PARENTING CULTURE STUDIES

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Table

Foreword

Parenting has emerged as one of the most hotly debated issues of the twenty-first century. Western culture attaches such significance to parenting because it is represented as the source of virtually every social problem that afflicts our communities. Poor parenting, or the absence of so-called parenting skills, is held responsible for the cultivation of dysfunctional children who in turn become maladjusted grown-ups. From this fatalistic perspective, the 'parenting deficit' is blamed for children's mental health problems, educational difficulties, anti-social behaviour, and poor coping skills, and the destructive consequences of bad parenting lasts throughout a person's life. According to the wisdom that prevails amongst policymakers and experts, everything from crime and drug addiction to teenage pregnancy and self-harm can be traced back to the way that mothers and fathers brought up their children.

Parenting as such is rarely depicted explicitly as one of the major problems of our times. Indeed, politicians and commentators often take care to state that most parents are doing a fine job of raising their children: before proposing another new policy or initiative that implicates inadequate parenting as the source of many of society's ills. Back in September 2006, the then prime minister, Tony Blair, made a remarkable statement about the necessity for policing parents who were likely to produce children and who had the potential to become a 'menace to society'. His demand to spot potential problem parents before birth was coupled to an argument for intervening in potential problem families before the children were even born. That only a handful of public figures challenged this statement is testimony to the prevalence of the belief in parental determinism.

The belief that the child will be punished for the sins of the parents has its origins in biblical times. Exodus 20:5 warns people that the Lord is a 'jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children'. However, in today's secular world the term 'sin' has been demoralized and transformed into a deficit. Divine intervention is not necessary where children are seen to be punished by the mere act of bad parenting.

The pathologization of parenting should not be construed as merely the secular variant of a very old religious theme. God's warning was addressed to those fathers and mothers who actually committed a sin.

In present times, it is not just a small group of irresponsible mothers and fathers who are seen to constitute a problem but *all* parents. In its pure form, the condemnation of the parent as a problem was first crystallized in the writing of eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's belief that people had to be saved from the detrimental effects of customs and traditions underlay his hostility to the authority of the father and the mother, for 'parents are the agents who transmit false traditions and habits from one generation to the next' (Shklar, 1987, p. 170).

The theme of curbing the influence that mothers and fathers exercise over their children has recurred periodically throughout modern times. However, it is only since the 1970s that parenting has come to be seen as one of the central issues facing policymakers and their experts. The remarkable expansion of public interest in childrearing is underpinned by the assumption that there is a direct causal link between the quality of parenting and social outcomes. This proposition has been particularly welcomed by policymakers, who find intervention in the sphere of parenting far more straightforward than engaging with wider social issues.

Over recent decades, the tendency to link social problems to childrearing practices has led to its elaboration as a causal relationship. The idea of a one-dimensional, causal relationship between parenting and socioeconomic outcomes tends to be conveyed through discrete and specific claims, such as the allegation that a lack of proper nurturing has a significant influence on the development of children's brains.

The transformation of parenting into a self-contained cause of childhood dysfunction has led to its politicization. However, parenting is not simply politicized; it is also transformed into a cultural accomplishment that can be cultivated to produce positive outcomes. So parents supposedly have the power either to damage their child, or to improve their life chances, through the exercise of such everyday practices as how one reads to one's child, or the form of discipline that is used. With so much at stake, it is not surprising that parenting is more and more regarded as a subject that requires the constant attention of policymakers and experts.

As the contributors to this book indicate, parenting is no longer an issue that confines itself to the relationship between mothers and fathers and their children. Parental determinism has its focus not only on the child but also on the society as a whole. Like the economic determinism or the biological determinism of the past, parental determinism is alleged to explain a bewildering variety of behaviours. When leading politicians on both sides of the Atlantic can argue that bad

parenting harms more children than poverty, then it becomes evident that parental determinism has become the mirror image of economic determinism.

