

Parenting Support in Europe

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Identify variation and its significance
Consider the underlying models and
implications

A Useful Lens?

- Changing /unchanging nature of welfare state (orientation and form, 'problem' identification, and focus of investment)
- Looking across policy spheres and at the interface between real people and policy
- Gender-based 'settlements'
- Management of generational relationships
- Management of family/state/societal patterns

- “Parents are nation-builders. It’s through love and sheer hard work that we raise the next generation with the right values. .. We are focused on making life easier for parents day-to-day, from extending childcare to increasing the number of health visitors.”
- David Cameron 2012.

England under New Labour

- ▶ A national roll-out of education programmes/classes for parents
- ▶ Parenting Commissioners in each Local Authority
- ▶ A prioritised list of evidence-based programmes
- ▶ Parenting support advisors in schools
- ▶ A national institute for family and parenting

- ▶ A national network of Children's Centres

- ▶ A national programme focusing on the education/support of young mothers
- ▶ A series of intensive family intervention projects around parenting
- ▶ Parenting made a focus of the judicial system by virtue of Parenting Orders (in 1998)

France

- More bottom up, local and regional but also a national co-ordinating body
- Main form – REAAP (Parental Support and Guidance Networks) offering peer support and educational activities to parents on a universal basis
- Other services focus on helping parents/children with schoolwork/attendance, family mediation, general parent/family information, drop in centres
- Parental responsibility contracts

Germany

- Some history in Germany - linked with 1,000 open access information and counselling centres – counselling in child-rearing + social pedagogical support for those with ‘weak parenting skills’
- Early intervention and protection against child risks leading to greater intervention – the child’s right to public support and protection
- Recently introduced Family Nurse service for ‘vulnerable’ young mothers
- Mandatory reporting of child abuse
- Also now moving towards family centres – offering services to families

Explanations for Cross-national Differences

- 1. The perspective on and organisation for child welfare
- 2. The welfare state system more broadly
- 3. The approach taken to family and the prevailing social philosophies around family
- 4. The professions and professional philosophies that are dominant
- 5. The particular 'problem' or needs' framing that dominate

Common Patterns

- A turn to parenting and parents in that:
- the figure and practices of the parent become a focus of intervention
- the focus is on particular parental resources (defined broadly to include information, knowledge, skills, personal and social resources) and child-rearing competencies and performance
- Children's agency is under-played, they are shadowy figured in all of this but children's performance is foregrounded
- A move inside the family

Common Tensions

- For whom are these measures intended?
Universal or targeted?
- Where is the emphasis between support and control of parents?
- Which bodies of knowledge do they draw from and which professions do they empower/or dislodge?
- Which type of intervention works best

Model of Parenting Involved

- A strong sense of parental agency but focused on parent-child interactions
- Parent-child interactions as strategic and outcome oriented - Control of the child's behaviour and 'successful child' is at the core of a number of the measures
- For these purposes a skilling of parents around 'what is known to work'
- Parenter = the executor of tasks and the user of techniques rather than a reflexive actor engaged in being a parent – a standardisation of approaches
- A responsabilisation of parents

What's Missing (1)?

- A broader sense of parenting - child rearing (which brings in the child and emphasises the moral and relational aspects of raising children)
- Parenthood/childhood – repository of societal expectations, customary procedures and structural arrangements
- Parent – in terms of personal identity and moral orientation/conflicts but also as actors who have a gender, class, ethnic and family identity

What's Missing (2)

- A problematisation of child-rearing as gendered
- Gender aware framing and targeting (the 'token fathers' group')
- Gender blind
- In their practice they are profoundly gendered:
- mainly mothers and the type of parenting that's endorsed is that of the classically male figure

Why?

- A moral panic around parents, children and young people - leading to a moral reframing of family relationships and associated responsibilities
- Part of an instrumentalisation of family policy
- They're relatively cheap
- They're relatively easy to get political consensus about

Why gender blind?

- Literature/knowledge they're drawing from is a gender blind/neutral literature
- A greater chance of engaging men
- Their main intent is to get women
- Try to promote an interchangeability of parents and parenting especially in the context of the recession and the changing labour market

Significance Overall

- These are not uni-dimensional interventions
- In relation to the welfare state, are they part of:
 - - A changing form and focus of family policy?
 - - Evidence of a social investment approach?
 - - Evidence of the move to services?
- Reframing of gender and generational relationships

What is parenting support in practice?

