Tanja Betz, Michael-Sebastian Honig, Ilona Ostner (eds.)

Parents in the Spotlight

Parenting Practices and Support from a Comparative Perspective

Special Issue 11 (2016 / 2017)
Journal of Family Research / Zeitschrift für Familienforschung

Barbara Budrich Publishers

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Barbara Budrich Publishers
Opladen • Berlin • Toronto 2017

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Die Deutsche Bibliothek (The German Library)

The Journal of Family Research/Zeitschrift für Familienforschung is sponsored by the State Institute for Family Research at the University of Bamberg (ifb). Editor-in-Chief: Prof. Dr. Henriette Engelhardt-Wölfler. For further information on the journal, please visit: www.journal-of-family-research.de or www.budrich-journals.de/index.php/zff

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www.barbara-budrich.net

ISBN 978-3-8474-0502-3
eISBN 978-3-8474-0924-3

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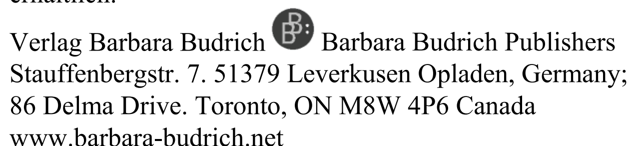
Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme
Ein Titeldatensatz für die Publikation ist bei Der Deutschen Bibliothek erhältlich.



Verlag Barbara Budrich Barbara Budrich Publishers
Stauffenbergstr. 7. 51379 Leverkusen Opladen, Germany;
86 Delma Drive. Toronto, ON M8W 4P6 Canada
www.barbara-budrich.net

Jacket illustration by disegno visuelle kommunikation, Wuppertal, Germany – disegno-kommunikation.de
Typesetting: R + S, Redaktion + Satz Beate Glaubitz, Leverkusen, Germany

Journal of Family Research/
Zeitschrift für Familienforschung
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Ilona Ostner, Tanja Betz and Michael-Sebastian Honig

Introduction: Parenting practices and parenting support in recent debates and policies

During the 1960s and 1970s, the important factors in family sociology were parents' child-raising practices and value commitments along with the transmission of social advantage or disadvantage by way of parenting. In the following decade, however, social scientists turned to issues of intimacy and personal life, to personal relationships rather than those between parents and their children. It was children and no longer parents who became an increasingly important focus for both sociological analysis and family policy research. These disciplines perceived families mostly as aggregations of individuals with differing interests and agency (Edwards et al. 2012; Gilding 2010). When sociology paid attention to parents and their child-rearing, it addressed these topics more often as an add-on to studies of children, childhoods, and child well-being rather than as an independent field of research.

Things have changed since the 1990s. Debates, analyses, and policies have brought parents and parenting back into the spotlight. They have also become more 'parent-centred' – if only on behalf of infants and young children and their best interest. 'Good enough' and 'not so good parenting' are being scrutinized increasingly by experts and policymakers intent on recalibrating policies towards 'child-centred social investments' (cf. Betz 2014; Esping-Andersen 2002; Hendrick 2014). Undesired child outcomes and the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage are back on the agenda. Websites on 'how to be a better parent' abound, parenting manuals are widespread, and new parenting support programmes are flourishing. The 1992 CRC [UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*] and subsequent Council of Europe recommendations, especially *Recommendation REC(2006)19* on 'positive parenting', set out frameworks and guidelines for improving parenting in the best interest of the child (Daly 2011: 9). The 2006 Recommendation defines 'positive parenting' as parental behaviour that ensures the best interest of the child, a behaviour 'that is nurturing, empowering, non-violent and provides recognition and guidance which involves setting of boundaries to enable the full development of the child' (as cited in: ibid). EU member states have answered (in differing forms and degree) by 'child-mainstreaming' their welfare state policies.

Zeitschrift für Familienforschung – Journal of Family Research – Special Issue/Sonderheft 2016/2017, S. 5-19
https://doi.org/10.3224/zff.si11y2016/2017.01

The twentieth century was proclaimed the *century of the child* by the Swedish reformer Ellen Key. As it drew to a close, parents' child-rearing practices – their 'parenting' – came under public scrutiny on both sides of the Atlantic. Will the twenty-first century become the 'century of the parent', as Dimitra Hartas muses? 'With a deluge of family policy initiatives and proclamations about how much parents matter when it comes to children's development and well-being, the twenty-first century may well be the century of the parent' (Hartas 2014: 1). Have we eventually arrived in this 'century of the parent'? Or is it more the case that the 'century of the child' has just begun?

In our view, parents come into the spotlight today because their offspring's future *productive* potential is at stake. The recent 'turn to parenting' reflects a public preoccupation with 'positive', cognitive and non-cognitive child outcomes rather than any concern for parents. It is the rights and well-being of (increasingly scarce, hence valuable) children along with powerful research on child development (including early brain development) and child health that have driven the recent public interest in parenting. Parents are seen as still instrumental, also responsible, for newly defined and publicly desired child outcomes – hence, expected to make a positive contribution. At the same time, their parental competence is largely questioned. Therefore, for instance, new (softer) forms of home visiting, so called 'parent–professional partnerships', or substitutes such as public early childhood education and care (cf. Betz/Bischoff 2015).

The following sections introduce the themes addressed in this special issue. The core of our introduction points to some major trends that have driven the recent 'turn to parenting' and the evolution of new parenting support policies in modern societies. Why have debates on parenting and new forms of parenting support been emerging? We present shared definitions of parenting support, and we highlight differences in support measures across countries. Concluding, we point to the experts' conviction that parenting, however crucial in early child years, constitutes only one of many other equally important, if not even more important, environments for publicly desired longer-term child outcomes that also include non-family childcare and early childhood education or schools.