The essays in this book provide an innovative approach towards the conceptualization of what is distinctive about contemporary parenting culture. Their arguments suggest that this issue is too important to be monopolized by one academic discipline. This book provides a compelling case for a new orientation towards what I very much hope will become a new field of scholarship.

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Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Ellie Lee is Reader in Social Policy at the University of Kent, and Director of the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies (CPCS). She established CPCS as a Research Centre based at the University of Kent with the other authors of this book in 2010. Her research to date has been about abortion, teenage pregnancy, feeding babies, 'welfare of the child' assessments in infertility clinics, drinking and pregnancy, and neuroscience and family policy. She has published books and papers about this research, and also frequently discusses her views in the print and broadcast media.

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Introduction

Ellie Lee

The origin of this book lies back in the mid-2000s, when Charlotte Faircloth and I became involved in separate research projects about a very necessary, but ostensibly mundane, aspect of being a parent: feeding babies. We both spent time interviewing and talking with mothers, reading and reviewing existing research about this topic from disciplines including sociology, political science, anthropology, philosophy, and history, and carried out desk research about the history of infant feeding policy. As we wrote up and published our work (for example, Faircloth, 2010, 2013; Lee, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2011; Lee and Bristow, 2009), we also developed an active dialogue with colleagues doing similar research to our own (Blum, 1999; Knaak, 2005, 2010; Kukla, 2005, 2006, 2008; Murphy, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2004; Wall, 2001; Wolf, 2007, 2011) and discussed our research in many non-academic forums (with healthcare providers, advocacy groups, in newspapers, and in TV and radio debates).

These are typical comments sent to us, in response to observations we have made in such public forums:

> Let me get it out there – I am a non-breastfeeding mum. I breastfed my daughter for six long weeks. Long for me and long for her. It's simple. Breast milk did not agree with her. But, here I am, yet again, finding myself explaining why I did not breastfeed for the recommended six months. It's like I have to give an excuse, a plausible one at that, as to why I failed my daughter. And failure it is considered. (Emily)

> I am a mother of a seven-month-old and I have chosen to formula feed. I have been amazed at the amount of pressure placed on women to breastfeed. In the early days following my daughter's birth, I felt

1

under a huge amount of pressure to attempt breastfeeding at a time when I was too tired and emotionally vulnerable to protest. (Sabina)

The conclusions we drew from this research experience inform the central propositions of this book. These can be summarized as follows:

- We live at a time when mothers will inevitably be informed, more or less explicitly, that they are mistaken if they think that the work of raising a child involves making straightforward decisions. So Emily, for example, soon discovered that what she thought was a 'simple' decision was certainly not viewed that way by others.
- Mothers will encounter the idea that they need to understand that what they do is far more complicated and much more important than they might imagine. Furthermore, they will receive the message that a great deal is at stake that they may not recognize when they make what seem to them to be practical, simple decisions.
- In sum, the message to mothers (and also fathers) is that the health, welfare, and success (or lack of it) of their children can be directly attributed to the decisions they make about matters like feeding their children; 'parenting', parents are told, is both the hardest and most important job in the world. Tomorrow depends on it.

Parental action, in most areas of everyday life, is now considered to have a determining impact on a child's future happiness, healthiness, and success. It is because of this that Sabina found there was manifest 'pressure to breastfeed'; others communicated to her there was a great deal at stake if she opted against breastfeeding and so she should do all she could to feed her baby from the breast. This was also why Emily found herself needing to 'account' repeatedly for what she ended up doing, when she found breastfeeding did not work out. Both these women indicate they experienced not breastfeeding as a measure of failure; indeed Emily states she had to 'give an excuse ... as to why I *failed my daughter*'. The relation between success, failure, and how a baby is fed is, this suggests, deemed to be a direct one, and so Emily's decision about this is not viewed by others as a practical or pragmatic matter. Rather, it is deemed powerfully and casually linked to the future well-being of her child.

