Parental Determinism
and Child Well-Being

Ellie Lee and Jan Macvarish
Centre for Parenting Culture Studies, University of Kent
Parental Determinism (Furedi, 2001)

‘The interlocking myths of ‘infant determinism’ (the assumption that infant experience determines the course of future development) and ‘parental determinism’ (the notion that parental intervention determines the fate of the youngster) have come to have a major influence on the relations between children and their parents’.

‘Parenting has been transformed into an all-purpose independent variable that seems to have the capacity to explain everything to do with an infant’s development. Parenting has been used as a main variable to explain the following childhood problems: Eating disorders; The ‘terrible twos’; Student anxiety; Failure in school; Depression; Low IQ; Violent behaviour; Psychological damage’.

‘Inflating the public’s perception of parental impact promises the potential of influence and power but inevitably delivers disappointing results. Unfortunately, when this happens we don’t discard the doctrine of parental determinism, we insist instead that mothers and fathers adopt new parenting skills. Such pressures have led and continue to lead to a major redefinition of parenting’.
The re-definition of parenting: the policy sphere this Century

• From family form and structure, to ‘parenting competence’
• Linking measurable outcomes for children to parenting competencies
• Moral impetus is risk to child well-being / welfare, meaning parenting and child well-being become causally linked
• Policy focus on intervention / training / education in parent/child interaction expands
• ‘Parental involvement’ and ‘Positive Parenting’ as normative
• Realm of state action becomes focussed on the affective (rather than the material) elevating management of emotion with the material as background / contributory factor
Sociological lens:
Risk Consciousness, Therapeutic Culture

• The problem of uncertainty regarding the future has been recast throughout
  modern history as the problem of childhood and of the family
• Uncertainty has, more recently, found expression in risk management
• Increasingly strong emphasis on the risks of ‘educational failure’ and ‘mental
  health’ / twin foci of ‘educational attainment’ and ‘psychological wellbeing’ as
  routes to amelioration of risk
• Adult identity increasingly linked to goals of ‘attainment’ and ‘mental health’
• Parent role organised around ‘involvement’ to these ends
• The reorganisation / destabilisation of previous boundaries of and meanings
  ascribed to public/private and adulthood/childhood are socially significant
  outcomes and this process of boundary dissolution is ongoing
• Therapeutic management of individuals and of relations between individuals
  has become normative
Making SCOTLAND the World’s First ACE-Aware Nation

26 September 2018
GLASGOW

www.connectedbaby.net
Latest iteration of the ‘first three years movement’ (Thornton 2011)

“an alliance of child welfare advocates and politicians’ which proposes that social problems such as ‘inequality, poverty, educational underachievement, violence and mental illness are best addressed through ‘early intervention’ programmes” (Macvarish et al, 2015)
Evangelical certainty - ‘new magic bullet’
How many adults reported each ACE in 2017?

**Child maltreatment**
- Verbal abuse: 20%
- Physical abuse: 16%
- Sexual abuse: 7%

**Household ACEs**
- Parental separation: 25%
- Mental illness: 18%
- Domestic violence: 17%
- Alcohol abuse: 13%
- Drug abuse: 6%
- Incarceration: 4%

**Neglect** was measured for the first time in 2017. Most people who reported neglect had multiple ACEs.

Emotional neglect: 7%
Physical neglect: 4%

For every 100 adults in Wales, 50 had at least one ACE and 14 had four or more ACEs:
- 0 ACEs: 50%
- 1 ACE: 19%
- 2-3 ACEs: 17%
- 4+ ACEs: 14%
Traumatised brains

70/30 CAMPAIGN: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN

Childhood Trauma
An event that a child finds overwhelmingly distressing or emotionally painful, often resulting in lasting mental and physical effects.

2x
more likely to develop DEPRESSION

3x
more likely to develop ANXIETY DISORDERS

Common causes:
- Child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)
- Witness/victim of violence
- Grief
- War/Terrorism
- Neglect
- Medical trauma
- Substance misuse
- Mental illness
- Bullying in school
- Separation from loved ones

LONG-TERM IMPACTS:
- Affects perception of reality
- Wires brain to expect danger
- Triggers fight, fright or freeze response
- Creates relationship problems
- Takes away sense of safety
- Increases stress hormones flowing through the body
- Creates a sense of helplessness
- Results in serious behaviour problems

"The initial trauma of a young child may go underground but it will return to haunt us"
James Garbarino

PREFRONTAL CORTEX (PFC)
"Thinking Centre"
Underactivated
Difficulties concentrating & learning.

