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*Troubling Families: Parenting and the Politics of Early Intervention*

Early version of a chapter published in: **Thatcher's Grandchildren, S. Wagg and J. Pilcher (eds) Palgrave Macmillan 2014.**

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The election of the Thatcher Government in 1979 is broadly acknowledged as marking a pivotal moment in social and economic history. As most theorists acknowledge this rise to power was instrumental in ushering in and cementing a neoliberal regime that over the course of 30 years transformed global politics and society. Thatcher's infamous proclamation: 'there is no such thing as society.... only the individual and his family', heralded a new age in which economic liberalism came to infuse, shape and contain all aspects of life, including our most intimate spheres of existence. 'Neoliberalism' as a term has been put to promiscuous and often reductive use (Hall 2011, Clarke 2008) but few can question the radical assault on social values it seeks to describe. Principles of individual freedom, independence and personal responsibility, stressed alongside a valorisation of the market as the optimal site for maximising human wellbeing, have become ingrained in everyday common sense (Harvey 2011, Couldry 2011).

The political consequences of the neoliberal project have been well documented alongside sophisticated analyses of social and cultural impact. However, the extent to which neoliberal ideals have penetrated deep into the arena of family relationships is more rarely examined. A critical look back across the decades reveals a series of dramatic changes in conceptualisations of children and parents, highlighting how a particular kind of individualism and economic reasoning have come to reconstitute understandings of personhood and relationality. At the centre of these profound shifts is a veneration of the ideal capitalist subject as not only self serving but also self producing, with everyday practices and even intimate relationships reducible to venture, speculation and investment. At the level of Government socially embedded lives have become re-imagined as disaggregated individual projects to be managed along entrepreneurial lines (Rose 1999), with infant development acquiring a new central significance in the production of competent neoliberal selves.

This chapter examines how such individualist modes of thinking came to be superimposed onto the essentially social experience of family as part of a concerted program to promote childhood investment as an alternative to the welfare state. I begin by considering the longstanding politicisation of family relations, highlighting the division that opened up between traditional conservatives and economic liberals over representations and prescriptions. I then explore how neoliberal values came to permeate and colonise the apparently radical, progressive critiques and policies pursued through the New Labour years. Baring testament to this process is the extent to which

relational bonds of love and care are now routinely technicalised through the instrumental language of parenting skills and proficiencies. In particular I show how related themes of children's wellbeing and protection have been appropriated to justify a highly regulatory approach to family policy; eventually morphing into a distinct doctrine of 'early intervention' under the auspices of the current Conservative led Coalition Government.

Turning to examine early intervention in particular, I explore and detail its emergence as new orthodoxy and a political rallying point. Founded on the notion that individual parenting practices can be held accountable for children's future life chances, early intervention programs target the family relationships of the poor ostensibly to prevent a transmission of deprivation. In practice the attribution of limited life chances to 'sub-optimal' parenting works to personalise and normalise inequality, while simultaneously conveying apparent concern for children's wellbeing. In cementing a broader shift away from state support towards a social investment model the principle of early intervention marks an ideological convergence between traditional conservatism and economic liberalism, galvanising a cross party political consensus in the process. But as I demonstrate, the currently employed doctrine of early intervention is built on sand, propping up old and increasingly discredited ideas and policies.

#### *The old and new politics of family*

Long cherished as the bedrock of society by politicians of all hues, family was articulated as a central theme by the Thatcher Government in the 1970s. Of particular concern was the changing structure and status of family in the wake of the so called 'permissive sixties' which was portrayed as undermining the social fabric. But while the 'pro-family' rhetoric' of Thatcher and successive Conservative Governments railed against liberal views on sexuality, marriage and childrearing, the libertarian instincts of the party curbed meaningful policy incursions into what was regarded at the time as a private sphere lying beyond the boundaries of legitimate state intervention. By the 1990s this tension in relation to the moral status of family had developed into an identifiable fault line among conservatives, dividing those assuming a more reactionary position from those adopting a more liberal stance. The Times newspaper memorably characterised this in terms of 'Tory Mods and Rockers', with the former embracing change while the latter cling on to old sensibilities and standards<sup>1</sup>.

This surfacing rift in the Tory party reflected a much broader political and cultural dynamic operating through the 1970s and 80s. The previously cherished ideal of the nuclear family came under sustained attack from feminists and others amidst rising rates of divorce, cohabitation and birth outside of marriage. A critical lexicon emerged to highlight the repression of personal freedom and individuality associated with traditional family ideology. Public/ private distinctions depicting families as independent units separate from the state were powerfully challenged by feminists, ushering in a new appreciation of the 'personal as political'. While most on the political right

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<sup>1</sup> See The Times, leader 'Mods and Rockers', 6<sup>th</sup> July 1998

fiercely opposed such critiques, regarding them as deeply threatening to civilised moral values, feminists found unlikely allies in a concentrated strand of neoliberal thinking that was wielding increasing power and influence. Individualistic, economic centric values began to be articulated through a strategic and opportunistic engagement with feminist and new left egalitarian critiques (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Fraser, 2009). Family as collective, structured experience was problematized as belonging to an old order, paving the way for a new emphasis on the personal as the key constituent of social life.

