From family policy to parenting support.

Parenting-related anxiety in Finnish family support projects

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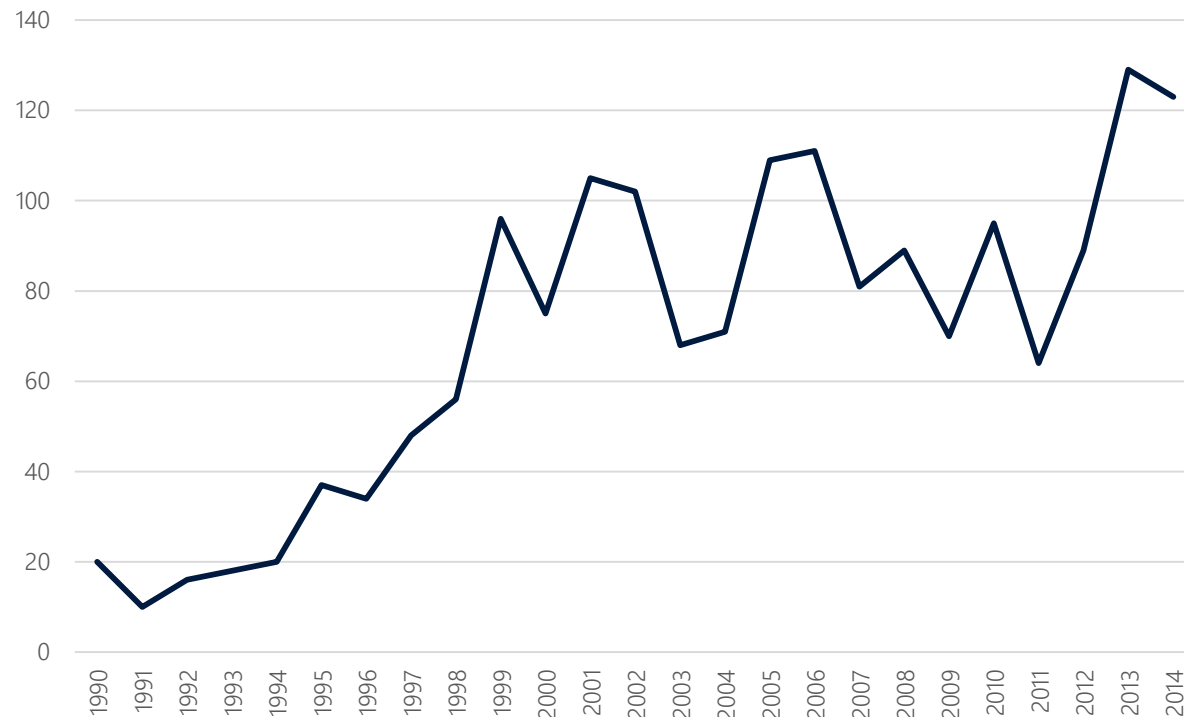# Ill-being of children and youth in the popular media: problem of parenting

"School authorities are not actually blaming children per se [about disturbing and ignorance behaviour] but an accusatory finger is rpointed at home, at parents. 'We have started to use the sentence disappeared parenthood'. ESS, 3.3.1999.

"Children are 'hungry for parenting'. Our parenting competences are disappeared and we only know how to satisfy children's basic needs. We only respect ourselves and our own prosperity." HS, 1.4.2001.

Anxiety about disappeared parenthood

Frequency of the articles in the leading Finnish newspaper (Helsingin Sanomat) using the word *parenting,* 1990-2014

- Hacking (1991):

  We live with and through a welter of conceptions that are at once moral, human, social and personal, but there are, at any time, few fundamental concepts that we can watch being made and moulded before our very eyes.