ANTERIOR CINGULATE CORTEX (ACC)
"Emotion Regulation Centre"
Underactivated
Difficulties with managing emotions.

AMYGDALA
"Fear Centre"
Overactivated
Difficulty feeling safe, calming down, sleeping

Complex Trauma: a result of repetitive, prolonged trauma

www.70-30.org.uk
@7030campaign
Health, education, police: aspiring to an ‘ACE-free’ world

Our research shows taking a public health approach to policing & criminal justice = less people in prison, less violence & less drug use.

We all need to be ACE & Trauma informed and support vulnerable people, families & communities so future generations can be ACE free

Mark Bellis, Director of Policy, Health and International Development
‘your body remembers what the mind forgets’

ACEs:

• **Retrospectively** identified in adults, correlated with health problems (mental and physical).

• **Prospectively** identified in children.

• Traditional fears of disorderly social underclass reinterpreted in therapeutic terms.
The evidence is uncertain: ‘the argument’ precedes it

‘Little robust research’ to ‘claim there is a sufficient evidence-base for specific Interventions’. (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health)

‘The ACE score approach is highly limited in being able to inform interventions as it’s unclear which adversities produce the most negative impacts upon health and how this occurs. The limitations of the ACE score approach are becoming more widely acknowledged in this field of research...’ (International Centre for Lifecourse studies)
‘Other potential gaps in the evidence also include research establishing causality; it is important to distinguish association from cause and effect.’ (Association of Directors of Public Health)

'The Academy of Medical Sciences similarly noted that “it is not always clear where the line is drawn between normative stress experiences and ACEs”’
Tension between activating parental agency, determinism and fatalism

“There is an ignorance among people in general about the importance of what they do for children’s lives. Children’s everyday experiences shape their lives, yet among many people there is a kind of fatalism. They think, “The child will be what it is going to be like anyway. It does not really matter what I do.” When you have that kind of attitude, you do not try to help your child. To overcome that kind of philosophy, we need to change our culture with regard to how we view parenting.” (Professor Edward Melhuish, oral evidence)
Psychological/therapeutic fatalism?

• Little faith in any maternal ‘instinct’ or spontaneous feelings of love.
• Motherhood is portrayed as more likely to inspire depression, or re-trigger past traumas.
• A mirror image of historic idealisations of naturalised motherhood?
ACEs: What happens to the parent?

• The parent appears to be centrally important: because they are determinate of the child/future adult.
  • But they are a risk factor.
  • Unconsciously determinate: a ‘toxic’ vector of harm.

• But, the parent also disappears relative to others:
  • Professionals are given para-parental status - the child needs ‘stable, caring adults’, ‘caregivers’, the professional knows the child better than the parent.

• Simultaneously the problem and the solution.
  • Lack of faith and authority, but the focus of intense therapeutic scrutiny and intervention.
The problem of the ‘Helicopter Parent’

- Extensive, highly visible discussion in the US (where term originates)
- Increasingly prevalent in Britain this Century e.g. media reporting (about both young adults and toddlers)
2018

‘Don’t make their GP appointments, don’t manage their money - universities’ advice to helicopter parents’ (The Guardian, November)

‘Helicopter parenting is bad for children’ (The Times); ‘Leave those kids alone: ‘helicopter parenting’ linked to behavioural problems’ (The Guardian); ‘Helicopter’ parents cause their children to struggle at school, become badly behaved and ‘defiant’, study finds (The Mail) (all June)

2017

‘Helicopter parents who praise their children too easily are blamed for them still living at home aged 25’ (The Mail); ‘Middle-class parents damaging their children by not being able to say 'no'; 'Mollycoddling' and 'helicopter' parenting leaving primary school children poorly behaved and ill-prepared for real life, expert warns’ (The Independent); ‘Warning to helicopter parents: ignoring your child may actually be the best thing for them’ (The Mail); ‘Helicopter and lawnmower parents beware: Experts say the key to raising kids is to be 'just good enough” (The Mail)