Contributors to this special issue from Belgium, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden scrutinize the recent 'turn to parenting'. They analyse which parenting practices are now 'in the spotlight', present approaches to and studies of good enough and also dangerous parenting, and report on recent forms of support for parents along with the dilemmas of professionals who work in the field. *Parents in the Spotlight* offers new insights into parenting support policies in countries that represent different 'worlds' of family policy. The issue highlights different ideas on the child's proper status in society, on the child's proper status within the family, and on good parenting. At the same time, it also addresses variations in the influence of experts on parenting as well as practitioners' attitudes towards the parenting practiced especially by mothers from different backgrounds.

The ‘turn to parenting’ as a social phenomenon

A ‘turn’ to parents and parental activities, the backdrop of this special issue, is well reflected in the recent and frequent usage of the term ‘parenting’ in English-speaking countries or in comparable neologisms such as the French ‘*parentalité*’. In political and scholarly debates, ‘parenting’ is replacing older concepts such as ‘child upbringing’, ‘childrearing’, or ‘parenthood’ (Lee 2014: 4; cf. Daly *in this issue*; Martin *in this issue*; Vandenbroeck et al. *in this issue*). New forms of parenting support have been designed and introduced – often on top of older ones. Since the late 1990s, experts have successfully intensified their efforts to better translate and diffuse to both the public and policymakers what they consider to be novel cutting-edge findings on child development (Shonkoff/Bales 2011) and, concomitantly, on the changing role of parents in providing infants with a stimulating environment. Consequently, international organizations such as the OECD, RAND Corporation, or Eurofound (repeatedly on behalf of the European Commission) have taken up the issue and recommended new forms of ‘parenting’ support (for instance, Council of Europe 2006; Daly 2011; Eurofound 2013; Janta 2013; OECD 2009).

The replacement of ‘child-rearing’ by ‘parenting’ implies a change in expert views on the proper role and contribution of parents to publicly desired positive child outcomes. Parents’ competence, and sometimes also their well-being, are seen as being not only a requirement but also instrumental to such outcomes. However, at the same time, this competence is also increasingly being questioned. Though experts and policymakers alike regularly assure us that most parents do a great job, a ‘fatalist’ view of their capabilities prevails in recent parenting discourses – as Frank Furedi asserts (2014: viii). Poor parenting or the ‘parenting deficit’ is assumed to be linked directly to individual shortcomings in later life and to a plethora of social ills (Furedi 2002: 59–60; Hartas 2014: 2; Lee 2014). These bad outcomes include educational failure and school dropout, health problems, anti-social behaviour, poor coping skills, self-harm, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, crime, low earnings, and eventually also old age poverty. Some experts therefore argue in favour of curbing, or at least mitigating, parents’ influence on their children from very early on – sometimes even starting with pregnancy – in order to break the cycle of social disadvantage and social ills (for instance, Esping-Andersen 2002; Heckman 2006; Meisels/Shonkoff 2000; Shonkoff/Philipps 2000). Others, typically child development experts and also paediatricians, believe that ‘positive parenting’ can be achieved by way of new techniques of parenting advice and training.

Hoghughi and Speight (1998: 293) provide a perfect (and early) example of this line of reasoning when they state, first, that ‘it is reasonable to start from the premise that the needs of children are best met by being raised in “families”’; yet they then go on to say that it is ‘naive to assume that as long as all children are brought up in their natural/biological families there will be no problems’. To the contrary, the two authors argue. In their view, one of the common threads linking together the aforementioned examples of individual shortcomings and social ills is:

> how spectacularly natural families can fail to provide normal happy childhoods. There is nothing foolproof or sacrosanct about natural families as a recipe for a healthier society. Families (whether natural or substitute) can only meet the needs of children if they provide them with good (or ‘good enough’) parenting. (ibid)

Consequently, child-rearing has been reframed as a task – 'parenting' – that requires aptitude and a particular know-how in order to become 'good enough' and also to avoid 'not so good', or even more so, 'dangerous' parenting. Hoghughi and Speight perceive of 'parenting' as 'a relationship, a process, and a group of activities'. To them 'to parent' 'denotes positive activities undertaken by parent figures towards children' (ibid: 294). In their view, 'good enough parenting' pertains to needs that are over and above basic ones such as physical care, nutrition, and protection. These are such needs as: (1) love, care, and commitment; (2) control and consistent limit setting; and (3) facilitation of development (ibid). Regrettably, yet in tune with their focus on 'outcomes', policy-related elites and policy briefs mostly emphasize the latter. For example, they emphasize healthy physical growth over time (Aizer/Currie 2014) and, more often and rather narrowly, the development of cognitive abilities (for instance, Heckman 2006). Hence, they fail to see the importance of 'love, care, and commitment' for children's development and well-being (Hoghughi/Speight 1998: 294).

Experts' questioning of parents' (the focus is mostly on mothers') capabilities to meet children's needs and thereby achieve socially desired child outcomes is not that new in our modern societies. Ever since the late nineteenth century, competitive experts, keen to professionalize their expertise against that of others (Abbott 1988), have sought to establish parenting as a complex skill that must be taught, learnt, and supervised. Hulbert (2003), among many other historians of parent education (cf. Dekker 2010; Hays 1996), has documented a century of child-rearing advice, accompanying manuals, and widely diverging philosophies. She distinguishes two – still vital and competing – schools of parent education and advice: a 'hard' parent-directed discipline school versus a 'soft' child-centred one. The 'hard advisers' recommended authoritative parenting and repeatedly warned mothers about too much rather than too little bonding (ibid: 367), whereas the 'soft experts championed maternal engagement' (ibid) to an extent that has developed into what Hays (1996) called the normative standard of 'intensive motherhood': it makes mothers, mostly middle-class ones we would add, 'spend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising children' (ibid: x; Faircloth 2014: 27; see Edwards 2010; Lareau 2011 on class-specific parenting standards; see also Andresen *in this issue*; Betz et al. *in this issue*; Vincent et al. *in this issue* on children's and adults' friendships across social class and ethnic difference).