Such ideas were echoed and to some extent crafted by prominent sociological theorists in the 1990s who hailed the emergence of a new social order of 'reflexive modernity' transforming the experience of family (Giddens 1991, 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002). A post traditional society was posited in which men and women, progressively freed from the roles and constraints associated with traditional social ties, are compelled reflexively to create their selves through day-to-day decisions. According to Anthony Giddens our fundamentally altered experience of love, sexuality and relationality rendered family a 'shell institution': 'The outer shell remains, but inside they have changed' (Giddens 1999: 19). Drawing on Giddens's work in the 1990s New Labour politicians set about developing their 'third way' approach, aiming to balance individual rights with social responsibility through an emphasis on both moral tolerance and personal obligation. The primary role accorded to family as the protector of civilisation was preserved in this account, but significantly through a focus on children as its principle constituents. Definitions of family structure became more flexible and inclusive, crucially through a centring of childrearing as the primary moral concern.

A year after the election of the first New Labour Government Giddens famously proclaimed 'There is only one story to tell about the family today, and that is of democracy. (1998p. 93). This somewhat optimistic proclamation obscured the process by which trenchant critiques of 'the family' had been co-opted to propagate an advancing neoliberal ethos (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Fraser, 2009). As Nancy Fraser (2009) argues feminist emancipatory ideals were appropriated and made mainstream achieving very different political ends from those intended. The concept of the personal as political increasingly became articulated as the personal is the *only* political, enforced through promotion of the self determining, networked individual, liberated from gendered and classed expectations and ties. Children came to assume a much greater significance within a market based ethic as human capital requiring extensive investment to secure their futures as productive citizens.

To be more explicit, under the remit of New Labour, the institution of family was actively re-constructed to embrace an ideology better suited to advanced capitalist values. In the modern 'democratized family' women are freed up to enter the labour market alongside men, replacing male breadwinner models of family with norms around dual earning households. Articulated through a discourse of gender justice, flexible capitalism is promoted as the progressive solution to women's inequality. The reality was a concentration of women in

low wage, insecure employment, and an overall decline in living standards despite steep rises in hours worked per household (Fraser 2009). Meanwhile the female dominated practice of childcare was redrawn as a motor of meritocracy, moving conceptualisations of family away from traditional structural associations with class bound trajectories. Instead family is hailed as the formative site through which competent personhood is cultivated, with well parented children better able to navigate and capitalise on new post-industrial economic landscapes (Gillies 2012, 2005).

### *The 'child centred' age*

Thus, while the concept of family has retained its political purchase over the years, is a distinctly different entity conjured up in rhetoric and policy today. Thatcher's preoccupation with 'family values' and strengthening the traditional nuclear family have largely been replaced by a focus on 'parenting' and the 'wellbeing' of the child. Family is now represented less as a haven in a heartless world and more as an individual project and an essential cipher through which moral responsibility must be seen to be exercised. A key feature of this new public politics of family is the way in which attention has moved away from concerns with family structure and function, towards an emphasis on knowledge and proficiency. More specifically, governments have come to see families in terms of their practices, with a particular focus on the minutia of childrearing translating into an ideology of family competence (Gillies 2011). As part of this shift parents are depicted as the architects of family while children occupy a new status and significance as its core subject.

Moreover, such changes are tied to a characteristically neoliberal individualisation and dismemberment of family as an inherently collective endeavour. Children, as the nucleus of family are accorded general needs and rights which position their interests in isolation from their family members. As distinct, separately conceived beings, children are attached to families primarily through contingent relationships with their parents. In the process family becomes construed as an intrinsically precarious location for children as vulnerable and less powerful individuals, and the issue of child abuse perpetrated by parents and carers takes on increased significance (Parton 2006). In particular, attention is deflected away from broader structural and economic risks facing families, with the principle source of threat to children's wellbeing associated with the conduct of relationships within families and communities.

In the 'democratised family' children are accorded much greater autonomy and standing than in the past, reflecting a significant shift in public understandings of children's capacities and welfare needs (Gillies and Edwards 2013). Over the course of the last three decades child centred discourse has filtered into public policy profoundly shaping legislation and practice. The Children Act 1989 was a particular landmark with its focus on supporting children's self determination within legal frameworks and prioritising their welfare. Values emphasising autonomy, choice and democracy have been similarly embraced as part of a broad take up of a discourse of 'children's rights'. Legislation enacted as part of the Children Act 2004 also saw the implementation of the Every Child Matters framework to

protect and foster children's well being. This included the introduction of a 'Children's Commissioner to promote awareness of the views, voices and interests of children.

