

Esther Dermott

'Poverty' versus 'Parenting': an Emergent Dichotomy

Parenting not Poverty

In the context of post-recession Britain with a population facing the largest cuts implemented since at least 1945 (Emmerson et al. 2012), Prime Minister David Cameron has declared that 'what matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting' (2010): it is this message which dominates political and policy discourse.

Claims about the importance of the family, its relative fragility, and the pivotal role of parents are, of course, not new. In 1999, Silva and Smart noted that a stable political rhetoric which reiterated threats to the family from changes in social life had existed for over a decade. In turn, the 'family values' of the Conservative government of the 1980s and 1990s were replaced by New Labour's (1997-2010) 'hard working families'. However, with increasing social acceptance of a wider range of family forms and a reluctance to explicitly condemn particular groups (such as single mothers), relatively less attention was paid to the status of family relationships and instead interest in parenting practices grew. During the New Labour years parenting came under increased political scrutiny and was viewed as an important mechanism for improving outcomes for children – 'good parenting in the home is more important than anything else in determining children's outcomes' (Margaret Hodge, Minister for Children 2004, cited in Gillies 2008a) – which, in turn, led to a range of initiatives intended to advise and guide parents (Edwards and Gillies 2004). The current Prime Minister's positioning of parenting as 'the principle site for social renewal' (Jensen 2010, p.1) could therefore be seen as an extension of these trends rather than a radical shift.¹

There is, however, a new inflection; bad parenting is presented as the *most* significant and acute cause of childhood problems while good parenting offers a panacea for all social ills. Cameron's comment on 'warmth not wealth' is an example of the ongoing policy focus on the role of parents but, more than that, it highlights how current political thinking explicitly disaggregates the effects of poverty and parenting on children. Since parenting is framed as concerning individual actions, it is reminiscent of the moral underclass discourse (Levitas 1998) in which those who are 'socially excluded' are viewed as culturally and

behaviourally distinct. Furthermore, dominant political and popular discourse sees parenting and poverty, not only as separate, but *in opposition* to each other. For example, the comment by Nick Clegg – Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Democrats – that ‘Parents hold the fortunes of the children they bring into this world in their hands’ was reported under the headline ‘good parenting, not poverty, shape a child’s destiny’ (The Telegraph 2010). This oppositional construction is also important because, as will be discussed later, it sets up the debate in a way that has ramifications for those challenging the government’s view.

The prioritising of parenting as a solution to ‘problem’ children rather than the alleviation of poverty was foregrounded in the government’s response to the dramatic and unusual events of last summer; David Cameron (2011) stated that ‘These riots were not about government cuts...And these riots were not about poverty’. Instead, he argued that attention should be turned on parents because, ‘Either there was no one at home, they didn’t much care or they’d lost control’. Perhaps more significantly this discourse is also evident, albeit in less emotive language, in two major reports commissioned by the government on improving outcomes for children. *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults* (Field 2010) and *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (Allen 2011) both reproduce the tendency to think of parenting as an independent mechanism through which negative outcomes for children can be avoided.

In June 2010, shortly after the General Election, the new Government announced that Frank Field (a Labour MP) had been appointed to lead an independent review on poverty and life chances intended to generate broad debate about the nature and extent of poverty in the UK.² *The Foundation Years* document was published in December 2010 as the final report of the review and sets out a new strategy for abolishing child poverty – which the government is legally committed to doing by 2020 – and improving social mobility. From Field’s perspective, educational attainment, which in turn leads to good employment prospects, offers the best route out of poverty. Throughout the document Field is therefore eager to impress the view that poverty is not explained solely by inadequate income; poor children, in his view, do not end up as poor adults primarily because they lack material resources. This leads him to reject policy programmes which are founded on income transfers as ‘Even if the money were available to lift all children out of income poverty in the short term, it is far from clear that this move would in itself close the achievement gap’ (2011, p.16).