2016

‘Pushy parents should 'butt out' of their children's university open days, admissions head demands’ (The Mail); ‘Oxford University separates 'helicopter' parents from children at open days- (The Telegraph)
Helicopter Parenting and Parental Determinism

‘A common target of child-rearing manuals before the Second World War was the over-protective parent, and guilt-ridden parents worried that they might be ‘smothering’ their children. But how many times do we hear parents criticized for being over-protective today? Indeed, many of the traits associated with the classic over-protective father or mother are likely to be praised by today’s child experts as responsible parenting’. (Furedi, 2001)

Is this problem a departure from, or development of, parental determinism?

- Claimsmakers and fields of discussion: who owns the term and how is the problem defined?
- ‘Helicopter Parenting’ as a problematic ‘parenting style’
- Outcomes: the expansion of therapeutic management of parent and child
Parenting advice

- ‘Mother hovers over me like a helicopter’ (Between Parent and Teenager, Haim Ginott, 1969)
- Creative Child and Adult Quarterly advises parents to ‘not hover like a helicopter’ over a child practising the violin (1987)
- Multiple references to the term as it originating with US parenting advice book Parenting With Love and Logic (Cline and Fay, 1990). Drawing on biblical references, merging with psychological theorizing, categorises Helicopter Parenting as ineffective, contrasting it with Consultant Parenting (as effective).

‘They say “some parents think that love means rotating their lives around their children. They are helicopter parents….While today these “loving” parents may feel they are easing their children’s path into adulthood, tomorrow the same children will be leaving home and wasting the firth eighteen months of their adult life flunking our out of college or meandering about ‘getting their heads together’. Such children are unequipped for the challenges of life. Their significant learning opportunities were stolen from them in the name of love’ (p23)
Higher Education Officials (major focus in US, imported to UK)
‘Lay’ commentators and campaigners (‘The Backlash’)

‘The insanity crept up on us slowly; we just wanted what was best for our kids. We bought macrobiotic cupcakes and hypoallergenic socks, hired tutors to correct a 5-year-old's "pencil-holding deficiency," hooked up broadband connections in the treehouse but took down the swing set after the second skinned knee. We hovered over every school, playground and practice field — "helicopter parents," teachers christened us, a phenomenon that spread to parents of all ages, races and regions...

All great rebellions are born of private acts of civil disobedience that inspire rebel bands to plot together. And so there is now a new revolution under way, one aimed at rolling back the almost comical overprotectiveness and overinvestment of moms and dads.

The insurgency goes by many names — slow parenting, simplicity parenting, free-range parenting — but the message is the same: Less is more’ (‘The Growing Backlash Against Overparenting’. Nancy Gibbs, Time Magazine Nov 20, 2009)
Academic Experts: Parenting Styles

‘The parenting style literature is probably the most important incubator of the concept of parenting. Such factors as parents’ orientation to their children, their style of discipline and manner of communicating with children are the focus of enquiry here. These are considered interesting mainly for their role in the transmission of patterns of adjustment or dysfunction in the individual child. This literature is permeated by the belief that parents’ modes of relating to their children can be conceptualised as ‘styles’ and that such ‘styles’ have profound effects on children’ (Daly, in Betz, Honig, Ostner, 2017, p43)
Helicopter Parenting as a ‘parenting style’
(following Baumrind)

‘We are not proposing that helicopter parenting is an entirely new dimension of parenting..... Instead it represents a unique pattern of the basic dimensions of parenting...

...helicopter parenting does not appear to be a clear form of psychological control as it does not appear to target the emotional or psychological autonomy of the child. It certainly appears to reflect some aspects of behavioural control, but with high levels of warmth and support as well as excessive limiting of autonomy that is not at all consistent with the age of the child.

...In these respects, helicopter parenting is reminiscent of similar constructs that have been identified in parenting of children at various ages....More similarity exists between helicopter parenting in emerging adulthood and an approach to parenting of younger children know as overprotective, or oversolicitous parenting....

Given that involvement, protection, affection etc tend to be aspects of ‘good’ parenting, it leads to the question of when and whether a parent can give too much of a good thing.....