As historical studies indicate, how babies are fed has long been construed as a matter of public debate and public interest (Kukla, 2005; Murphy, 2003). Yet as the accounts from Sabina and Emily show, public surveillance and monitoring of maternal decisions has certainly not receded, regardless of drastic declines in infant mortality and morbidity

associated with very early childhood in the past. This monitoring is stronger than ever, and as we indicate in other parts of this book, has become connected to an ever-widening set of claims about children's 'success' or 'failure'. For example, the biological core of a person – their brain – has come to be viewed as profoundly and directly impacted by the way that person was fed as a baby (O'Connor and Joffe, 2013).

Research also shows how even ostensibly 'doing the right thing' does not offer protection from monitoring and surveillance. The accounts above bring to light something of the way the mantra that characterizes official views – that 'breast is best' – works itself out. However *breastfeeding* (especially if a mother decides to carry on giving her baby milk this way for a lengthy time) can *also* be viewed as a matter of concern for others (Faircloth, 2013). Far from being an 'expert-free cultural space', this way of feeding a baby is medicalized and professionalized (Avishai, 2011, p. 27). Indeed a whole new professional sector, that of the 'lactation specialist', has emerged over the past 40 years, with its own publications, 'academic' journals, and claims to be heard by both policymakers and parents, on the grounds that there is such a thing as breastfeeding expertise.

This book has four authors, each of whom has researched different, but related, aspects of parenting culture over the past few years. Our aim in writing the book is to explain why the everyday and routine matters of being a parent, typified by the example of feeding babies, have become the 'big issues' they now appear to be. Centrally, we highlight the main development in parenting culture, which is the growth and influence of what Furedi (2002/2008a) has termed 'parental determinism', a form of deterministic thinking that construes the everyday activities of parents as directly and causally associated with 'failing' or harming children, and so the wider society. The project of Parenting Culture Studies[1] is grounded in an attempt to understand better the roots and trajectory of parental determinism, and overall, this project is informed by two central propositions.

First, in common with the tradition of Family Studies (Ribbens-McCarthy and Edwards, 2011), a genuinely interdisciplinary approach is of most value, starting less with discipline-based concerns than with an interest in bringing together insights from any scholarship that can help shed light on the development and contours of this form of determinism. As such, Parenting Culture Studies seeks to draw upon scholarship that is attentive to the need to try and answer the question of how and why the task that should properly be shared by *all* adults – that of shaping and developing the next generation – has come to be thought of and

fetishized as 'parenting'. While the approach taken by this book's authors is primarily sociological, we have pursued the development of Parenting Culture Studies by engaging with and debating academics from other disciplines, such as the philosophy of education, anthropology, psychology, law, and history, and from many countries other than England. We hope that is reflected in what you read here.

Second, a key challenge is to develop the best understanding we can of the relationship between continuity and change. The proposition that the sociocultural context in which parents raise their children has changed in recent years seems, to us, to be strongly supported by the evidence. For example, as we discuss below, a distinct and specific terminology is now used to discuss (and make problematic) what parents do, and this is most clear in the way that raising children is now called 'parenting'. The verb 'to parent' is itself relatively new, and Figure I.1 below shows how interest in this new practice of 'parenting' has escalated in recent decades.

A useful starting point is to ask questions about the new language for describing the task of raising children and explore what appears to be new. However, as Frank Furedi suggests in his Foreword, and the chapters that follow make clear, important continuities with the past also emerge. For example, for many centuries there have been 'child experts' or self-proclaimed 'authorities' who set out their views on the mistakes they think parents make. The relation between past and present is thus posed as a key question for the study of parenting culture, leading to the matter of the future, that is, how might our parenting culture develop and change for the better? How might the concept of parental determinism best be interrogated and challenged? We return to these questions at the end of the book.