Poverty researchers have, for many years, drawn attention to the limitations of looking solely at income in relation to the experience of poverty and highlighted the importance of other resources such as local services, social networks, and gifts (Townsend 1979; see also <http://poverty.ac.uk>) for mitigating the effects of very low incomes. However, Field, in arguing against the importance of income, does not focus on other forms of resources, but instead concentrates on what he labels the ‘home learning environment’. This rather unwieldy term encompasses a number of disparate components, relating to the people, relationships and activities located in the home. In the first instance, Field states 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’ (2011, p.5); thus positing a whole collection of potentially relevant elements in opposition to the financial. ‘Family background’ and ‘parental education’ hark back to the idea that family form itself continues to have some importance, along with social class. However, it is the latter two phrases ‘good parenting’ and ‘opportunities for learning and development’ which receive most attention. He states:

positive but authoritative parenting, high quality childcare, a positive approach to learning at home and an improvement in parents’ qualifications together, can transform children’s life chances, and trump class background and parental income. A child growing up in a family with these attributes, *even if the family is poor*, has every chance of succeeding in life. (2011, p.16 my emphasis).

Therefore not only is the role of financial resources sidelined but the ‘background’ variables that are directly associated with class position, such as parents’ education, are also downplayed in favour of an even more explicit focus on parent-child relationships and child-centred activities: it is parents’ actions and the relationships they establish with their offspring *not* their ‘capital’ that are seen as determining their children’s outcomes.

The second major report concerning poverty, commissioned by the Social Justice Cabinet Committee, was the result of the government’s review into early interventions with children who are at risk of multiple disadvantages. Graham Allen, also a Labour MP, was appointed to chair the review by Iain Duncan Smith with whom he had previously co-authored a pamphlet on the same subject, *Early Interventions: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens* (2008). The final report focused more narrowly than Field’s on the specific interventions that might prove successful in ‘unlocking children from generations of poverty and giving them a real chance to make something of their lives’ (Duncan Smith 2010).

Again, the onus is placed on parenting while the significance of social markers is played down: ‘the right kind of parenting is a bigger influence on their [children’s] future than wealth, class, education or any other common social factor’ (Allen 2011, p.xiv). Due to this emphasis, early intervention is conceived as a set of programmes and policies that seek to improve the welfare of children primarily through altering parenting practices. Five of the eighteen intervention programmes categorised in the report as being of the highest standard are concerned with improving literacy and a further six are directed at strengthening ‘parenting competencies’. These programmes range from home visits aimed at developing what are believed to be more effective styles of parenting, to therapeutic-like interventions which promote emotional awareness and the enhancement of ‘problem-solving’ skills. The intervention programme which Allen suggests has been most successful and should be first in line for any available government funding is the *Family Nurse Partnership*: a scheme which promotes particular parenting skills to low-income mothers during pregnancy and in the first two years of their child’s life through ‘intensive visitation’. As an exemplar of the approach Allen favours, it engages with the mothers of young children who are economically disadvantaged and offers them tips on parenting rather than financial support.

The direction of travel is evident in these two government commissioned reports, and there are already indications that their main theme – that parenting is an independent factor of singular importance for children’s development – is spreading. For example, the emphasis on the role of parenting is reproduced in a report by CentreForum (self-defined as an ‘independent, liberal think-tank’) which received significant media attention. Proposing a national parenting campaign, Paterson names five ‘small, manageable steps’³(2011, p.6) to ‘positive parenting’. Taken together, these documents and commentaries make it evident that engaging with parenting is high on the current political list of priorities and that a decisive segregation is taking place with economic related concerns placed firmly to one side, while the actions of individual parents are moved centre stage.

Challenging Evidence on the Role of Parenting

Why should we be concerned about this focus since there is indeed evidence that parenting makes a difference? ‘[P]arenting is important’ as Sullivan et al. conclude in their report looking at outcomes for children aged seven (2010, p.34). The rationale for taking issue with the status parenting is currently accorded is that it misrepresents current evidence and hides the complexity of relationships between parenting, poverty and outcomes for children.