Involvement of the ‘wrong sort’

‘Although parental involvement has generally been found to be associated with positive cognitive and psychosocial child outcomes (Day and Padilla-Walker 2009; Fingerman et al. 2012; Wilder 2014), there is mounting evidence that developmentally inappropriate levels of involvement associated with helicopter parenting is associated with decreased well-being (LeMoyne and Buchanan 2011; Schiffrin et al. 2014; Segrin et al. 2013) and academic achievement (Nelson et al. 2015; Padilla-Walker and Nelson 2012; Shoup et al. 2009) among adolescents and young adults’. (Schiffrin and Liss 2017, ‘The Effects of Helicopter Parenting on Academic Motivation’ Journal of Child and Family Studies 26: 1472-1480)
Expanding the field of study
Discovering the pathological effects of helicopter parenting 2010+

- **Depressive symptoms / use of prescription medication** (LeMoyne and Buchanan, 2011; Garner 2017; Reilly and Semkovska 2018)
- **Anxiety and social connectedness** (Ulutas and Aksoy 2014; LeMoyne and Buchanan, 2011; Schriffin, Liss et al, 2014; Woo, Hur and Ahn 2017; Cui, Janhonen-Abruquah et al 2018; Lee and Kang 2018)
- **Well-Being / Psychological Well-being / Psychological adjustment** (LeMoyne and Buchanan, 2011; Schriffin, Liss et al, 2014; Woo, Hur and Ahn 2017; Cui, Janhonen-Abruquah et al 2018; Lee and Kang 2018)
- **Anorexia and eating disorders, body image** (Levy and Crow 2017; Ciccia and Darlin 2017; Perez, Cui et al 2018)
- **Academic motivation / academic achievement and functioning/procrastination** (Hong, Hwang et al 2015; Scriffin, Liss 2017; Goh 2017; Lubbe, Mancini et al 2018)
- **Adjustment to college** (Darlow, Norvilitis, Schuetze 2017)
- **Self-efficacy** (Reed, Duncan et al 2016)
- **Rapport with instructors** (Van Ingan, Freiheit et al 2015; Frey and Tatum 2016)
- **Lack of empathy** (McGinley 2018)
- **Narcissism** (Winner and Nicholson 2018)
- **Retreat from marriage** (Willoughby, Hearsh, Padilla-Walker, Nelson 2015)
- **Perceived impaired ability to relate well to children** (Scharf and Rousseau 2017)
Outcomes

‘The main outcome of this process is not a balanced understanding of the problems of ‘hyper-parenting’, but a further development in the ‘normalisation of parent-bashing’. Parents are castigated for their failure to anticipate and manage a bewildering range of risks to their child, and simultaneous criticized for the failure to ‘let go’” (Bristow, in Lee et al, 2014, p214)

➢ A response to parental determinism that re-articulates its premises in a new way
➢ Maintains starting point for ‘the problem’ in the child’s emotions and links directly to ‘parenting style’
➢ Introduces new layer of mixed messages regarding ‘involvement’
➢ Avoids the problem of adult responsibility in general
‘Parenting’ comes full circle: the roots of the pathology in the early years
Outcomes: therapeutic management

• ‘Resilience training’ for the young as counter to parenting (at least in part)

• New forms of ‘self help’ for parents who want to do better: ‘Loving with limits’
‘Parents as part of the team’: involvement in HE (not just school)
Concluding points

Contrasts between the ACEs parent and the helicopter parent:

• Both are usually mothers
• Both rely on parental determinism as precept

• **ACEs mother** = lower class, takes too little parental responsibility, too little love and security, may be actively abusive or neglectful (drink, drugs, violence). Physically or emotionally absent. BUT, may also be the product of their own childhood ACEs: not ignorant or feckless but traumatised. Naturally toxic.
  • ACE Awareness proposed as a social movement to fix the problem of the vulnerable child within the adult.

• **Helicopter mother** = middle class, takes too much responsibility, too much love and security, too present. Unwittingly toxic: love too much, maternal anxiety. OR culpably toxic: narcissistic, status-driven, instrumental, forging their own identity through their children.
  • Self-awareness alongside continued involvement (of the right sort)