Here, we make a few further preliminary comments about our general approach. Two written works in particular have inspired our efforts to develop the study of parenting culture; these are Sharon Hays' 1996 work, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* and Frank Furedi's *Paranoid Parenting.* (This was published first in 2001. A revised edition with new introduction appeared in 2008, and an American version was published in 2002. We make it clear in the text to which of these versions we refer.) Both Hays' and Furedi's texts stand as influential works, each having been cited hundreds of times. The terms developed in these books to capture contemporary experience – 'intensive motherhood' in the former and 'paranoid parenting' in the latter – have become reference points within and beyond the world of scholarship. This book, and the wider project of Parenting Culture Studies, aims to take forward
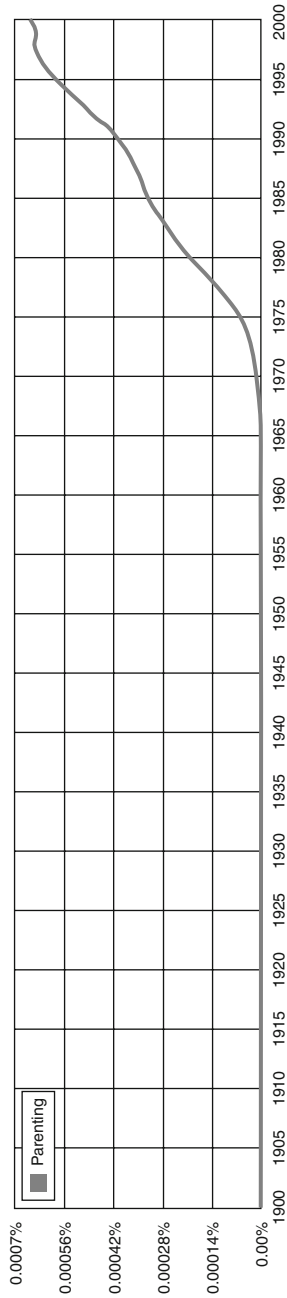
Figure I.1 Books about parenting, 1900–2000
Note: Graph generated by Google Books Ngram viewer.

an ongoing conversation about these two terms and explore what they capture about the emphasis now placed on 'parenting'.

There are three related ideas that, in the view of the authors of this book, emerge from *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* and *Paranoid Parenting* as especially important, and all the chapters that follow engage with them in different ways. One is the **historical specificity** of contemporary parenting culture; 'intensive motherhood' or 'paranoid parenting' are contemporary phenomena. While their history can be traced, and their roots and antecedents identified, they constitute a novel cultural development. The second is the usefulness of the concept **risk consciousness** for understanding the development of parental determinism. The third idea is the emphasis that Hays and Furedi place on viewing 'parenting' (in its 'intensive' or 'paranoid' form) as **socially constructed**. Later chapters further engage and explore these ideas: here, we offer some preliminary comments to highlight the core themes of the book.

'Parenting': what's new?

It will become rapidly apparent to those who start to research the way that any routine aspect of bringing up children is now talked about that a particular language is used to describe these activities. Central to this language is the term 'parenting'. If one looks, for example, at the question of how to discipline children, it will become clear this is rarely discussed as a community task or the responsibility of adult society as a whole. Rather, discipline is discussed as a 'parenting strategy', focused primarily on changing parental behaviour so as to discourage spanking or shouting at children, which is often expressed in the advocacy of 'positive parenting' (Daly, 2013; Reece, 2013). There are 'parenting manuals', 'parenting guides', 'parenting classes', and 'parenting education' that all purport to be able to improve matters in this area of the everyday life of parents (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The same is true for every aspect of raising a child. Feeding children, talking to them, sleeping with (or separate from) them, and even playing with children have become areas of action subsumed under the overall umbrella term 'parenting', and there is 'parenting advice' relating to all of them.

A central source of scholarship for Parenting Cultures Studies is that which has made efforts to understand the development of this terminology and its usage and meaning. In the first instance *Paranoid Parenting* provides us with this account:

> Child-rearing is not the same as parenting. In most human societies there is no distinct activity that today we associate with the term

parenting. In agricultural societies, children are expected to participate in the work and routine of the community and are not regarded as requiring special parenting attention or care … The belief that children require special care and attention evolved alongside the conviction that what adults did mattered to their development. These sentiments gained strength and began to influence public opinion in the nineteenth century. The work of mothering and fathering was now endowed with profound importance. It became defined as a distinct skill that could assure the development of character traits necessary for a successful life … Once children are seen as the responsibility of a mother and father rather than of a larger community the modern view of parenting acquires salience. (Furedi, 2002, p. 106)