The clearest evidence about the impact of parenting on children exists in relation to extreme situations of neglect and parental abuse: ‘maltreatment increases the risk of a wide range of other negative outcomes’ (Hooper 2011, p.192) including poor mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, and homelessness (Radford et al. 2011). Psychological research indicates that, more generally, parent-child relationships are associated with an ‘impressive array’ of measures, including children’s cognitive/academic outcomes, social competence and (negatively) with high-risk health behaviours (O’Connor and Scott 2007, p.14). So, to reiterate, policy makers and commentators are not wrong to highlight associations between aspects of parenting and outcomes for children. But this is only part of the picture. The idea that there is a *causal* relationship between parenting and outcomes for children remains controversial (O’Connor and Scott 2007, p.3). This appears to be the case even when there is a narrower focus: a recent comprehensive evidence review exploring the role of children’s and parents’ attitudes, aspirations and behaviours for reducing the educational attainment gap concluded that it was ‘not possible to establish a clear causal relationship between AABs and children’s educational outcomes’ (Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012, p.1). Indeed, positive parent-child relationships may be a consequence, rather than a cause, of having well-adjusted, high performing children; as Desforges (2003) notes, the higher a child’s level of attainment in school, the more parents get involved. Furthermore, in statistical terms, even if parenting is a ‘prior’ variable this is not evidence that there is a direct causal relationship, since other factors may be influencing the observations. This seems especially likely since mechanisms explaining the relationship between parenting and children’s performance are not well understood.

As a further complication the term ‘parenting’ is used as if it refers, in simple fashion, to a single concept, when it is really a multifaceted notion comprising parenting behaviours/styles; the quality of the parent-child relationship; parenting activities; and more general caring activities (see Dermott 2012 for a longer discussion). It is for this reason that most sociological accounts of parenting have tended to use qualitative research methods, allowing researchers to explore how parents and children think about ‘good parenting’ in the round. Even if it is possible to classify different dimensions of parenting and translate these into quantifiable measures, there remains a further question about how ‘good’ – often taken to mean ‘intensive’ (see Hays 1996) and ‘intimate’ (see Dermott 2008) – should be defined. A number of writers have highlighted how dominant expectations about good parenting rely on classed assumptions which privilege middle-class views on what parenting should look like

(e.g. Gerwitz 2001; Gillies 2008a; Jensen 2010). Good parenting is then largely defined in reverse: if good parenting is the most important criteria for children to be successful, then ipso facto what the parents of successful children do must be good parenting. Similarly, the question of whose definitions count then also applies to what ‘outcomes’ for children are under consideration; what is classified as successful. In the government reports discussed earlier and the comments of politicians, there is clearly a focus on educational achievement with the expectation that this will lead to better employment opportunities. In other words the focus is on ‘well-becoming’ (Bradshaw 2011, p.3) with an orientation towards children as future adults, rather than a broader focus on children’s ‘wellbeing’ as illustrated in UNICEF’s ‘report cards’ (e.g. UNICEF 2007) and advocated by sociologists of childhood. Therefore when David Cameron (2010) declared that ‘we all know what good parenting looks like’, we need to be careful of assuming that there is one generally accepted model to which everyone aspires. Indeed, Raemaekers and Suissa ask: ‘What would it mean...to talk about criteria for successful parenting? Who would determine such criteria?’ (2011, p.104). While there may be agreement on what the very worst outcomes for children and examples of parenting look like, it does not follow that there is a similarly universal version of what is ‘good’.

At the same time, there is compelling evidence that poverty has a direct effect on children. It is well established, from a wide range of longstanding academic research, that there is a link between poverty and outcomes for children: ‘poverty and the persistence of poverty still matter’ (Kiernan and Mensah 2011, p.324). Poverty is strongly associated with a whole range of negative measures of child well-being, including higher mortality and morbidity, and levels of mental ill-health (Bradshaw 2011, p.27). Ermisch et al. (2001), using the British Household Panel Survey, concluded that poverty had negative impacts in terms of adolescents’ self-esteem and their chances of obtaining good GCSEs, while Goodman and Gregg (2010), drawing on the Millennium Cohort Study, note that children from poorer households have worse cognitive development and lower social and emotional wellbeing from a very young age. A recent overview on the impact of poverty on children highlighted that children in poor families are more likely than children in richer families to have higher incidences of behavioural problems and demonstrate early signs of later life health problems such as obesity. It concludes that: ‘[t]he detrimental outcomes for children found to be associated with child poverty are extensive and range from mental illness to low educational attainment’ (ESRC 2012a, p.1; see also Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997 for a similar overview from the US). The 2012 Good Childhood Report also notes the significance of material

deprivation on children's subjective wellbeing (Rees et al. 2012). Taken together, the research suggests that it is perverse to focus purely on parenting. Ultimately then, we should challenge political claims that focus purely on the role of parenting, as there are question marks over the existence of a causal relationship between parenting and outcomes for children; 'parenting' is a complex mesh of decisions and actions that is not well defined and therefore is prone to be considered in overly simplistic terms⁴; and there is strong evidence that poverty and material disadvantage effects how well children do.