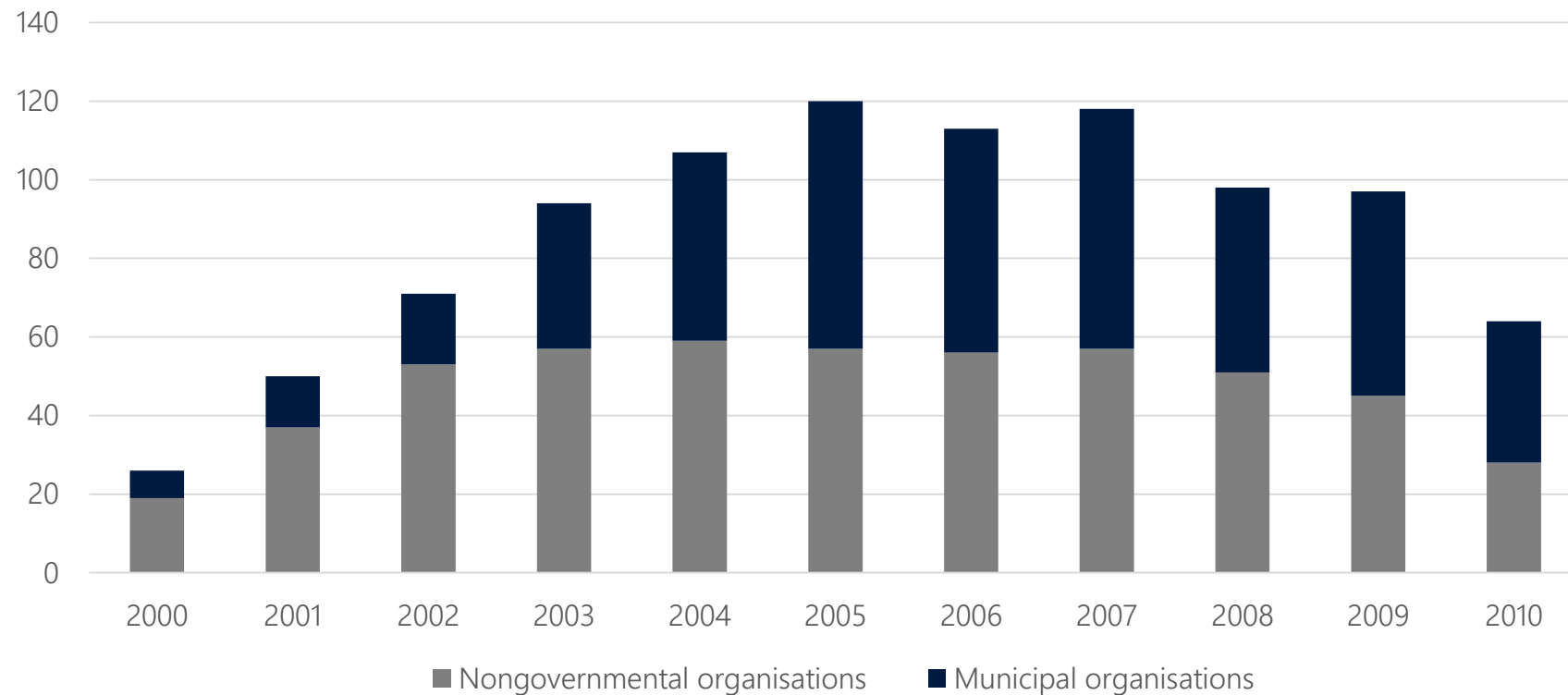Kela|Fpa

"Parenting support" in Finnish governments Action plans

Regime	Party controlling the government
1999–2003	The Social Democratic Party of Finland
2003–2007	The Centre Party
2007–2011	The Centre Party
2011–2015	The National Coalition Party (centre-right)
2015-	The National Coalition Party (centre-right)

"The [Finnish] Government fosters partnership and collaboration of different agencies in order **to support responsible parenting** and a safe environment for children to develop into and grow up to be stable adults." (Action plan, 1999–2003).

"The focus of family policy is to **support parenting** and to create a safe environment for children to grow up. **Parenting support** and support for partner relationships are developed and strengthened. (Action plan, 2011–2015)

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Number of ongoing parenting support projects 2000–2010

Distribution of the projects between municipal and nongovernmental organisations

Legend: ■ Nongovernmental organisations ■ Municipal organisations

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Data: documented parenting support projects

❖ The data:

- 310 documented parenting support projects between the years 2000 and 2010
- Projects from both public organisations (51%) and NGOs (49%)
- Mostly qualitative text and discourse analysis of various kinds of project documents