From this point of view, a trajectory towards placing particular significance on the role and contribution of *the parent*, using their 'skills' to ensure a child's 'successful life', has a long history. It is at least as old as industrialization and, as Hays (1996) details, it may be considered that the basis for contemporary parenting culture lies in the working through of the separation out of 'the family' from the wider economy and society. However, despite its long history, it is also recognized that 'parenting' has acquired specific connotations more recently. 'Whoever invented the term *parenting* was not primarily interested in the lives of children', notes Furedi. 'Until recently, the term *to parent* referred exclusively to the act of begetting a child. Today it is deployed to describe the behaviour of mothers and fathers' (Furedi, 2002, p. 197). It is this more recent turn towards an *explicit focus on the parent and their behaviour* that emerges as the general, distinctive attribute of the contemporary term 'parenting' and the determinism it brings with it.

The decade since the publication of *Paranoid Parenting* has seen an expansion of research efforts looking into the meaning of the words that are now used so commonly to refer to (and make problematic) what parents do (for example, Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012). The history of the term has been explored usefully by some; Faircloth *et al.* (2013) suggest that 'parenting' as a term became widely used first in specific fields – for example, by psychologists and self-help practitioners – from the 1950s. It would seem, however, as we indicated above, that its popularization into more everyday language (for example, in titles of mass-market books) took place a little later. An interesting contribution from Smith, whose research focus is explicitly on 'changes in language', comments that '[t]o "parent" as a verb and the idea of parenting are relatively recent arrivals', with 'an explosion' in use from the 'early and mid-1970s' (Smith, 2010, p. 360).

Smith also comments on the changing *meaning* of the term. Much older uses of the term 'parenting', he contends, came to give way by the last quarter of the twentieth century to a view that 'parenting' is a 'technical' matter which can therefore be generalized about (rather than a personal relationship, by definition not appropriately subjected to technical criteria). Additionally, notes Smith, '*parenting* does not tend to depict the relationship with one's child as an easy or comfortable one' (2010, p. 360, emphasis in original). This suggests that from the outset, the term 'parenting', when used widely, has been associated with the view that parent–child relationships are problematic or deficient. It is, notes Smith, conceived of, 'as a dour business, and in which experts … have a proper role' (2010, p. 360).

By looking at the language of 'parenting', a picture emerges of a growing momentum from the 1970s onwards towards the targeting of *parental behaviour* as deficient and also 'parenting' as something of a joy-less task or 'job', to be conducted under the watchful gaze of experts. As well as being inherently bound up with the idea of a *deficit* in parental behaviour that must be addressed if children are to succeed, studies of 'parenting' also thus indicate this term is inherently bound up with the idea that *people other than parents* have special insights that can and should be brought to bear. Indeed, one of the dominant observations from studies is that 'parenting' is now viewed as an activity that cannot be effectively carried out 'naturally'. '(Good) parenting' is, in contrast, considered to be a form of learned interaction, widely discussed as a 'skill set'. In their contribution exploring what it means to view parents as 'educators' of their children, Ramaekers and Suissa thus persuasively identify the way that 'parents are expected … to do things with their children that are in a very specific sense goal-oriented' (2011, p. 198). In this sense, the parent today is not a person who, in their informal, everyday interaction with their child, teaches and guides the child about the world, on the basis of their own experience. Rather, the idea of 'education' associated with 'parenting' is a far more formal one, coming from the outside; indeed, argue these authors, it has become 'something that parents can (and should) do on the basis of scientific research' (2011, p. 199).