Challenging Parenting *Versus* Poverty

Following this, it might seem that what is required is a robust assertion of research findings which draw attention to the impact of economic disadvantage. Indeed, some academics have already drawn attention to and protested against the 'absolute faith...planted in the power of practices of "good parenting"' (Jensen 2010, p.1); responding to the government's position by reasserting the very real importance of addressing economic disadvantage and warning against the tendency to fall into assumptions about the (deficit in) capabilities of those living in poverty while ignoring structural explanations (e.g. Gillies 2010; Gordon 2011; see also Shildrick 2011 on the 2011 riots). However, in attempting to provide a counter to the arguments of those emphasising the parenting angle, there is a possibility of falling into the trap of reaffirming the categories of 'poverty' and 'parenting' as dichotomous. Making a stark distinction between poverty and parenting as the explanation for differences in outcomes between children or riots on the streets is understandable when engaging in public debate, since a simple message is easier to communicate in soundbites and short commentaries. It is also perhaps intuitively compelling because it maps onto the tendency to look either for structural explanations and the impact of societal wide influences, or at the individual level with a focus on personal responsibility. However, while criticisms of overplaying the role of parenting for child outcomes are justified, the development of the debate in this way has contributed to an ultimately unhelpful tug-of-war between the explanations of poverty and parenting. While it is important for academics to engage in political and policy debates (because it is wasteful if research findings that relate to real world concerns are not included as part of any discussion), being pigeon holed as belonging to one of two camps makes it more difficult to publicly explore the ways in which parenting and poverty are entangled. Academics – whose primary motivation should be to understand better the phenomenon

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under consideration – should therefore be wary of reproducing this, fundamentally political, dichotomy.

There do exist convincing descriptions of pathways between poverty and child outcomes, and between parenting and child outcomes, suggesting that genuine relationships may exist (e.g. the impact of a lack of material resources in relation to the former, and the impact of parenting style for the latter) – albeit with a recognition that these are not unidirectional. Yet what is evident from recent academic research is that working out the effects of parenting from those of poverty is difficult as the relationships are not separate and unrelated; there is a complex relationship between poverty and parenting (Katz et al. 2007). In fact, even Frank Field, who focuses on the role of parents at the expense of reducing poverty throughout his report, acknowledges this (Field 2010, p.44).

The best overviews and individual pieces of quantitative research discuss two equally important aspects: how neither parental behaviour nor low income are alone sufficient to explain social disadvantage (e.g. Sullivan 2010) and the existence of *both* separate and related effects alongside interpretations of these associations. If separate effects exist then a focus on only one is unlikely to reduce the gap in attainment (ESRC 2012b): if separate and related effects are present then exploring this is of major importance. Sullivan highlights the differential impact depending on the particular outcome under consideration, explaining that ‘we can say that although poverty is relevant to an understanding of the full range of childhood outcomes...its impact, and the extent to which this can be explained by mediating factors, varies across outcomes’ (2010, p.56). Meanwhile Kiernan and Heurta (2008) have suggested that parenting can be viewed as ‘mediating’ the relationship between poverty and outcomes for children. By this they mean that positive parenting (as measured using a composite index which includes parental activities, measures of relationship quality between parent and child, and disciplinary practices) redresses some, though only about half, of the impact of poverty. Notwithstanding the limitations of these quantitative studies – which largely rely on survey instruments to measure particular aspects of parenting – the interconnectedness of the two headline terms is at least recognized. Val Gillies’ recent work (e.g. 2007, 2008b, 2010) is a good example of qualitative research which seeks to interrogate the relationship between poverty and parenting by focusing attention on how the values that parents hold are constructed by their economic and social circumstances. Also important is research which explores and problematises the terms ‘poverty’ and ‘parenting’, as well as

outcomes and wellbeing; recognizing that part of the reason that the discourse of ‘parenting or poverty’ is reproduced is because of wooliness and debate over the terms being used.