- Parenting support is a (loose) portfolio of services
 - Drop-in sessions for parents and children (modelled play, early years education, nutrition)
 - Advice clinics (professionals e.g. nurse, speech therapist)
 - Parenting training programmes
 - Parent counselling
 - Home-visiting by professionals
 - Information services widely available
 - Highly targeted initiatives for ‘difficult families’

Parenting Support – The Gender Significance

Why? Drivers behind parenting support (1)

- Political interest at national level, led by senior individuals (intergenerational transfer of disadvantage; anti-social behaviour; fitted with the responsibilities culture of New Labour)
- Evidence base (large, multi-disciplinary)
- Availability of parenting programmes: mass, low training investment, thought to be relatively inexpensive
- The latter are less popular now (post 2010)

Why? Other Drivers (2)

- Risk culture and focus on early intervention
- Social investment perspectives in social policy
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) – child as actor with rights, parent as bearer of responsibilities, state as monitor of these
- Changing notions of parenting – the idea that good parenting is involved or high investment parenting
- Social conformity/management of anti-social behaviour

Parenting Programmes: Examples

1) Incredible Years Early Years Basic - 4*

Who should attend: Single parents, Risk of maltreatment, Social/economic disadvantage, Any parent

- **Setting:** Family home, Children's centre, School, Community centre/faith-based centre, Clinic/Health centre. Parents receive 12 weekly group sessions where they learn strategies for interacting positively with their child and discouraging unwanted behaviour.

2) Helping the Noncompliant Child - 3*

Who should attend: for parents having serious behavioural problems with a child (3-8)

- **Setting:** home, Children's Centre, school, community centre. The parent and child attend between 8 and 10 individual sessions where they learn how to create a nurturing and supportive environment for the child and manage unwanted child behaviour.

3) Holding Hands - 2*

Who should attend: Any parent

- **Setting:** Family home; Individually delivered in homes over 6 weekly sessions. Practitioners provide parents with strategies for playing with their child and discouraging unwanted child behaviour.

Some critical observations...

- Parenting support is polysemic
 - Various interpreted and harbours a wide variety of provision
 - Seen as a solution to a range problems
- Parenting support is quite conventional
 - Does not challenge the gender order
 - Attempts to 'shore up' family
 - Promotes middle class methods of raising children (?)

Model of Parenting/Policy - 2 ideal types

- (1) Emancipatory view, a focus on parental strengths, on the enabling of parents, self-help, relational parenting rather than task-oriented parenting, no single best model of parenting – guidance and standard setting
- (2) Parental deficit view, a focus on weaknesses in parental and child functioning, penalising and reforming overtones, parenting as a set of skills/dispositions, strong recourse to professional knowledge (and control), endorsed and enabled by the state

Conclusion (1)

- This is not completely new – in most settings it's a development and extension of older ideas (it's 'embedded')
- However there are (at least 2) novel phenomena involved:
- (1) greater engagement on the part of the state with socially desirable forms of parenting – these are interventions that are about parents as much as about children
- (2) new institutional developments as regards the scale and nature of state activity towards putting in place a set of measures to influence how parents manage and rear their children which at its most developed involves three shifts:
 - a) from a passive to an active cast
 - b) moving beyond parents of infants/young children.

Conclusion (2)

- The policy/provision emerges differently and takes a different form across the three countries
- This depends on a range of factors, but especially the historical constellation and values around the family (and its relationship to state and society)
- Here we see the manifestation of a 'steering' vs a social interventionist' state, further evidence of a behaviouralist turn in social policy and a move away from material support of families

Argument (3)

- Theoretically, we need to locate developments also in arguments about family/state/society as much as in economic developments or philosophies

Consequences

- A particular normative standard is being set up and promoted
- The category of parent is being reinvented - underplaying the complexity of being a parent and the needs and identity of parents
- The category of child also is being (re)defined – as passive object
- Parenting is represented as undifferentiated (gender neutral, class neutral, ethnicity neutral and so forth)
- It tends to desocialise and also in some respects to individualise parenting

Is parenting support new?

Partially

- Certain functions preceded parenting support
- In the early 2000s under New Labour, parenting support gained a new momentum
- Parenting programmes were the vanguard of this new enthusiasm but it has extended much more widely than these
- 3 markers of change:
 - 1) beyond advice and passive support
 - 2) expansion to older children
 - 3) universal ambition

Argument

- (1) This is not completely new – in many ways it is a development and extension of older ideas
- However there are novel phenomena involved:
- the putting in place of a suite of measures oriented to influencing how parents manage and rear their children which involves moves:
 - a) oriented to prevention rather than crisis engagement or help in cases of need
 - b) from a passive to an activist cast
 - c) moving beyond the health of mothers and infants/young children to the rearing of older children.
- (2) Greater engagement on the part of the state with socially desirable forms of parenting and a particular type of parental behaviour and role being promoted
- (3) A more complex understanding of parenting is necessary

Parenting Support – The Significance

1. The Execution of the Parental Role

Returning to the Question of Why

- Countering and at the same time promoting individualisation
- Maybe something about parenting and childhood in conditions of two-earner families
- It may also spell a change in the form and conditions of state support to family
- Part of a pathway of social control focusing on the correction of certain behaviours and the promotion of others