Another area addressed by recent research is the relation between 'parenting' and gender (Shirani *et al.*, 2012). 'Mother-blaming' has been a long-standing theme in literature on the history and sociology of the family, and scholarship has exposed how the perceived inadequa-cies of mothers have been frequently highlighted as the cause of wider social problems (we discuss this further in Chapter 2). Relatively less

scholarly attention has been paid to 'fathering' and its history, although it is clear that 'fathering' has certainly been considered problematic by experts and opinion formers from at least the nineteenth century onwards (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). 'Parenting', however, is manifestly a gender-neutral term purporting to include both mothers and fathers (Sunderland, 2006), and as we discuss further in Part II of this book, those concerned about 'parenting' suggest that today's fathers, just like today's mothers, need to 'acquire skills' through 'expert help', in order to play their critical role as a parent adequately. For this reason, it has been observed that policymakers' efforts to 'engage fathers' form an important part of parental determinism (Gillies, 2009).

Scholarship about 'parenting' that analyses developments in the realm of policymaking has developed considerably in recent years, with research exploring various ways that policymakers have organized what they do around the assumption of direct, causal connections between how children are 'parented' and problems of social concern. A recent contribution from one of the authors of this volume (Bristow, 2013) looking at political commentary about the riots that occurred in Britain in 2011 highlights, for example, the uniformity of the view among policymakers that 'parenting' was in some way to blame. Some have drawn attention to just how distinctive is this turn towards a new politics of parenting (Edwards and Gillies, 2011; Gillies, 2008, 2012). As Edwards and Gillies explain:

> There has been a remarkably explicit and sustained focus on the minutiae of everyday parenting practices as linked to the good of society as a whole. (Edwards and Gillies, 2011, p. 141)

A prominent theme in the literature concerned with parental determinism is that of 'targeting', or a preoccupation on the part of policymakers with the 'parenting' practices of those who claim welfare benefits. In Chapter 3 we discuss this very important area of parenting culture in more detail.

The central proposition to emerge from this preliminary assessment is that we can be sure that 'parenting' is not a neutral term to describe what parents do as they raise their children. Rather, the transformation of the noun 'parent' into the verb 'parenting' has taken place through a sociocultural process centring on the belief that 'parenting' is a highly important and problematic sphere of social life; indeed, 'parenting' is almost always discussed as a social problem and in some way blamed for social ills. In turn, 'parenting culture' can be summarized to mean the

more or less formalized rules and codes of conduct that have emerged over recent years which reflect this deterministic view of parents and define expectations about how a parent should raise their child.

Risk culture and risk consciousness

The emergence of 'parenting' as described above has thus become a growing focus for scholarship. The chapters in Part I of this book detail further what emerges from the relevant work about central aspects of this process. Questions we have frequently been asked by students when teaching about the insights of this scholarship in recent years are: How did this happen? Why has the work of bringing up and raising children come to be re-defined as 'parenting'? Before moving on, we now offer some general answers to these questions to situate what comes next.

A feature of some of the work that analyses parental determinism is its use of 'risk' as a core concept to understand the rise of this way of thinking. 'Risk' is an underlying concept in *Paranoid Parenting*, a book that forms one of a series of studies by Furedi about the workings of risk culture (see Furedi, 1997, 2005, 2007). The concept of risk is also central to books about specific topics that have been influential for our thinking. These include, for example, Armstrong's study of the regulation of alcohol consumption in pregnancy (2003), Lupton's work on the monitoring of pregnant women (1999a, 2013a, 2013b), and Wolf's critique of the 'breast is best' discourse (2011). Scholarship about 'risk' has noted, however, that this is a concept that is understood and conceptualized in the vast literature that uses the term in different and contradictory ways (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 1999b). The approach that informs the arguments set out in this book draws on a perspective that is concerned primarily with a *consciousness of risk*, and we now summarize briefly what 'risk consciousness' means. We set out four features of this way of understanding 'risk' and then return to them through the book, as we work through our arguments about contemporary parenting culture.