A recent paper by Kiernan and Mensah (2011) argues that there is a relationship between experiences of poverty and the quality of parenting but that disentangling the effects of each is not straightforward. The task for social researchers who wish to challenge the dogma of improved parenting as the only route to improve outcomes for children, is to avoid the temptation of merely countering the ‘parenting’ camp and to more overtly challenge the framing of the debate by conducting and disseminating academic research that is subtle and teases out exactly how parenting and poverty are intertwined.

Conclusion: an Unconvincing and Unhelpful Dichotomy

In a time of austerity, the idea that the fate of children is entirely dependent on the actions of their parents has an immediate appeal to those in charge of the nation’s finances. That parental time and energy can alone all but guarantee a positive outcome removes the issue of access to resources from the equation, and in times of economic difficulty – with inequality set to rise further in the face of benefit cuts (Jin et al. 2011) – a focus on what parents *do* rather than what they *have* allows politicians and policy makers to continue to claim that they are prioritising families while at the same time cutting their financial support. This need to maintain a belief that families are being supported is important because of the central Conservative tenet that, rather than the state, ‘strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society’ (<http://www.conservatives.com/policy/>). Given this set of circumstances, the current political discourse of ‘parenting not poverty’, which shifts families from having troubles to being the cause of trouble (Levitas 2012), seems certain to continue.

Any position which ignores, or at best downplays, the role of material resources in discussions of outcomes for children certainly needs to be challenged. Equally it is important to expose the underlying classed and gendered assumptions in political discussions that initially seem neutral and uncontroversial (Gillies 2007, 2008; Jensen 2010; Klett-Davies 2010). The question is what to do next? While continuing to challenge political or popular commentaries that misrepresent empirical evidence about the importance of material disadvantage for children’s lives there is also an obligation on social researchers to develop a better understanding of the relationship between parenting and poverty, and this need is especially acute in relation to explaining outcomes for children in order to avoid the

development of policies based on ideology rather than evidence. To do so, the framing of the debate as a dogmatic either/or proposition needs to be challenged because the creation and maintenance of this unhelpful dichotomy works against developing a nuanced understanding of how the practices and attitudes of parents are influenced by, and interact with, financial circumstances and access to resources.

This may seem a relatively straightforward undertaking, and is in line with what some researchers are already doing. However, the task requires us, as social researchers, to take three, perhaps difficult, steps. First, we need to engage with a broad range of research, including psychology which seeks to examine various aspects of parental interaction and their impact in order to incorporate these insights alongside sociological critiques of ‘good’ parenting. Second, it is necessary to recognise that interactions between aspects of ‘parenting’ and ‘poverty’ are key and therefore we should examine measures of both in tandem: this involves *embracing* the complexity of social reality rather than trying to marginalize it. Finally, in relation to getting research messages out into the realm of politicians, social commentators, the media and the general public, we need to accept that all these audiences can cope with a more complex story than that which is currently being told. While it may be tempting to counter political interventions on parenting that are based on partisan interpretations of the available social science research by reasserting the importance of poverty, in the longer term shifting the terms of the debate will be more productive.

¹ Though it could be argued that any element of continuity is itself somewhat surprising given the historical and ideological reluctance to intervene in the ‘private sphere’ by both the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties.

² The main aims of the Review were to: explore how a child's home environment affects their chances of being ready to take full advantage of their schooling; generate a broad debate about the nature and extent of poverty in the UK; recommend potential action by government and other institutions to reduce poverty and enhance life chances for the least advantaged, consistent with the Government's fiscal strategy; examine the case for reforms to poverty measures, in particular, the inclusion of non-financial elements, <http://www.frankfield.com/campaigns/poverty-and-life-changes.aspx>.

³ Talk to your child (with the television off) for 20 minutes; play with your child on the floor for 10 minutes; read to your child for 15 minutes; provide good nutrition; offer positive praise.

⁴ It is notable that, in the UK, reading to children and breastfeeding seem to have become proxy measures of ‘good parenting’. Also that while the gender neutral term ‘parenting’ is commonly employed in policy documents it is mothers who have greater responsibility for putting ‘good parenting’ into practice.

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