Recent times have witnessed the re-emergence of 'a whole new industry and matching workforce with the aim of promoting 'good parenting'' (Gillies 2012: 17; see also Geinger et al. 2014) along with the two contrasting lines described by Hulbert and criticized by Hays, Furedi, and many others. This re-emergence is now combined with the scientization of parenting as new risk management. This trend is puzzling in at least two ways: first, it coincides with a societally desired steady rise in maternal employment that has led to mothers' longer daily absence from their homes and their children; and, as a corollary, to longer hours spent by children (including very young ones) in non-family care or pre-school (Faircloth 2014: 27). The latter – early childhood intervention in the form of quality day care and pre-schooling – has been recommended strongly by prominent child development experts and economists who are often advisers to international organizations, and it is also well-established in many western societies. Consequently, parents share child-rearing to a growing extent with non-family institutions and agents such

as child care professionals, teachers, tutors, or nannies. All of this makes it more difficult than ever to link parenting practices – bad and, most notably, good ones – directly and causally to certain child outcomes (Lösel/Bender *in this issue*; Kindler *in this issue*). Therefore and second, this makes what Furedi (2002) has termed the 'parental determinism' found in many scholarly analyses and much policy advice all the more surprising: that parents and their parenting 'determine[s] virtually every aspect of a child's future', that everything they do especially in the 'crucial early years really matters' (ibid: 60, 62). For Heckman (2006), the family (parents) makes up only one stage and environment in the child's development, albeit a crucial one. Quoting Shonkoff and Philipps' *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (2000), he affirms that 'virtually every aspect of early human development … is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood' (ibid: 1900). He continues by stressing that early 'family environments are major predictors of cognitive and noncognitive abilities … Environments that do not stimulate the young and fail to cultivate these skills at early ages place children at an early disadvantage' (ibid). In his view, disadvantage in later life arises more from lack of stimulation 'than simply from the lack of financial resources'; it is 'associated with poor parenting practices' (ibid).

In the following, our introduction briefly summarizes some major challenges that have formed the backdrop to the recent turn to parenting in western societies (for these challenges, see also Knijn et al. 2017, forthcoming; Lundqvist/Ostner *in this issue*). It distinguishes between parenting support and early childhood intervention and their respective drivers. In the last section, we then provide a short sketch of the structure of this special issue.

Challenges: Social change, disadvantage, and new social risk policies

Traditionally, sociologists have studied the processes through which systems of social stratification are maintained and how social advantage or disadvantage is transmitted from parents to children (Weininger et al. 2009). Well-known examples are Melvin Kohn's (1959) finding that the class-specific position in the occupational system and the related degree of self-direction in the job have psychological consequences in terms of, for instance, the value commitments of parents; Basil Bernstein's (1964) observation that working-class and middle-class children learn a different language at home that prepares them differently for succeeding in non-family settings; or Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's (1971/1964) study of how class-specific preferences, attitudes, and behaviours serve as a basis for social and cultural exclusion of the lower classes, thereby helping to reproduce and maintain the class structure (Lamont/Lareau 1988: 154).

Rising social inequality in the United States and elsewhere in the West, evident in income inequality and related unequal opportunity for socio-economic mobility, has contributed to social scientists' renewed attentiveness to parental disadvantage, parental behaviour, and longer-term child outcomes (for instance, Aizer/Currie 2014; Kurz/Becker *in this issue*; McLanahan/Percheski 2008; Western et al. 2008). Reviewing existing research, McLanahan and Percheski treat social inequalities as both independent and dependent

variables: they ask how income inequality affects changing family structures, and, in turn, how family structures, like being a single or non-married parent, impact on parental resources and the resulting parenting practices and thereby lead to unequal child outcomes (cf. Hasselhorn et al. 2015 on conceptualizing related causal pathways). The authors particularly discuss how income inequality and economic insecurity may have led to an increase in single motherhood, especially among less educated women. Single mothers, in turn, often lack the resources of partnered mothers, and, particularly, of married mothers, and this may impact negatively on their parenting and hence decrease their children's educational and later-life economic chances. Heckman (2006: 1900) has also linked what he calls 'family environments which have deteriorated' to disadvantage, while, as mentioned above, downplaying the harder factor of economic inequality.

A second set of research topics focuses more specifically on the pathways through which income-related socio-economic disadvantage may lead to undesired child outcomes such as bad health at birth. In their review essay, Aizer and Currie (2014) for instance, suggest that maternal disadvantage can lead to bad child health at birth through poor prenatal maternal health behaviour (which again may result from disadvantage); through environmental stressors such as pollution or a violent home; through disadvantaged mothers' health status; and, rather importantly, through barred access to medical care and family planning and the corresponding non-use of both (if sufficiently available!). Like Heckman, Shonkoff, Hoghughi and Speight, and other child-concerned experts, Aizer and Currie also point to the crucial role of public policies in breaking the cycle of disadvantage (ibid: 860). They call for inequality-reducing measures that will enhance maternal and thereby children's health such as subsidies for food, influenza vaccination, and easy access to medical care and advice. The authors also recommend new forms of parenting support such as the US Nurse–Family Partnership (NFP) that provides nurse home visits to poor, unmarried young women with first-time pregnancies. Variants of NFP also exist outside the United States in, for instance, the United Kingdom or Germany (cf. Sann 2014).