This child centred shift coincided with broader concerns that the UK was witnessing a 'crisis' of childhood (Lee 2001, Kehily 2009, Parton 2004). Reports, books and even a newspaper campaign<sup>2</sup> appeared alleging that British children are exceptionally troubled (UNICEF 2007; Palmer 2006 Gilbert et al 2008; Layard and Dunn 2009). Anxiety has coalesced in particular around the state of children's mental health, with claims made that one in ten suffer from a diagnosable disorder (Mental Health Foundation, 2005). As Harry Hendrick (2003) notes policy constructions of children across the last 100 years have been characterised by a mind body continuum, with particular historical periods emphasising one or the other. Hendrick cites a bodily preoccupation with health and hygiene in the early part of the last century overtaken by a post war concern with psychological attachment, which shifted to a focus on physical abuse and 'battered baby syndrome' in the 1970s. Arguably the 1990s saw another pendulum swing towards a relatively disembodied conception of children's emotional wellbeing (or perceived lack of it).

Despite its potentially extensive scope children's wellbeing is addressed as a curiously self contained state of mind in much current literature. For example, 'The Good Childhood Enquiry', a highly publicised series of reports by the Children's Society, seeks to centre notions of wellbeing and positivity through an account of the potential consequences of contemporary children's unhappiness. In attempting to 'describe the state of children's well-being in the UK today' the report reifies the concept treating it as an indicator in its own right. Lack of wellbeing is framed as the principal cause of problems, rather than as a symptom of adverse circumstances. As the following quote from the 2012 report demonstrates, wellbeing as a state of mind becomes the primary focus for change.

Low well-being could be an important indicator of longer-term repercussions in people's lives. If this is the case then focusing on subjective well-being, and particularly on children who experience low well-being, offers opportunities for early intervention which could substantially improve these children's life chances (The Children's Society, 2012, 6)

Defined as an entirely subjective experience, and routinely measured separately from other contextualising factors, wellbeing encompasses notions of resilience to adversity ensuring children who struggle with poverty and other life stressors can be viewed as psychologically troubled, rather than just poor or overburdened. Parenting is accorded the primary role in laying the foundations for this mental buoyancy, reflecting the central significance childrearing has come to occupy in the new politics of family.

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<sup>2</sup> See Daily Telegraph Campaign to Halt the 'Death of Childhood'  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/yourview/1528718/Daily-Telegraph-campaign-to-halt-death-of-childhood.html#>

### *The rise of parental determinism*

As has been noted, traditional conceptions of 'the family' were characterised by a strongly bounded notion of privacy. The intimate features of family life, including parent child relationships were generally positioned as outside the remit of state involvement in all but extreme circumstances. The advent of the New Labour Government marked a very different approach communicated through an emphasis on the importance of children and their development. Family, it was suggested, must be re-positioned in the collective imagination as a public rather than a private concern. A powerful moral argument was fashioned on the grounds of promoting both social order and justice, with parenting portrayed as holding the key to a safer and fairer society. This relied on a common sense framing of parenting as a 'skill' that must be learnt. Detached from any appreciation of structural context, culture or values, good parenting was presented as set of neutral and natural techniques. Upskilling parents, it was claimed, could reduce crime, anti-social behaviour and poverty whilst increasing the social mobility and life chances of poor children. Following this reasoning the state has a responsibility to regulate and enforce good parenting for the sake of the nation and its vulnerable children. New guiding policy principles of prevention and early intervention began to take shape.

As many have pointed out deprivation has long been depicted as a condition inherited through families lines (Townsend 1979, Walker 1996, Welshman 2006) Nikolas Rose (1989) has documented how 19th century philanthropists identified the family as a potential prophylactic against a perceived dangerous immorality exhibited by the growing urban poor. By the 20th century evolutionary biology was inspiring genetic accounts of social ills expressed through anxieties about dysfunctional households passing degeneracy down through the generations (Welshman 2006). Eugenic inflected preoccupations with 'problem families' and their pathologies dominated welfare and public health agendas until the 1960s when they were overtaken by social deterministic explanations (Starkey 2000). Poor families remained in the frame, but were accused instead of sharing and reproducing lifestyles and values that set them apart from mainstream society, thereby perpetuating a 'cycle of deprivation'. Popular with successive conservative Governments, theorising about inherited disadvantage and the existence of an underclass eventually fell out of favour when, despite concerted efforts, research consistently failed to establish links between poverty and cultural deficit (Atkinson et al 1983, Morris 1994).

New Labour, however, set about repackaging the old and discredited preoccupation with transmitted deprivation, presenting it as a progressive, liberal concern with tacking inequality and supporting the poor. Partly this was achieved through coupling parenting interventions with tangible support like tax credits to address family hardship. New Labour's flagship nationwide policy initiative 'Sure Start' provided subsidised childcare, toy libraries, cafes and drop in groups alongside more didactic attempts to regulate parenting practice through classes and explicit advice. Much needed practical and financial assistance for parents was delivered through an impassioned

commitment to invest in children's future, papering over the moral and political objections provoked by previous cultural deficit models. The promise of identifying and immediately addressing family based risks to children's future outcomes proved to be a deeply appealing idea, communicated through an almost evangelical faith in the power of good parenting to compensate for social disadvantage.