(1) *Risk as untoward possibility not probability*
Analysis of risk consciousness begins with the observation that there is an important difference between what 'risk' has meant at previous points in history and what it comes to mean in the present. Fox outlines the shift as follows:

> Before the era of modernity, *risk* was a neutral term, concerned merely with probabilities, with losses and gains. A gamble and/or endeavour

that was associated with high risk meant simply that there was great potential for significant loss or significant reward. However, in the modern period, *risk* has been co-opted as a term reserved for a negative or undesirable outcome, and as such, is synonymous with the terms *danger* or *hazard*. (Fox, 1999, p. 12, emphasis in original)

The meaning ascribed to the term 'risk' today, then, is different to the past. Where it once meant 'probability' understood via calculation to generate a balanced assessment, it now connotes the possibility of an *unwanted* or *dangerous* outcome.

Risk consciousness, from this perspective, is a way of thinking about the future in which *possibilities that are untoward* are taken into account more than *probabilities*. This outlook, Furedi explains, 'invites speculation about what can possibly go wrong' and 'frequently what can possibility go wrong is equated with what is likely to happen' (2009b, p. 205).

This redefinition of risk as possible danger suggests, in turn, the development of a particular view of *uncertainty* (that is, outcomes about which we cannot be sure at the outset). Rather than uncertainty being perceived as something which can be confronted rationally, or which opens up possibilities as well as pitfalls, the 'unknown' is viewed with anxiety. Indeed, '[o]ne of the defining features of our times is that anxiety about the unknown appears to have a greater significance than the fear of known threats', notes Furedi (2011, p. 97).

This sort of 'possibilistic' risk-thinking has been assessed as having wide influence. Most famously, it was associated by the former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld with the conduct of war; there are, he explained with reference to 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq, 'unknown unknowns – the ones we know we don't know', and it is these that should form the focus for strategic decisions (Furedi, 2009b, p. 199). As Furedi notes, however, although Rumsfeld was ridiculed for his 'unknown unknowns' comment, the possibility that there are speculative threats has become the organizing principle for action and policy-making in many instances.

The focus on speculative threats – the 'what ifs' of everyday life – has had a significant impact on the way that children, and also fetuses, are now perceived. Both children and 'pre children' are, we suggest through this book, more and more defined as *de facto* 'at risk', but what exactly the 'risk' *is* is often admitted to be uncertain or unknown. It is a 'worst case scenario', a possibility rather than a probability. Yet 'risks' of these kinds exert powerful influence over all discussions about childhood and children, from pregnancy behaviour to children's play, to the

interaction between adults and children within local communities. This perception of risk as applied to children also forms a key underpinning of the redefinition of the parent as determinant of the future well-being of the child; indeed what arises from it is the construction of the parent as a *manager of risk*, who has in their power the ability to decide the fate of the child according to how well they perform this task (an idea that we dwell upon throughout this text).

(2) *Risk as free-floating anxiety*

The second important observation about risk consciousness is that this way of looking at the world finds as its focus not collective concerns about specified dangers faced by groups, so much as *individualized fears about uncalibrated risks*. The recognition that this sort of anxiety has become the typical way of thinking about children is fairly widely noted.

Stearns, for example, writes that in America 'at some point in the past four decades', a view has taken hold that children, 'operate amid significant dangers about which they need to be warned and from which they need to be protected'. This outlook, he suggests, is distinguishable from longer standing ideas about 'vulnerability' in that in the past, the idea of risk bound up with the notion vulnerability 'did not, initially, assume that *the larger social context itself* had to be viewed in terms of danger' (Stearns, 2009, p. 48, our emphasis). More recently, in contrast, it is precisely this context, society itself, which has come to be viewed as risky (or 'toxic', as we discuss further in Part II). Thus, what the child is 'vulnerable to' becomes far less specific; 'unsanitary conditions' or 'accidents', for example, are replaced by a generalized sense that 'society' places children 'at risk'. This, argues Stearns, means that the child 'must be surrounded by a host of precautions and constraints previously unnecessary … A culture already installed was greatly intensified towards new levels of monitoring and regulation' (Stearns, 2009, p. 48).