Heckman (2006) considers deteriorating family environments; increasing rates of non-married parenthood, separation, and divorce; and single motherhood as a 'source of concern' (ibid: 1900). Sure enough, since the 1970s, marriage and parenthood have undergone a process of deinstitutionalization – a substantial weakening of the traditional social norms defining partners' and also parents' behaviour (Cherlin 1978, 2004). Delayed marriage and parenthood, increasing rates of cohabitation, divorce, single-parent households, and the proliferation of same-sex marriage are all evidence of this process. Individualized partnerships and their volatility, parenthood by individualized choice, and growing childlessness have eroded life-worldly parental knowledge about how to raise and educate children. Rules on how to display who 'is' family or who counts when as kin, and new social norms 'concerning proper behaviour' as part of a couple or as a parent have not yet emerged. Under these circumstances, Cherlin (2004: 848) argues that 'individuals can no longer rely on shared understandings of how to act. Rather, they must negotiate new ways of acting, a process that is a potential source of conflict and opportunity'. Therefore, growing numbers of couples and parents have turned to the world outside and sought expert advice – an important micro-level driver of the turn to parenting and new parenting support. These tendencies echo Riesman et al.'s timely (1961) diagnosis of

'other-directedness'. 'Other-directed' parents, for instance, doubt their parental competence and depend on other people's and increasingly on experts' advice on how to bring up their children. This, in turn, erodes their parental authority and self-confidence and also thwarts their desire to have children (du Bois-Reymond *in this issue*; Knijn/Ostner 2008: 85). Riesman et al. (2001/1961: 48) wrote:

> Increasingly in doubt as how to bring up their children, parents turn to other contemporaries for advice … Yet, they cannot help but show their children, by their own anxiety, how little they depend on themselves and how much on others.

Pluralization, individualization, and de-institutionalization have deepened feelings of uncertainty and fostered a 'culture of risk thinking' and 'risk consciousness' that is shared by a growing number of experts and ordinary people alike in western societies. Lee (2014: 11, quoting Frank Furedi) defines 'risk consciousness' as 'a way of thinking about the future in which possibilities that are untoward are taken into account more than probabilities'. Experts and politicians alike have all exploited the de-institutionalization of parenting and the rise of 'risk consciousness' when designing new parenting policies and programmes.

Growing social inequalities, the frequency of longer spells of unemployment (often among young adults), and contingent employment on the one hand combined with individualization and the weakening of social cultural norms on the other hand have contributed to the volatility of family forms or living arrangements and put issues of parenting and related child outcomes on the public agenda. The politicization of these issues came about at a time when the continuing fiscal crisis necessitated budget consolidation and subsequent cost-sensitive policy recalibration on both sides of the Atlantic. State welfare policies shifted towards providing for new social risks such as mothers' and their children's poverty risks, the risk of being working poor (especially if low skilled and working reduced working hours or without a proper contract), or the risk of having poorly educated parents (Bonoli 2005; Esping-Andersen 2002). As a result, child-centred social investments such as early childhood education and care and early intervention in the form of new parenting support to improve child outcomes have become part and parcel of recent new risk policies.

Strategies: Parenting support as childhood intervention

'Parenting support' as a new policy field has been emerging since the 1990s. It has slowly but steadily been included in the national legislation and strategies of a number of EU member states. Nonetheless, not only the scope, range, organization, and funding of provisions but also the kind of practitioners involved and the methods they apply vary between and sometimes even within countries.

The EU COM *Parenting Support Policy Brief* of 2013, developed by the RAND corporation (Janta 2013: xi) defines 'parenting support' as 'the provision of services aimed at enhancing parenting skills and practices in order to address children's physical, emotional and social needs', and 'as a potential lever to improve educational outcomes and reduce the risk of criminal behaviour'. It also views parenting skills 'as drivers of reducing pov-

erty and social exclusion'. 'Provisions' or 'services' encompass all actions undertaken that are related to parenting support (ibid).

Daly (2013) has suggested a definition encompassing three characteristics: (1) Parents are the 'first-line target' of parenting support, and the focus is oriented towards supporting parents in their role as parents. (2) Parenting support is organized in the form of (personal) services rather than through cash, leaves, or infrastructure. (3) The focus is on the parent's resources and child-rearing competencies. Consequently, for Daly, non-parental childcare that does not pertain to the execution of parenting fails to qualify as 'parenting support'. The same applies to 'child protection' or (anti-)child poverty policies and measures, because they focus primarily on children and their well-being and opportunities and not on their parents (but see Alberth/Bühler-Niederberger *in this issue* on social workers' matter-of-factly '*mother*'- and *not* 'child-centred' child protection practices).

Whereas debates on 'new risks' and the need for 'child-centred social investments' have converged, the parenting support measures that are currently being proposed and enacted still vary across countries both quantitatively and qualitatively. Most have shifted their focus towards infants and very young children (Stolberg *in this issue*). In Germany, expert attention now targets parents of infant children (below the age of 12 months) who are too young to enter crèches – the solution preferred by many child experts. Other countries also try to address the new needs of parents of older children and youth that are often health-related. Many also focus on young (often non-married) pregnant mothers in apparent need of support and advice. Migrant parents, their child-raising practices, including their low usage of non-family day care and parent education, have also become centre-stage in many countries. This has led to measures to ease access to public support, care, and early childhood education. In numerous countries, parents, mostly mothers, are said to be overburdened and under permanent pressure to 'do the right thing', and therefore in need of support. Starting with the Jospin government in the late 1990s, France has offered (also subsidized) innovative ways for parents to join together and find their own directions in parenting (*parentalité*) support (Martin *in this issue*). Sweden has recently emphasized the importance of acknowledging the views of parents. While still stressing the role of the state as a provider of parenting support, the government maintains that support should simultaneously be designed according to the wishes of the parents themselves (Lundqvist 2015; see Heimer/Palme 2016 for a criticism of the persistent parent-centredness of Swedish family policy). In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, or Sweden, groups of experts as well as policymakers have increasingly stressed the need for evidence on what works in parent training and education. This is well in tune with both experts and policymakers' new emphasis on measurable 'effectiveness factors' that, as Shonkoff/Bales (2011: 23) assert, 'make the difference between early childhood intervention programs that work and those that do not work to support children's healthy development' (see also Lösel/Bender *in this issue*; Kindler *in this issue*).

In some countries, professionals have experimented with parenting courses. They have frequently imported these from abroad and modified them to fit their target groups. Often professionals have succeeded in persuading top bureaucrats in their countries, for instance, in Germany, to promote and also subsidize the innovative measures in parenting support they employ. Municipalities have added a wide variety of parenting support measures to their standard service portfolio, for instance, Triple P parenting programmes

(above all, in the UK and in the Netherlands: see Bray/Daly *in this issue*; Hopman/Knijn *in this issue*). Often, a middle-class bias prevails in professional assessments of parenting practices, whereas indicators for 'children at risk' and 'dangerous parenting' clearly apply to and discriminate against less educated, socially disadvantaged, or marginalized groups (Betz 2014; Edwards et al. 2012; Gillies 2008).