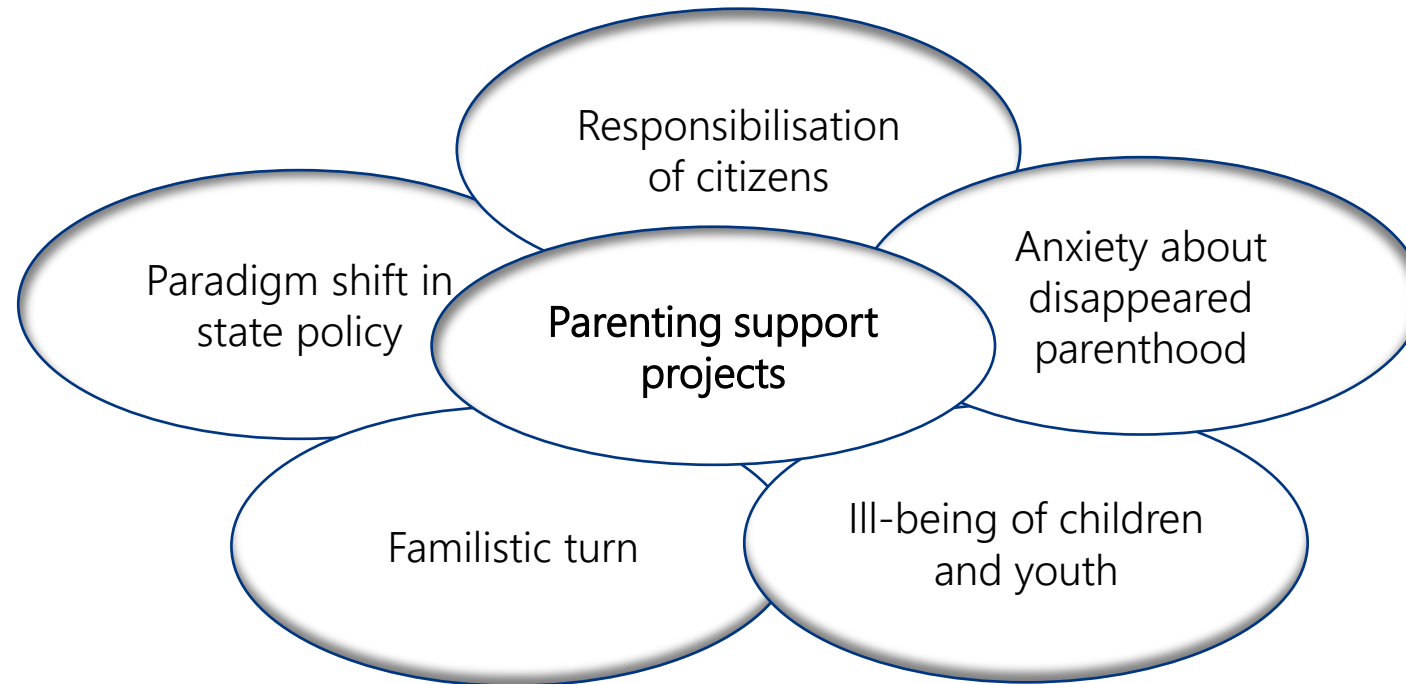| Type of the document	n
Final reports	154
Mid-term reports	28
Project plans	67
Funding applications	51
Other publications	91
Other project documents	126
Total	514

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A familsitic turn

- Identified in the public debate on family in the late 1990s and named by Jallinoja (2006) as a familistic turn .

- Not a conservative conquest of family policy, but embodied modern elements in the discussions about family (e.g. freedom to choose) and gained wide-ranging popularity within in public debates and politics.

- Family was situated in the heart of discussions about the overall welfare (or ill-being) citizens.
  - Ill-beigin of children and youth and anxiety about parenthood (Sihvonen, 2008)

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The Finnish welfare state context

- The deep economic recession of the early 1990s
- *Paradigm shift* towards more market orientated-state policy (Heiskala and Luhtakallio, 2006)
  - This shift included a set of new abstractions such as the responsibilisation of citizens
- A specific discourse of responsibilisation of families penetrated the entire discussion of the roles of the state and the family (Julkunen, 2006)
- That paradigm shift was mirrored in discussions on family policy

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Contextualising the parenting support projects

Responsibilisation of citizens

Paradigm shift in state policy

Parenting support projects

Anxiety about disappeared parenthood

Familistic turn

Ill-being of children and youth

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Turn to parenting in Finland and beyond

- Similar parenting support programmes in other European countries (REAAP, Early Child Matters Programme, Sure Start Programme etc.)

- 'A shift towards parenting' (Faircloth and Murray, 2014) or 'turn to parenting' (Daly, 2013)

- Important: parenting is increasingly understood as both the source and the solution to a myriad of social problems and wide range of social ills (e.g. Lee, 2014)

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Research questions

- How is parenting understood in parenting support projects? In other words, what is supported when parenting is supported?