But far from representing a timeless, universal skillset, a very particular understanding of good parenting evolved to embody this highly politicised investment in children's development. Stephen Brown (1990) mapped the beginning of this process, coining the term 'parentocracy' to describe how in the arena of education an emerging commitment to the 'wealth and wishes of parents' was displacing more traditional concerns with children's abilities and potential. Introduced by a Conservative Government in the 1980s, parental choice in education was promoted as mechanism for better meeting needs and driving up standards, with little consideration given to the deeply uneven territory from which such 'choices' are made (Ball 2008). This consumerist framework expanded under the auspices of New Labour, extending deep into the arena of childrearing itself. Good parenting became associated with choosing, accessing and continuously evaluating products and services (food, toys, childcare, parenting advice etc.).

The ideology of 'parentocracy' also imposes a distinct moral agenda that naturalises individualism, competition and self interest. Good parents are expected to fight tooth and nail to ensure their children succeed, even if this is at the expense of others (Reay et al 2011). This competitive imperative is endorsed through a normative promotion of 'intensive parenting', most often expressed in the form of attentive, child centred mothering (Hays 1996, Lupton, 2002, Wall 2010) Deeply gendered and classed in terms of sanctioned values and practices, intensive parenting, is closely aligned with attachment theory, proposing continuous emotional labour to maximise an infant's social, emotional and cognitive capital. Dependant on middle class resources and values, 'cultivational' approaches are characterised by the active manipulation of social and financial assets to ensure middle class advantage is passed down through the generations (Lareau 2003). This intensive model of childrearing has been broadly embraced as 'gold standard' parenting, ensuring class specific family practices now regularly held to account for the social and structural positions they reflect.

#### *Troubling families: troublesome evidence*

Strategic deployment of simplistic but appealing social justice narratives helped reframe childrearing as a job with attached performance indicators. However, it was an apparent grounding in 'evidence' that provided a seemingly unassailable legitimacy to new directions in family policy. New Labour's approach to Government was characterised by a commitment to base policy making on evidence rather than ideology. This focus was summed up in their 1997 manifesto phrase 'what counts is what works'. Leaving aside the inherently problematic concept of removing ideology from politics, the application of this conviction to family policy built on and compounded technocratic definitions of parenting. The middle class values underpinning

sanctioned models of childrearing were enshrined as optimal practice. At a public level it became common place to view parenting through an evaluative lens as something you either get right or wrong. Increasingly startling claims about the transformative powers of particular parenting practices began to permeate policy documents and political rhetoric, often marked by the prefix 'research has shown'. For example, the following assertions were used and recycled in a wide variety of New Labour speeches, reviews and strategy papers.

We know from all the research evidence....good parenting in the home is more important than anything else in determining children's outcomes. (Margaret Hodge, 2004).

Parents and the home environment they create are the single most important factor in shaping their children's well-being, achievements and prospects (Alan Johnson, Department for Education and Skills, Foreword to, Every Parent Matters 2007)

Parental interest in a child's education has four times more influence on attainment by age 16 than does socio-economic background (Alan Milburn, Unleashing aspiration: Final Report from the Panel on Fair Access 2009 p30)

Although such claims were invariably coupled with authoritative looking footnotes and references the substance and quality of the evidence cited was either distortedly over-interpreted or strikingly flimsy. Many of the attributions and citations link Chinese whisper style from policy review to policy review until their final source becomes untraceable. For example, Alan Milburn's claim that parenting is 'four times more influential than socio-economic background' was reproduced on a far reaching scale, and became a 'factoid' regularly drawn on by local and national policy makers. The stated source for the figure (another policy review) makes no mention of it and so the origins of this claim remain a mystery. Much emphasis was, and continues to be placed on Leon Feinstein's (2003) secondary analysis of the 1970s birth cohort study, which implicates social class in determining the trajectory of children's test scores from the age of 22 to 42 months. While this finding highlights the formative significance of class from a very early age any association with childrearing is purely speculative given that no measure of parenting was included in the data.

As part of a more general commitment to what was termed 'evidence based policy' New Labour initiated and encouraged a large body of research with the explicit aim of establishing links between parenting interventions and improved child outcomes. These included evaluation studies of large initiatives like Sure Start, parenting programmes and specific services<sup>3</sup>. In addition, a range of new birth cohort studies were designed to include 'measures' of parenting in order to track and link them to children's future outcomes. The results of this sustained research effort have to date proved

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<sup>3</sup> For example Family Nurse Partnerships and Family Intervention Projects)

inconclusive, and for proponents advocating parenting interventions as a pathway out of poverty, distinctly unhelpful. The introduction of Sure Start in particular was tied to grandiose promises that it would reduce poverty and social exclusion. Extensive evaluations have provided clear evidence that Sure Start benefited poor (and not so poor) families (Churchill 2011) but chronic inequality and intergenerational disadvantage remained endemic. In the wake of this realisation many branded Sure Start an expensive failure, blaming lack of engagement with the neediest parents rather than the impossibly unrealistic aims framing the scheme<sup>4</sup>.