According to Daly (2011, 2013), parenting support differs across countries with respect to (1) the domain within which parenting support has been developed (for example, education, health, deviance, or poverty) and the frame that has been used to put the policy on the public agenda; (2) the range of provisions and degree of standardization (countries may, for instance, differ in their familiarity with and acceptance of pre-packaged, standardized, technology-like parenting support ['programmes'], hence, also in the extent to which programmes are evidence-based); and (3) the welfare mix of parenting support provisions. Contributions to our issue suggest that countries also differ in the role they assign to public policy and intervention, for instance, in the extent to which they employ public measures intended to curb or at least mitigate parental influence on child development. Germany has recently chosen this latter strategy: it has embarked on rapidly expanding public early childhood education and care (ECEC) that also targets very young children. This brings it closer to the Swedish model (Lundqvist/Ostner *in this issue*; Ostner/Stolberg 2015). It is also strongly encouraging cooperation between ECEC professionals and parents ('educational partnerships': Betz 2015; Betz et al. 2017 forthcoming) as proposed in the 2013 European Commission Recommendation (2013/112/EU) *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* and outlined, too, in the draft of the forthcoming reform of German Children and Youth Services (*Social Code VIII*). Existing variations result from path-dependent institutional settings, public sentiments, and policy 'cultures'. Hence, we are witnessing not only common trends but also different paths in parenting support policies among countries.

Paradoxically at first sight, the turn to parenting and new parenting support has been driven by new scholarly insights and policy initiatives that question parents' impact on child outcomes, and, more generally, what Furedi had coined 'parental determinism'. Hulbert (2003: 8) noted accordingly:

> As parenting Web sites spread, so did skepticism about the accumulated psychological wisdom. How solid had the scientists' findings about parents' long-term influence on children turned out to be? Was the ever-rising demand for, and supply of, expert directives for parents helping or hindering?

The 'capacities and varieties of babies', small children as 'competent and communicative subjects' rather than 'the compliant (or noncompliant) objects' of experts and parents alike have become a focus of child development research and the new childhood studies (cf. James 2009; Honig *in this issue*). This has complicated the issue of measuring parental influence 'on the personalities of these responsive creatures, who soon clambered out of their cribs to interact with the wider world' (ibid: 306; cf. Lösel/Bender *in this issue*).

From the onset, the turn to parenting has included recognition of its limits. Heckman (2006) already acknowledged the multiplicity of environments that were perceived as conducive for child development and desired child outcomes. Many years ago, Myrdal and Klein quoted Margret Mead's statement that 'we have evidence … that the character formation of the child represents the child's *total environmental situation*' (Mead 1954

cited in Myrdal/Klein 1956: 127; our emphasis). The family environment is only one among many other influential environments. Confronted with new neurosciences and behavioural genetics, social scientists and psychologists alike eventually have come to terms with the age-old *nature versus nurture* opposition, and penned a new 'core story of development'. No longer stressing the opposition, they now speak of the 'interaction of genes and experience' (Shonkoff/Bales 2011: 23) 'that begins before birth and continues into adulthood' (ibid). And they point to the role of publicly provided early childhood intervention in constantly offering the stimulating environments developing children needed but parents regularly fail to provide both sufficiently and flexibly.

Turning away from parents and relativizing parental influence on child outcomes has played well into the arguments of those who have pointed to the families' increasingly impaired 'ability to absorb social problems and provide adequate care' (Esping-Andersen 2002: 12). Many emerging risks require skills and, as Esping-Andersen argues, 'a level of caring intensity that most families are unable to furnish' (ibid). Families have become more fragile and 'also lack available caring capacities'. A turn to families would also 'contradict women's employment abilities' (ibid). Concluding, Esping-Andersen asks whether turning to families or parents as providers of welfare and well-being 'would … be the most desirable option' (ibid: 24). Likewise, Heimer and Palme (2016: 435) have criticized the enduring parent-centredness of Swedish family policies and 'the weak imprint of CRC on Swedish legislation and CRC implementation'. They ask: Why do lawmakers in Sweden and elsewhere still 're-cognise parents' rather than children's … rights'?

We conclude that children have remained centre-stage in the new turn to parenting and related debates and policies. For Heckman, Shonkoff, the OECD, the EU, and many other agents or 'drivers' of changing debates and policies, parents and their practices are relevant because of their very early and continuing influence on child outcomes. Recent Commission Recommendations or Council Conclusions on investing in children or ECEC (for instance, Conclusion 2011/C/175/03) hardly acknowledge parents' achievements in child-rearing and the 'good enough parenting' that still prevails. A century of the parent, the turn to parenting notwithstanding, has yet to dawn.

A brief note on the structure of this special issue

This issue on parents in the spotlight is organized into four parts. The *first part (A) 'Parents and parenting: Concepts and recent state of the art'* is, like this introduction, mostly conceptual in nature and includes three contributions. It introduces the overarching topic of the 'new turn to parenting' by first deconstructing the term (see *Michel Vandenbroeck, Naomi Geens, Freya Geinger, Tineke Schiettecat, Dorien Van Haute* and *Griet Roets* on 'Parenting newspeak'). *Mary Daly*'s essay draws upon insights from a range of sociological scholarship and utilizes this to identify and then critique the leading ideas on 'parenting support' as it is being promoted by state policies. She subsequently performs an in-depth analysis of the meaning of parenting as a concept and social practice. *Michael-Sebastian Honig* emphasizes the relational quality of parenthood. In his essay, he ponders

the locus of children in recent parenting discourses and policies. Family sociologists and welfare or family policy scholars have rarely dealt with this issue. Childhood studies have their roots in a fundamental critique of children's locus in family sociology – particularly in socialization theory but also in developmental psychology. It is from there that they have developed their main concepts and arguments. Can they extend our understanding of the recent turn to parenting? *Honig* argues that the sociology of childhood has failed to comprehend the essence of recent parenting policies and policing parents when conceptualizing the notion of the 'child as agent', because it lacks a concept of the 'parental child'.