- How is responsibilisation of parents carried out in parenting support projects?

- What is the role of the experts and community within parenting support?

- What kinds of skills, competencies and capabilities are required of and from contemporary parents?

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Theoretical perspectives

- Anxiety about parenting from the point of view of risk (e.g., Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998).

- Four elements of risk consciousness and parenting related anxiety: risk as the possibility of dangerous outcomes for children; the individualization of those fears, a lack of shared values; the policing of parenting (Lee, 2014).

- Shift from normative life policy to one's own responsibility (Sulkunen, 2009).

- The governmentality theory: Parenting support as 'conduct of conduct' From the point of view of those in power, the behaviour of individual parents becomes crucial (e.g. Miller & Rose, 2008).

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Theoretical perspecties: part II

- Difference between childrearing and parenting (Daly, 2014; Faircloth & Murray, 2014)
  - Childrearing identifies the target as children, whereas parenting identifies the subject as the parent(s)

- In this vein, political aspirations to support parenting – not for example childrearing – aptly described as 'the turn to parenting' (Daly, 2013) or 'a shift towards parenting' (Faircloth & Murray, 2014) in family policy, becomes understood as techniques through which parents are governed (i.e., Rose 1999).

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Descriptive analysis: aims and target groups of parenting support in Finland

Type of the project	Number	%
Prevention projects	**211**	**68**
Non-selective prevention projects	180	58
Prevention projects for selected groups (young mothers, immigrant families, etc)	31	10
Intervention project	**99**	**32**
Parenting support for families in child welfare services: child behavioural problems, etc	57	19
Parenting support for families in child welfare services for other reasons: parents with mental illnesses or substance misuse issues	35	11
Other intervention projects: supporting parenting during a prison sentence, etc	7	2
Total	**310**	**100**

Descriptive analysis: the main approaches

Two main approaches were identified from the project documents

An individualised parenting support approach	A communal parenting support approach
Parenting is understood as a social problem interpreted as a of intimate family relations	This approach is based upon a wider scope of social relationships within a community and targeted to increase an overall 'sense of community'

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Emphasis of individual and communal parenting support approaches in syb-studies I-IV

Emphasis of individual and communal parenting support approaches in sub-studies

Running heads of the paper titles	Individualised parenting support approach	Communal parenting support approach
I Childrearing and parenting support	+	-
II Early interventionist parenting support	+	-
III Parents as resposible and competent actors	+	+
IV Community and parenting support	-	+

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Individualised parenting support approach

- Childrearing a fairly popular topic

  - Kasvatuskumppanuus i.e. parents as partners with professionals in childrearing
  - Partnership and shared responsibilities between professionals or responsibilisation of parents?
  - Competence in childrearing relies heavily on responsible parenting and *inner* capabilities and *inner* expertise of parents.

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Individualised parenting support approach

- Early interventionist parenting support focuses on the conduct of the parents, the nucleus of which lies in the parent–child relationship.

- The logic of early interventionist parenting support encompasses thematic components, such as activating the parent into responsible and 'reflexive' parenting, enabling latent and quiescent parenting capacities.

- Role of the experts: experts in family projects do not provide advice on how to raise children per se, because that is not the purpose of early interventionist parenting support.

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Communal parenting support approach

- This approach relies on ideas about a lost and collapsed community, thus fracturing 'traditional' support structures, and the individualisation process extending too far, causing, for example, ill-being of children and youth.

- Interestingly, the communal approach to parenting support relies on peer-parenting relationships, what I have named as the *horizontal expertise of parenting*.

Conclusion

- What is common to the communal parenting support approach and individualised parenting support approach is an understanding of the lack of shared values producing a need for parenting support and the distant position of professional experts.

- These findings indicate that, at least within Finnish parenting support discussions, professional expertise is not highlighted as much as expertise stemming from the parents' own experience as well as horizontal expertise – that is, expertise shared amongst peer parents within a community.

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Conclusion

- In parenting support, structural changes in the welfare state are not highlighted as much as the responsibilities of individuals and their immediate communities.

- While the individualised parenting support approach focuses merely on strengthening the parent–child relationship, and the communal parenting support approach focuses on strengthening a sense of community, economic, social and cultural structures are overshadowed as if they do not matter at all.

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