ‘early intervention’ programmes to protect or enhance emotional and cognitive aspects of children’s brain development” (Macvarish *et al.*, 2014, pp. 792-93).

In their review of the literature on this three years movement, Jan Macvarish, Ellie Lee and Pam Lowe make three main criticisms: the first concerns the scientific validity of brain claims; the second “calls into question the politicisation of parenting and childcare as a solution to what have been more usually seen as structurally generated social problems, such as inequality and poverty” (Macvarish *et al.*, 2014, p. 793); while the third engages with the reconceptualizing of love in biological terms. In their systematic review of the literature on neuroparenting, Snock and Horskötter (2021) partly support these proposals and also raise three main criticisms that partially overlap with those just mentioned: they confirm the gap between neuroscientific findings and neuroparenting advice, but also put forward the implicit normativity in the transfer from neuroscience to practice and, third, the idea that neuroparenting is a form of neoliberal self-management.

A great deal of confusion and myths clearly surround these brain claims on the first 1,000 days, starting with the confusion between the explosive synaptic connectivity of the early years of the child and brain power. The fact that neural connections multiply exponentially in early life does not make a newborn’s brain more “powerful”, as a computer would be. This leads to another causal hypothesis that has been widely contested, claiming that hyperstimulation improves children’s cognitive performance. As numerous neuropsychologists have pointed out, “too much deterministic power is attributed to the early years” (Macvarish *et al.*, 2014, p. 795). Conceiving of the brains of newborns and young

children as formidable small computers that require only stimulating and feeding with information to improve their performance led to a complementary line of argument that concerns not just cognitive development but affective and emotional development, remobilizing the latest contributions and theories on attachment resulting from the seminal work of John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1958).

To understand the political uses and misuses of neuroscience in the production of public policies in the United Kingdom, Tineke Broer and Martyn Pickersgill analysed a series of official reports and documents published in the UK from 2000 to 2013 (a total of 84 plus 6 websites) featuring a series of key words related to neuroscience, brains and education (Broer and Pickersgill, 2015). These authors show how neuroscience-based concepts contribute to redefining responsibilities in contemporary societies, in other words, both responsibility to and for oneself and responsibility for others. This reframing of responsibility follows three arguments: that of optimizing human potential on a neurobiological register, with the idea of investing in human capital; that of self-governance, resilience and the capacity to deal with stress when under pressure and faced with challenges; and that of vulnerability, in particular given that children and teenagers are particularly (even “naturally”) vulnerable and porous to ordeals and risks.

Despite criticism and precautions put forward by a large number of researchers in neuropsychology and neuroscience, as well as social sciences, brain claims have continued to filter into political discussions and guide public policies in the sector. For example, the authors that we cite here almost all mention the mediatization in 2011 of an MRI image comparing the brains of two children, one of which was “normal” and the other subject to extreme neglect, and calling for an early intervention campaign to reduce public costs and guarantee massive savings⁵. These messages and injunctions aimed at parents, in particular mothers, to guarantee the good development of their children’s brains led in the UK to removing children, for preventative reasons, from parents deemed incapable and making mothers understand the point to which their responsibility was key for the future of their offspring. The injunction to pursue intensive parenting (in fact, especially intensive mothering), in other words involving parental investment above social investment, has been compared by numerous authors to the neoliberal ideology, whereby individuals are encouraged to self-govern (among others see Wall, 2004 and 2010). Analysing the situation in a Canadian province, Glenda Wall argues that, “The focus on educating parents fits well with a model of individual responsibility and privatised parenting. It does not require governments to re-invest in the welfare state and design policy to alleviate poverty, provide affordable housing and child care services, and improve employment practices” (Wall 2004, p. 47). To qualify this offloading onto parents of collective socialization responsibilities, we have put forward the idea of “parentalisation du social” (parentalizing social issues) (Martin and Leloup, 2020), in other words, a shift from the social issue, or the issue of inequality, to the issue of parenthood. Frank Furedi has described this assumption of responsibility by parents as the source of a large number of social problems as parental determinism (Furedi, 2002).

This entrepreneurial parenting model has (re)opened an area of influence that insists less on the cognitive dimension (i.e. optimising children’s learning) than on the affective dimension (i.e. making children happy). As Davi Johnson Thornton puts it so well, “Good babies are not measured by cognitive or intellectual criteria: instead, what makes a baby ‘good’ is defined in terms of happiness, emotional adaptability and social adjustment” (Thornton, 2011, p. 400). By picking up on the achievements of research on attachment and importing some

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-intervention-smart-investment-massive-savings> (accessed on 01/06/2023).

results from neuroscience on this emotional dimension of brain functioning, numerous manuals offering practical advice to mothers and child and family professionals reinforce the injunctions aimed at mothers, and in doing so, their anxiety.

According to this orientation, children's neuro-emotional development and sense of security and well-being depend not only on what their mothers do and say, but on the authenticity of their mothers' own emotions. Mothers can guarantee this good emotional attachment only if they themselves "authentically" experience well-being (when breastfeeding, in their interactions and games with their children, etc.). And they must also understand that these feelings have hormonal and therefore biological repercussions ("maternal hormones as the key determinant of the bonding experience"), their only playing card being to work on their own emotions. "Successful bonding is a project of personal freedom, inextricably bound up with women's self-realization. Attachment is a project of authenticity that requires women [to] shape themselves into mothers who genuinely enjoy the early experiences with their infant" (Thornton, 2011, pp. 407 & 409). As once again put so well by Davi Thornton, "women are obliged to be free", in other words, obliged to comply with the advice of these experts whose mission is "disciplining the depths of mothers' souls" (*Ibid*, p. 414).