The *second part (B)* of the issue focuses on '*parenting as performance*' and contains four contributions. The first by *Manuela du Bois-Reymond* conceives of parenting as a process starting in youth and being one of learning; the contribution also takes into account the balance of power between the sexes and generations in the processes of becoming a parent. The second article by *Tanja Betz*, *Stefanie Bischoff,* and *Laura B. Kayser* elucidates how parents with different social backgrounds themselves deal with the many (and new) discourses on 'good parenthood' and parents' perspectives respectively. The authors show how the discursive models of 'good' parenthood and parents' educational responsibility have become meaningful for parents who have constantly played an active role in their maintenance. In the third contribution, *Sabine Andresen* investigates why support measures for poor parents have regularly failed. Based on evidence from her qualitative research, she highlights poor parents' permanent struggles with bureaucratic obstacles, constantly changing contact persons, and the barely penetrable jungle of information on the public support system. Taken together, these make it harder for them to be good parents. In their article, *Carol Vincent*, *Sarah Neal,* and *Humera Iqbal* draw attention to a specific part of parenting as performance: the parents' perception, enabling, and evaluation of their children's friendships across social class and ethnic difference. They analyse empirically how children and adults from varied backgrounds negotiate friendship in super-diverse localities in London with those who have backgrounds different to their own. Their results reveal contradictory impulses among parents: a desire for friendships across difference that remains, however, confined to the school setting rather than being brought 'home'.

The *third part (C)* on '*dangerous parenting*' ponders the issue of 'not good enough', bad, or even dangerous parenting. When do we speak of this? And how can 'dangerous parenting' be changed? Three contributions in part C revolve around these questions: *Lars Alberth* and *Doris Bühler-Niederberger* present insights from their qualitative study of social workers' professional tenets and dealings with parents who constitute a risk for their children. They point to the generation and gender biases of social workers who focus on mothers rather than children and largely omit fathers when dealing with cases of violent parenting. The interviewed social workers often used notions of the 'overburdened mother' to stretch ideas of normalcy, thereby trivializing and also normalizing dangerous parenting. *Karin Kurz* and *Sten Becker* ask whether (German) single parents (mothers, in fact) of lower socio-economic status constitute a special health risk for their children as evidenced by their frequent non-attendance of health check-ups. They argue that the lower participation rate in screening programmes among these single parents is mainly a result of a structural social capital deficit. They test this assumption using the German 'Children and Youth Health Survey' (KiGGS 2003–2006). The last article in part C by

Heinz Kindler argues in favour of differential approaches to dangerous parenting. It also provides reviews based on German data of the effectiveness of interventions following physical abuse or neglect.

The *fourth part (D)* of the issue focuses on '*new parenting support and early intervention*' in Germany and other European countries and includes six contributions. It starts with an article by *Friedrich Lösel* and *Doris Bender* who focus on links between parenting and child behaviour. The authors reject the widespread view that child problems are due mainly to inappropriate parenting, criticizing it for being too simple. They go on to discuss conceptual problems in designing and evaluating parenting programmes. *Rachel Bray* and *Mary Daly* examine how professionals involved in the delivery of parenting support interventions in England view and manage a series of tensions associated with the planning and delivery of services. The overall argument put forward is that there is a gap between the discursive level and the everyday reality that forces those involved in providing parenting support to make many compromises. *Marit Hopman* and *Trudie Knijn* draw attention to bottlenecks in the Dutch parenting support system. They ask why it is above all single mothers, unemployed parents, and children from ethnic minority families who are largely excluded from care and support, despite several reforms designed to ease access. Their analysis pinpoints crucial 'flaws' in the parenting support structure and asks critical questions about hidden 'normativity' and about the blind spots that exist in relation to parenting support. In his essay, *Claude Martin* highlights the reactivation of old and deeply rooted oppositions and controversies concerning family issues in the French context characterized by structural oppositions between Republicans and the Catholic milieu and the division between left- and right-wing parties on private life issues and the challenge of secularization. *Carolyn Stolberg's* contribution compares new measures for promoting children's health in Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom – countries that have adopted a social investment strategy. She looks for commonalities and remaining differences in health-related early childhood interventions and the assigned role of parents. Finally, *Åsa Lundqvist* and *Ilona Ostner* ask how apparently *converging trends* can be found in German and Swedish parenting support polices *despite* the historical and institutional *differences* between the two countries. They discuss the major challenges that have sparked off a new turn to parenting in Sweden and Germany alike, but also pinpoint differences in context, assumptions, and timing that help us to understand why parenting support has taken a different shape in the two countries.

Our special issue was designed and put together at a time marked by fierce debates on good or not so good parenting and astonishing policy initiatives in the field of parenting support and early childhood interventions on both sides of the Atlantic. This background has led to very inspiring cross-country conversations and co-operations between the issue's editors and contributors. Parts of the research upon which the contributions to the special issue are based were presented at regular meetings of the PolChi project (*Governing 'new social risks': The case of recent child policies in European welfare states*) funded 2011–2014 by the *Open Research in Europe for the Social Sciences (ORA)* Programme. This also resulted in co-authored publications. The editors of this special issue have been cooperating partners in the research project 'CHILD – Children in the Luxembourgian Day Care System', funded by *Fonds National de la Recherche (FNR) Luxembourg* (C 12/CS/3991009). The special issue is also a result of this cooperation. We thank

both ORA and the FNR for their generous funding. Most importantly, we thank Dr. Kurt P. Bierschock, managing editor in charge at the journal's 'headquarters' for his enduring support, amazing patience, and excellent editorial advice; Jonathan Harrow for his rigorous and continuous language editing; and Myrna Karolin Sieden for helping with correcting and layout. Not least, we thank the many reviewers of the contributions for their valuable advice that has helped to sharpen the arguments and relate them to international policies and state of the art.