Well established and longstanding evaluations of US parenting programmes yielded equally disappointing results for those looking to family based interventions to solve deep rooted social problems. For instance, after four decades Head Start, a model programme for the UK Sure Start initiative, could only demonstrate modest and temporary differences in children's school performance (Ellsworth and Ames 1998). Similar, transitory boost effects have been a characteristic of a wide range of US interventions (See Bruer 1999 for a detailed analysis). In addition, British cohort studies have produced mixed and contradictory analyses of the impact of parenting practices on children's outcomes across time. While some studies have sought to associate 'favourable parenting practices' with more advanced development at ages 3 and 5 (Ermisch 2008, Kelly 2011), others focusing on outcomes at age 7 demonstrate the overwhelming significance of income and maternal education above and beyond parenting styles (Dickerson and Popli 2012, Hartas 2011, Hartas 2012a). As Demitra Hartas (2012b) states, in stark contrast to prevailing policy claims:

Parents, it seems, matter most for who they are (for example, educated, capable of accessing resources and services) rather than for what they do. This is not to suggest that they shouldn't bother supporting their children's learning. Their involvement does matter, but it cannot be seen as the way to level the playing field for deprived children (3)

### *Early intervention and the scientisation of parenting*

Despite the scant evidence, depiction of disadvantage as cultural inheritance has remained a central policy tenet through a change of Government to the new Conservative led Coalition. Attempts to portray poor families as personally responsible for their own hardship have reached new extremes in the context of unprecedented cuts to welfare and public spending pursued in the name of austerity. The Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg asserted that 'parenting not poverty shapes a child's destiny'<sup>5</sup>. The Prime Minister, David Cameron expressed similar sentiments claiming 'what matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their

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<sup>4</sup>See for example, Jill Kirby: It's time for the Government to admit that Sure Start has been an expensive failure <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thecolumnists/2012/07/ts-time-for-the-government-to-admit-that-sure-start-has-been-an-expensive-failure-.html>

<sup>5</sup> Nick Clegg, Speech on Social Mobility, 18 Aug 2010. Transcript available at [www.libdems.org.uk/press\\_releases\\_detail.aspx?title=Nick\\_Clegg\\_delivers\\_speech\\_on\\_social\\_mobility&pPK=38cf9a88-0577-403e-9dcb-50b8e30ed119](http://www.libdems.org.uk/press_releases_detail.aspx?title=Nick_Clegg_delivers_speech_on_social_mobility&pPK=38cf9a88-0577-403e-9dcb-50b8e30ed119)

parenting<sup>6</sup>. Behind this overblown political rhetoric lay subtle yet significant shifts in family policy.

The spectacle of powerful, privileged, white males with public school backgrounds briskly dismissing the relevance of class in determining life chances stretched credibility and highlighted the need for a more robust hook to hang parental determinism on. More significantly, a continued troubling of families had to be articulated through the Coalition's ideological narrative stressing the need to shrink the state through increasing personal responsibility. New Labour's preoccupation with family relationships had underpinned a huge expansion of state and third sector services aiming to support parenting. The Coalition's rise to power was driven by a very different austerity agenda pursued under the pretext of a global financial crisis. Plans to slash welfare and state spending were announced immediately and much of the previous Government's investments were dismissed as wasteful, ineffective and symptomatic of a 'nanny state' degrading personal responsibility (Gillies 2012).

The Coalition Government remained invested in attributing social ills to poor parenting, but while simultaneously presiding over savage cuts to family services. To square this circle, policy makers looked to the US and an increasingly influential body of literature promoting heavily scientised interpretations of child development. In particular, it was claimed that advances in neuroscience could provide incontrovertible evidence of the formative impact of parenting in the first years after birth. This concept facilitated and bolstered a very specific focus on early years intervention as an evidenced, bounded and cost limited policy approach. Reports and reviews set about detailing the apparent physical damage inadequate parenting inflicts on infant brains, with the poorest in society implicated as most at risk (Wastell and White 2012). UK policy makers and politicians seized on this literature as hard evidence of the need to target initiatives more effectively at very deprived mothers of young children.

A government commissioned independent review into early childhood intervention conducted by Graham Allen (2011a&b) played a particularly formative role in fostering and promoting this biologised policy direction. In a series of two reports Allen details near miraculous social and economic benefits that he claims are achievable through targeting the families of socially disadvantaged under three year olds. To the fore of Allen's account is a claim that children develop faulty 'brain architecture' if they receive sub-optimal nurturing. This point is conveyed graphically, with the front cover of both his reports featuring brain scan images of children. An image branded 'normal' is placed next to a smaller atrophied brain that has been labelled 'extreme neglect'. The origins of this powerful visual statement betray the shaky grip on science displayed throughout the reports. The images, in fact, derive from an article in a short lived, scientifically dubious journal<sup>7</sup>, which considered the severe physical neglect and sensory deprivation experienced by Romanian

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<sup>6</sup> David Cameron: Supporting Families Speech  
[http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/01/David\\_Cameron\\_Supporting\\_parents.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/01/David_Cameron_Supporting_parents.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> See Wastell and White (2012) for a more detailed discussion.

orphans after the fall of the Communist Government in the late 80s. The sampled article itself is of remarkably poor quality, providing next to no details of the methodology pursued or of the clinical histories of the children scanned (Wastell and White 2012).