The French configuration of these debates is particularly illuminating here. When a group of experts was put together in 2019-2020 to reflect on the policy to adopt for the first 1,000 days of a child's life, some areas of knowledge and competencies were clearly emphasised more than others: as might be expected, the group comprised child development psychologists, paediatricians, child psychiatrists, neuropsychiatrists and a mid-wife, but no specialists in social and family policies, demographers, historians or sociologists. Yet perhaps even more striking is the place given to people responsible for popularizing positive parenting knowledge and practices, promoting training and services to childhood and family professionals as well as to parents themselves. This group of experts undoubtedly made certain that the report delivered balanced recommendations, but not without mentioning the importance of "taking inspiration from the British model and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF), specializing in pre-school children" (Cyrulnik, 2020, p. 121), despite the well-documented criticisms expressed in the literature mentioned above.

This understanding in terms of a movement of ideas and power struggle is also clearly illustrated by several media controversies that were particularly symptomatic of the intensity, even the violence, of clashes. During the autumn of 2022, numerous daily and weekly newspapers in France published articles on a controversy opposing advocates of the "time out" with defenders of positive parenting. In other words, the issue was whether or not sending children to their bedrooms to calm down is an everyday violence that has very negative impacts on children's development and might even be the first stage of a path leading to much more violent acts.

This intense controversy involved a confrontation between, in one corner, a clinical child psychologist called Caroline Goldman, who strongly criticized the adverse impacts of the French version of positive parenting defended by "self-proclaimed" (as she put it) experts on confused parents and mothers at risk of burn-out; and in the other corner, the leading two (so-called "self-proclaimed") experts: the psychotherapist Isabelle Filliozat, Vice-President of the First 1000 Days Commission and a figurehead of the positive parenting market in France, author of two popular psychology books with sales of respectively 500,000 and almost 400,000 copies, and at the head of a "registered trademark" for a training and presentation catalogue, and Catherine Gueguen, a paediatrician and also author of bestsellers that popularize, at the risk of "disinforming", according to Caroline Goldman, the lessons of affective neuroscience "for a happy childhood" (the title of one of Gueguen's books).

Over and above the terms of this controversy, and its knock-on effect on articles signed by collectives of professionals supporting one or other of the positions, it illustrates the strong resonance that this theme of parenting, and in particular mothering, has had on contemporary French society. Undoubtedly, the topic provides a reliable staple for the media. Once again, the issues involved here are struggle and influence and the promotion of a vision of mothering and parenting that tends to boil down to the level of inter-individual interactions while overlooking the importance of their context.

Conclusion

At the end of this retrospective look at parenting and its role in shaping individual autonomy, we should like to emphasise a few points. Firstly, the fact that parenting work and practices are far from a new policy issue. However, major changes have occurred in the arguments that have contributed to building this public problem. At the start of the 20th century, the questions raised were clearly collective and political, as they concerned national fertility rate, infant mortality and population growth. But following the Second World War and the surge in knowledge about child development, the issue no longer concerned mainly the quantity of children, but rather their quality. The development of a therapeutic culture played a key part in defining the roles of mothers and parents and the impact of their roles on children and teenagers.

In this process, another lesson of this look back concerns the highly euphemistic use of the term « parent » in the last decades, since it is clear that most of the questions raised tend to concern the practices and attitudes of mothers. Contrary to what one might think, the term parent is not employed here to underline equally shared roles between mothers and fathers, but rather an attempt to disguise the gendered dimension of this role: a gender-blind approach rather than a gender-neutral one, as pointed out by Mary Daly (2013).

A change occurred in the 1990s with the re-emergence of a specific policy aimed at parents, combining old and new ideas: old objectives, such as controlling parents' bad behaviour and preventing risks to children in order to avoid delinquency or other forms of deviance later in life; but also new directions, complementing family support measures (services and allowances, designed in particular to help parents combine work and family responsibilities) with a policy aimed at educating parents about their own role, encouraging them to invest in that role in order to produce brighter, more successful, more efficient and happier children (intensive parenting). This injunction to perform coincides with the ideas and practices of the personal development market (Marquis, 2014).

This revival has less to do with the preventative and punitive approach that continues to be applied to parents deemed incapable (the vast majority of whom belong to the working classes), than with the development of injunctions addressed to middle-class parents to “optimize” their offspring through intensive and positive parenting methods. The result is an exponential supply of devices – a parenting market – that meets a growing demand for advice from parents concerned about the future and success of their offspring in a context of social regression.

The development of this parenting policy should lead to a clearer distinction being drawn between what comes under the heading of social investment, i.e. collective services and rights that enable individuals to cope better with the constraints of contemporary society, and what comes under the heading of parental investment understood as a condition for the production of “quality” and autonomous individuals.

While the targets of these parental measures remain the same as in the past (mothers, fathers), the change also lies in the knowledge and techniques mobilized and their roles in the production of primary socialization norms. In this renewal, the politicization of neuroscientific knowledge is remarkable, leading to a public policy that clearly favours interventions on individuals rather than on the contexts in which they live. It is important in that respect to make a clear distinction between what is happening on the knowledge side and what is happening on the battlefield of ideas, values and ideologies, on the lobbying and decision-making side.

In this battle of ideas, there is, on the one hand, an approach that emphasises the individual responsibilities and capacities that people must have in order to be socially integrated, according to a logic that combines investment in oneself and parental investment; and, on the other hand, an approach that emphasises the conditions that enable individuals to be autonomous, taking account of their environment and living conditions. In this second perspective, the main issue concerns the inequality of conditions for parents.

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