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A Parents and parenting: Concepts and recent state of the art

Michel Vandenbroeck, Naomi Geens, Freya Geinger, Tineke Schiettecat, Dorien Van Haute and Griet Roets

Parenting newspeak

Parenting und „Neusprech“

Abstract
Scholars in several European countries have documented the recent turn to parenting (see e.g. Mary Daly’s contribution *in this issue*). Inspired by this analysis and informed by on-going and recent research in our Department, we discuss the emergence of a new vocabulary (or new meanings given to older words) in a polemic essay. Presently, the terms *empowerment*, *strengths-based approach*, and *demand-led services* seem to be shaping the dominant narrative over parent support policies and practices – particularly when framing parents in poverty. With reference to Foucauldian discourse analysis, these buzzwords in contemporary parenting support policy and practice appear to have different – if not opposing – meanings to what may be their historical meaning. The use of these words can therefore be labelled as either *duckspeak* (babbling without content) or *newspeak* (meaning the opposite of what they are saying) (Orwell 1949). This Orwellian newspeak may very well mean that parent support is hardly concerned with the perspectives and well-being of parents. This does not necessarily entail, however, that parents are mere objects, let alone victims of the parenting turn. They are active constructors as well as de-constructors of dominant parenting discourses, considering that parents are also part of the surrounding social, institutional, systemic, and structural dimensions of the welfare state and its social investment paradigm in which educational discussions are framed.

Zusammenfassung
Wissenschaftler in mehreren europäischen Ländern haben den jüngsten „turn to parenting“ (siehe dazu auch den Beitrag von Mary Daly *in diesem Sonderheft*) dokumentiert. Angeregt durch diese Analyse und gestützt durch die vor kurzem durchgeführte und noch laufende Forschung in unserer Abteilung, diskutieren wir in diesem durchaus polemisch gehaltenen Aufsatz das Auftauchen eines neuen Vokabulars (oder auch von neuen Bedeutungen für ältere Begriffe). Gegenwärtig scheinen *empowerment, strengths-based approach* und *demand-led services* die Begriffe zu sein, die das vorherrschende Narrativ im Feld der Politik und der konkreten Unterstützungsangebote für Eltern und Hilfen zur Erziehung rahmen und zwar insbesondere dann, wenn es um arme Eltern geht. Aus der Perspektive der Foucaultschen Diskursanalyse scheinen diese hohlen Phrasen in der gegenwärtigen Politik und Praxis der Elternunterstützung Bedeutungen anzunehmen, die sich von den früheren, historischen Bedeutungen unterscheiden, wenn nicht gar diesen entgegengesetzt sind. Der Gebrauch dieser Begriffe kann deshalb als „Quaksprech“ (*duckspeak*, inhaltloses Gebrabbel) oder „Neusprech“ (*newspeak*, d.h. wenn genau das Gegenteil vom Gesagten gemeint ist, Orwell 1949) bezeichnet werden. Dieses Orwellsche „Neusprech“ kann durchaus bedeuten, dass sich Maßnahmen zur Unterstützung der Eltern kaum um deren Perspektiven oder ihr Wohlergehen scheren. Dies hat jedoch nicht notwendigerweise zur Folge, dass die Eltern lediglich Objekte oder gar Opfer des „turn to parenting“ sind. Sie sind aktive Konstrukteure wie auch De-Konstrukteure der vorherr-

Zeitschrift für Familienforschung – Journal of Family Research – Special Issue/Sonderheft 2016/2017, S. 23-39
https://doi.org/10.3224/zff.si11y2016/2017.02

schenden Diskurse über das „parenting“, wenn man bedenkt, dass Eltern ebenfalls Teil der sie umgebenden sozialen, institutionellen, systemischen und strukturellen Dimensionen des Wohlfahrtsstaates und seines Paradigmas der Sozialinvestitionen, die den Rahmen erzieherischer Diskussionen bilden, sind.

Key words: Parenting support, parenting, empowerment, agency, strengths-based, demand-led services, social investment

Schlagwörter: Elternunterstützung, parenting, empowerment, agency (Handlungsfähigkeit), strengths-based approach (stärkenbasierter Ansatz), demand-led services (bedarfsgesteuerte Dienstleistungen), Sozialinvestitionen

Introduction: The turn to parenting

In several European countries, scholars have documented the emergence of a turn to parenting since the late 1990s or early 2000s (Martin 2012). Although parenting policies take substantially different forms from one country to another (Daly 2013), it is undeniable that a significant increase in the attention of policymakers to issues of parenting can be observed over the last two decades. As Mary Daly analyses elsewhere *in this issue*, the turn to parenting includes (but is not limited to) the state's engagement with parenting through funding programmes that aim to train parents (such as Triple P) and are directed towards parents in poverty. This shift from 'upbringing' or 'childrearing' to a more individualized emphasis on 'parenting' is contingent with societal changes, changes in the conceptualization of the welfare state, and changes in anti-poverty policies. We briefly document each of these changes before analysing some of the new emerging vocabulary that is accompanying the combination of these three societal changes.