Leaving aside Allen's reliance on unsubstantiated research, there is no explanation of where the continuity might lie between infants experiencing malnourishment, disease and minimal human contact, and mothers failing to properly 'attune' to children's emotional needs (40). In their extensive critique of current policy directions Wastell and White (2012) carefully and systematically dismantle the claims about brain damage that pepper Allen's work, showing how he misunderstands and misrepresents the science. Nevertheless, enthusiastic endorsements of the role neuroscience can play in developing and targeting parenting interventions have profoundly impacted on the public imagination. Politicians, policy makers, health practitioners and social commentators from across the political spectrum have drawn heavily on the notion that the first 3 years represent a critical period for brain development. As the following quotes demonstrate the implications reach far beyond early years provision:

We know that there are specific changes that occur in a child's brain in the earliest years of its life that have a disproportionate impact on that child's fate; on that child's capacity to be able to make the right choices and avoid the wrong temptations' (Michael Gove,<sup>8</sup> 2011).

For far too many people in society crime began before they were born. ....neuroscience demonstrates that the damage that we start children with, is damage that they keep.... We now know that we can pretty much figure out where an 18-year-old will be at the time that they are two and a half or three years old...there are of course physical signs, including the scale and size and capacity of their brains to be able to deal with challenges  
(Ian Duncan Smith, 2010<sup>9</sup>)

Research has for decades kept proving that, by the age of three, a child's destiny is all but sealed by how much affection, conversation, reading and explaining they have received. Getting no love and no language relegates them to a lesser life. Recent research from the University of Pennsylvania scanned children's brains over 20 years and found cognitive stimulation by the age of four was the key factor in developing the cortex, predicting cognitive ability 15 years later. That shows how brief is the window of opportunity for changing lives (Polly Tonybee 2012<sup>10</sup>).

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a00199946/michael-gove-speaks-to-the-london-early-years-foundation-about-the-importance-of-early-years>

<sup>9</sup> See Speech to Centre for Social Justice – see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/09/iain-duncan-smith-childrens-brains>

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/18/tory-dogma-cut-price-baby-farming>

The sad part of the increased knowledge about baby brain development is that it is clear that the way hardwiring consolidates the connections makes it very hard to undo or "rewire" (NHS parenting program, The Solihull Approach<sup>11</sup>)

The strident tone of these claims implies the existence of a clear cut robust body of scientific evidence, belying the altogether more troubling reality. In an illuminating and detailed study John Bruer (1999, 2011) has documented the rise of such deterministic discourses in a US context, highlighting their divergence from neuroscience as an emerging discipline. As a high profile cognitive scientist, Bruer described his increasing bemusement on hearing and reading about breakthroughs in brain science that promised to revolutionise child care policy. In an effort to trace the sources of such apparent breakthroughs he found no new science, just a selective, oversimplified and over generalised re-appropriation of longstanding studies. Significantly, he reveals how such claims derived from policy and advocacy circles rather than the scientific community, largely driven by philanthropists in a well-meaning but misleading campaign to re-validate parenting support initiatives like Head Start. As Bruer notes:

Neuroscience was chosen as the scientific vehicle for the public relations campaign to promote early childhood programs more for rhetorical, than scientific reasons (Bruer 2011, 2)

The seductive allure that brain scans, can exert over the general public has been well documented, particularly in terms of the capacity of brain images to authenticate explanations that would otherwise lack plausibility (McCabe and Castel 2008, Skolnick Weisberg et al 2008). This potent effect has not been lost on UK policy makers, think tanks and voluntary organisations, with such images liberally disseminated alongside impassioned entreaties to fund early intervention. As in the US, UK neuroscientists themselves have had notably little engagement in the translation and interpretation of their work. In fact, in direct contrast to the early intervention message, advances in the field of neuroscience continue to highlight the enduring adaptability and plasticity of the brain (Royal Society, 2011a & b; Rutter, 2007).

The retreat of contemporary policy makers into biological determinism and the flagrant misuse of science this entails bears an uncomfortable but striking resemblance to the rise of eugenics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In line with the eugenics movement in its time, brain science and early intervention proponents receive much of their funding from wealthy philanthropists, regard negative traits and weakness to be rooted in the lower orders and are exerting a powerful influence over welfare and public health agendas. While brain development has replaced the concept of genetic weakness the alleged consequences of a lack of timely intervention are almost as immutable. The 'prime window' for development is estimated at 18 months (plus the prenatal

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<sup>11</sup> Solihull NHS Care Trust (2011) The Solihull Approach Resource Pack, Cambridge: Jill Rogers Associates.

period), beyond which deficits are portrayed as increasingly harder to overcome.