As Furedi has pointed out, this unfocused, generalized sense of anxiety has fundamental importance for the definition of 'parenting':

> Traditionally, good parenting has been associated with nurturing, stimulating and socializing children. Today it is associated with monitoring their activities. An inflated sense of risk prevails, demanding that children should never be left on their own … Permitting youngsters to be home on their own after school is presented as an act of parental irresponsibility. (Furedi, 2002, p. 5)

As we detail further in Chapter 1, the meaning of parenthood is reworked through the re-redefinition of the child as 'at risk' in this generalized way; 'Parenting', with its deterministic connotations, is the outcome of this inflation of risk.

(3) *Risk consciousness and morality*

Risk consciousness has become more pervasive, but why has this happened? A third feature of the relevant literature is the answer it provides to this question. Understanding the growth of risk consciousness, it has been suggested, lies in grasping the relation between an outlook that elevates fear of the unknown and conditions where 'cultural authority is weak' (Furedi, 2011, p. 92). A powerful preoccupation with the untoward effects of 'not knowing' develops, grows, and becomes institutionalized, in conditions where authoritative value systems that provide meaning and clarity are more and more attenuated. Overall, risk consciousness understood this way reflects 'the difficulty that society has in bringing meaning to uncertainty', explains Furedi (2011, p. 92).

The insight that risk consciousness expands and gains traction in conditions where value systems are weak is one of the most important for understanding parenting culture. This point is elaborated as follows:

> The estrangement of contemporary western culture from a grammar of morality means that threats and dangers are unlikely to be conveyed in an explicit moral form. Moral regulation has an amorphous form and is often promoted indirectly through the language of health, science and risk. (Furedi, 2011, p. 96)

In a similar vein, Hunt has explained:

> [I]ncreasingly morality has come to function through proxies, not in its own voice, but in and through other discursive forms, the two most important and closely related being the discourses of 'risk' and 'harm'. (Hunt, 2003, p. 166)

The contention is thus that responses to problems of concern are now rarely conceptualized in terms relating to general systems of values or beliefs. Rather, perceived problems are most likely to be represented as such because they 'increase the risk of harm', that is, they are somehow threatening to the 'wellbeing' of the individual. This way of thinking inevitably means that the bodies we (and our children) inhabit, and the minds inside each one of our heads, *individually* become the focus for

attention. Thus the solution to this individualized problem of being 'at risk' is perceived to rest in 'risk management strategies'. Reducing and managing risk emerges as the temporary stand-in for a crisis of meaning and morality, and in this way a particular form of morality – risk management, which has 'keeping us safe' as its prime value – attains dominance.

This development can be readily identified when it comes to children; it is now entirely routine for parents to be warned about a wide variety of risks and dangers which threaten the health and well-being of their children, particularly those for which they are responsible (for example, feeding a baby formula milk, disciplining a child 'the wrong way', or letting them watch too much television).

Hunt, however, also makes the following very important observation about this development:

> The point that needs emphasis in explicating the thesis that moral discourses function through proxies is that the moral dimension is not excluded, rather it becomes subsumed within discourses whose characteristics have a utilitarian guise … The most striking feature of the hybridization of morals and risk is the creation of an apparently benign form of moralization in which the boundary between objective hazards and normative judgements becomes blurred. (Hunt, 2003, p. 167)

For Hunt, then, the development of a way of looking at the world in which dangers and problems are identified as risks does not mean this interpretation lacks moralizing power. On the contrary, it acts to generate powerful codes of conduct for behaviour but in a way which places the focus squarely on the individual and their way of life.

For example, to return again to the topic of feeding babies, this is now an activity with pronounced moralized connotations. What mothers do is surrounded (and influenced) by precepts and ideas about what they *should* do. However, the 'should' is very rarely articulated in conventional moral terms (for example, making explicit reference to the alleged sacredness of the child at the breast). Rather, the message 'mothers should breastfeed' is routinely justified on the grounds that 'medical evidence shows' and that 'experts know' as if there is no other way of thinking or speaking about what counts when it comes to feeding a baby that might be relevant, other than specialist knowledge.

The abandonment of a 'grammar of morality' is, in this light, a development with very significant implications. The possibility of opening