First, from a family sociology perspective, Neyrand (2012) describes societal changes in which the public concern for parenting is contingent with a moral panic that emerged as a result of the decline in traditional family structures. He documents the decline in the (holy) trinity of the family in which three basic functions were once considered as being inextricably intertwined: making the child (biological parenthood), naming the child (legal parenthood), and raising the child (educational parenthood). All three competencies and responsibilities once belonged to the nuclear family 'till death us do part'. Since then, female labour, divorce, and recomposed families, adoption, gay marriages, in vitro fertilization, gamete donation, and the other profound changes over the last decades have revealed that the nuclear family with its trinity of functions and responsibilities is not a historical and natural given, and thus needs to be considered as a historical, social, and cultural construction that is potentially subject to change (Vanobbergen et al. 2006). What appears when the family disappears is, according to Neyrand (2012), the individual parent and a reinforcement of individual parental responsibilities. What also appears is a new vocabulary, such as the French *parentalité* or the English *parenting* (Daly 2013). Since the last quarter of the 20th century, parenting (in contrast to upbringing or childrearing) is increasingly viewed as a *technical* matter rather than as a historical, personal, social, po-

litical, and cultural relationship that cannot be subjected appropriately to technical criteria (Gillies 2012). As Freire already noted in the 1970s, the parent–child relationship in the home usually reflects the cultural conditions of surrounding social and systemic structures (Freire 1970: 152). In that sense, it is significant that the neologism of parenting (or *parentalité*) suggests a one-directional influence of parents on their children, and that the reciprocal influence of children on their parents does not even have a word. Indeed, there is no such word as *childering* or *enfantinité*, or at least not in policy documents. In addition, this profound societal change is contingent with demographic changes marked by women having their first child later and declining birth rates. It might be argued that both tendencies contribute to the sacralization of the child (e.g. Furedi 2015).

Second, it is necessary to consider profound changes in the welfare state in general in order to understand the emphasis on parenting and parenting support around the turn of this millennium. In that vein, Rosanvallon (1995) argued aptly that a triple crisis of the welfare state marked the turn of the millennium: a *financial crisis,* because states were facing increasing spending on social security issues (e.g. unemployment benefits) while having a reduced income from taxation; a *bureaucratic crisis,* because states were increasingly perceived as being ineffective and inefficient by the general population as well as by policymakers; and, as a consequence, a discourse on smaller states emerged; and, finally, a *philosophical crisis*, questioning the very concept of social welfare and social security (see also Dean 2015). This triple crisis has contributed to a growing focus of social policymakers on risk management, individual responsibility, and a discourse of 'no rights without duties' in which welfare rights are no longer taken-for-granted entitlements (Dwyer 2004; Esping-Andersen 2002a, 2002b; Giddens 1998). These manifestations have been described as the 'employment-first' welfare state (Finn 2003) or the 'contractual state' (Crawford 2003). The transition from welfare to workfare has also affected relationships between parents and the state, because the focus shifts towards a radicalization of parental responsibility in which parents are considered responsible for the future success of their children (Daly 2004; Featherstone 2006). As Cunningham (1995), who studied the history of parenting, asserts, policies emphasizing the importance of parental responsibilities have always been accompanied historically by a mistrust of parents. Therefore, these policies easily embody a plea for alternative measures (such as parenting support, or – historically – custodial childcare) that will help parents to shoulder the responsibilities attributed to them.

Finally, the turn to parenting is particularly salient in the context of changing anti-poverty policies. A central observation implies that poverty and inequality are perceived as acceptable, just, or fair by societies when this inequality is considered to be the sole result of differences in effort, because citizens are given so-called equal opportunities at the start of life (Dean 2015; Morabito/Vandenbroeck 2014). International organizations, such as UNESCO and the World Bank, have used these references to make a plea for a shift in policy from equality of outcomes to equality of opportunities (for an elaborate analysis of this shift, see Morabito et al. 2013). The World Bank, for instance, argued that redistributive policies (i.e. equality of outcomes) would always generate conflicts between the political left and the political right based on arguments of economic inefficiency. Also the problem of the so-called 'undeserving poor' will be raised as an argument against such anti-poverty policies, making it hard to achieve consensus about redistributive policies (Morabito et al. 2013). In contrast, policies focusing on social investments in (young)

children more easily acquire political consensus because the majority in societies will never blame these children for being responsible for their precarious living situation (e.g. Paes de Barros et al. 2009). The argument goes, therefore, that if we invest in the (youngest) children today, we can combat poverty in the future (Esping-Andersen 2002a, 2002b; Gray 2013). During the last few years, this argument has even gained momentum because it is increasingly underpinned by the rhetoric of the neurosciences (e.g. Shonkoff 2010; Shonkoff/Phillips 2000). With reference to the so-called 'damaging' brain development of young children who are living in poverty, policy documents now promise to reap 'massive savings in public expenditure for the smallest of investments in better outcomes, and by avoiding expensive provision when things go wrong' (Allen 2011: vii). In the context of the crisis of the welfare state, and as a result of shifting views on poverty and inequality, it can thus be observed that anti-poverty policies now focus more than ever on parenting, and more specifically on the importance of 'good parenting' in poverty situations as a relevant strategy for mediating child poverty. Under conditions in which ideas about how to effect wider social change are elusive, change is envisaged only where it seems possible to enact and control it, for example, in the management of the small-scale relations between individuals, especially those between parents and children (Lee 2014). For example, the Field report wanders even beyond the limits of neoliberal caricature, claiming that:

> it is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money, in determining whether their potential is realized in adult life. (Field 2010: 7)

As such, parenting support policies take different forms in different countries according to their social, cultural, political, and historical differences as well as according to how the welfare state is organized (Daly 2013). Yet, some communalities can be observed, including public worries about the alleged decline in traditional family structures, the shift from the welfare state to a social investment state, and more meritocratic conceptions of anti-poverty strategies. We therefore argue that the turn to parenting, being an instrumental and integral part of the increasingly meritocratic view on anti-poverty strategies, is contingent with the rise of a new vocabulary (or at least to new uses of an existing vocabulary).

In the next sections, we first clarify our analytical framework as well as the sources on which our analysis is based. Second, we critically analyse some popular buzzwords in current parenting support policy and practice in order to uncover the taken-for-granted meanings of these words. We have chosen to analyse the use of the concepts of *empowerment*, *strengths-based approach*, and *demand-led services* because these terms are particularly dominant and topically illustrative of changing relations between child and family social work and its users.

Analytical framework

Because a diversity of authors have contributed to writing this article, we are confronted with the dominant interest in these concepts in our field of study in our current research ventures. This deliberately polemic essay builds on recent and on-going research in our