Yet, for the time being a heavily biologised narrative of early intervention retains a progressive aura. Positive values of social investment and moral necessity are stressed, with early intervention portrayed as an unquestionable social good. As Brid Featherstone and colleagues (forthcoming) point out critical analysis is hindered by general apprehension about the survival of state services in the context of austerity. This silence is further bolstered by the emotionally-potent vision of children as perceived victims of neglect, making early intervention difficult to question without appearing to position oneself against children's wellbeing. But while presented as a discrete, time limited inoculation against the incubation of poverty, the ideological underpinning of early intervention obscures the worsening hardship framing the lives of poor families in the current climate. Disadvantaged mothers might now receive training in parenting skills, but their prospects of securing decent housing, an income sufficient to feed their children and access to desperately needed support services diminish by the day.

#### *Responsibilising families and re-traditionalising mothers*

Policy appeals to early intervention as a concept are largely conveyed through a rhetoric of social munificence and paternalistic concern. Deserving poor families are positioned as naturally inclined to self improvement and eager to address their personal, emotional and cultural deficits. Any hint of resistance to this program of responsabilisation marks a rapid descent into moral pronouncement and authoritarian threat. With the rise of family policy under New Labour came a creeping encroachment of a criminal justice agenda (Pitts 2003). Disadvantaged families were increasingly drawn into judicial systems through the design and expansion of a range of legislative acts. Most notoriously Parenting Orders were introduced to force parents to attend classes and adhere to particular childrearing rules. In addition, record numbers of parents (mainly mothers) were prosecuted and jailed for failing to prevent their children from truanting.<sup>12</sup> A similar hardline approach is to the fore of the Coalition Government's concern with 'troubled families' as the wellspring of anti-social behaviour.

Repeated Government pledges to 'turn around' the lives of the nation's most troubled families have seen the setting up of a Troubled Families Unit and a 'national network of 'Troubled Family Trouble-Shooters' overseeing and co-ordinating interventions on a payment by results system. Struggling families are approached as if they were business units requiring rationalisation, performance management and heavy handed financial disincentives. In her first report as head of the Troubled Families Unit, Louise Casey peddled gratuitous case studies of welfare dependency and child sexual abuse as if representative of a wider 'dysfunctional' rump of troubled families, detailing immorality, incompetence, ignorance and lack of aspiration. Related policy proposals have included limiting child related benefits to two children to

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<sup>12</sup> Figures released by the Ministry of Justice following a freedom of information request in 2011 see Truancy laws caught 12,000 parents last year, The Guardian, Tuesday 8 November 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/nov/08/truancy-parents-12000-prosecutions>

ensure the poor 'cut their cloth in accordance with their capabilities and finances'<sup>13</sup> and welfare payments administered through cards that restrict purchases to so called 'priority items' to guard against the spending of public money on alcohol or cigarettes<sup>14</sup>.

A discourse of early intervention to some extent sugar coats this ruthless drive to regulate and responsiblise poor families. It goes beyond the harsh rhetoric associated with accounts of an amoral underclass to offer a government sponsored road to redemption. Disadvantaged parents are pathologised and blamed but ostensibly to receive help for the sake of their children. From this perspective only the morally reprehensible would eschew an opportunity to become a better parent and transform their children's lives. This appeal to self discipline can also be seen as marking a crucial political pivot point, marrying neoliberal sensibilities with more traditional conservatism. Libertarian values intersect with moral authoritarianism through a shared commitment to discipline the poor so they become able to embrace and manage themselves appropriately. This approach exemplifies a form of 'neoliberal paternalism' (Soss et al 2011), with good citizenship reduced to self care and individual responsibility. State involvement in the sphere of the personal is justified on the grounds of ensuring the production of competent neoliberal subjects capable of managing their freedom.

In this particular manifestation of neoliberal paternalism longstanding conservative ideals are appeased through a re-inscription of traditionalised and heavily gendered family roles. While couched in the gender neutral terminology of 'parenting' early intervention is almost exclusively targeted at mothers as the core mediators of their children's development. Old and highly contentious tenets of attachment theory are reinvoked and embellished with brain science to emphasise the primacy of mother child relationships in the early years. The gender encoding of early intervention policy has become increasingly explicit. Current initiatives are largely directed and delivered through pre and postnatal care provision in poor communities via targeted parenting education for pregnant women and new mothers. The default, language of parenting continues to frame policy literature, but now frequently gives way to female pronouns and references to mothers, while fathers feature in relation to concerns about discipline and financial maintenance (Gillies 2012).

This invocation of mothering through the gender negating language of 'parenting' results in the worst of both worlds for targeted women. Implicitly held to account for their children's development, the particular challenges and disadvantages facing them as women and mothers go unrecognised. They

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<sup>13</sup> See 'Iain Duncan Smith suggests two-child limit for benefits' The Telegraph 25 Oct 2012 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9632688/Iain-Duncan-Smith-suggests-two-child-limit-for-benefits.html>

<sup>14</sup> No booze' smart cards for benefit claimants who spend their handouts on drugs and alcohol Daily Mail 13 October 2012 <http://js.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2217101/Iain-Duncan-Smith-No-booze-smart-cards-benefit-claimants-spend-handouts-drugs-alcohol.html>

are to all intents and purposes trapped in an empty policy ethic of sameness in a context of ingrained difference and inequality (Haney 2004). The Allen review highlights the consequences of this strategic and cynical use of genderless concepts of parenting in early intervention discourses. Most notably domestic violence is listed as highly damaging to children's development, while recommended policy solutions centre exclusively on enhancing a 'parent's' sensitivity to the child. Meanwhile funding for domestic violence services have been reduced by almost a third ensuring that large numbers of women and children are now regularly turned away from refuges (Towers and Walby 2012).

### *Challenging orthodoxies: recalibrating the debate*

This chapter has offered a critical analysis of family policy as a politicised project. Pursued as part of a wider program of economic reform and sold on the ticket of individual freedom, democracy and personal empowerment, neoliberal strictures have permeated and re-ordered contemporary political thinking about families to better fit with market based ethics. The profound implications of this for children and parents have been explored to show how an apparently enlightened child centred discourse and associated championing of children's wellbeing have concealed narrow and politicised conceptions. Dominant developmental perspectives construct children as minds in the making, detachable from broader family and material circumstances, and acknowledged only through consideration of their future capacity to compete in the marketplace.

A doctrine of early intervention has grown out of this fixation with maximising human capital. Initially designed as a practical policy measure to shape and support the development of competent neoliberal subjects early intervention has come to occupy an increasingly ideological role in the context of contemporary austerity politics. Its power operates largely through reverberation of rhetoric, stressed in almost inverse proportion to actual government investment in programs and initiatives. Funding cuts and payment by results schemes have decimated a previously thriving sector of 'parenting professionals'. Early intervention as a practice is now targeted towards a very small minority of families, while the contentions and distorted science framing the doctrine are drawn on more broadly to lend credence to the responsibilisation of the poor.

This is not to underplay the significance of such approaches for those caught in the cross hairs. Punitive, almost vengeful policy approaches (fines, imprisonment, or even care proceedings) can be enacted supposedly to protect a child's psychological wellbeing and development. Crucially concern is directed at what children will become rather than what they might be experiencing in the here and now. A twisted logic that advocates the docking of family benefits for the sake of the child can be articulated through reference to future prospects and the spectre of transmitted deprivation. Similarly policy debates around child poverty now focus, not on the moral repugnance of such a vulnerable group suffering, but on the effects deprivation will have on their later life chances. Emphasis on tackling the 'causes rather than the symptoms of poverty' ensure that commitments to reduce disadvantage are deferred to

unspecified dates in the future, chiefly through the expressed intention to prevent children from making the same mistakes as their parents. The tendency to define children in relation to their futurity is not new (Lee 2002, Mayall 2002), but the conceptual dislocation of children from their existent material lives has intensified with the rise of the early intervention movement.

The automatic eliding of children's best interests with the best interests of neoliberal regimes has been particularly effective in masking the brutal impact on women and children. The last 30 years have seen levels of inequality and child poverty soar<sup>15</sup>, while the current on-going austerity drive has targeted family benefits and children's services. In the face of a ruthless program of cuts families have suffered disproportionately, with lone mothers and their children estimated to lose more than any other household type (Green 2013). At the same time, the vast majority of Parenting Orders are discharged against mothers ensuring women continue to bear the brunt of punitive sanctions designed to discipline irresponsible parents (Peters 2012). And while the language of children's rights and wellbeing decorate policy commitments, the criminalisation and incarceration of children and young people have reached staggering heights, with use of custody for ten to 14-year-olds rising by 550% since 1996 (Banardos 2008). At a more general level, children and young people are subjected to an extraordinary level of surveillance and regulation. This ranges from compulsory checks for two year olds to ensure they are developing to order, to the extensive and intrusive use of CCTV in schools

As Stuart Hall (2011) notes, this is the neoliberal engine at full throttle, despite and perhaps because of the continuing global economic crisis and subsequent discrediting of the fundamental ideas propping up economic and political orthodoxies. In the context of growing doubts about market based rationality as a governing ethic, ruling elites are increasingly blaming the faulty psychology of individuals and looking to mechanisms and technology that force people to better fit the market model (Davies 2012). Current family policy directions reflect this overextension of neoliberal apparatus, to embrace highly illiberal, coercive ideals (Parton forthcoming, Davies 2012). An advancing capitalist ethos through the 1990s appropriated and apparently championed women and children's rights, but the progressive rhetoric is fast wearing thin amid re-traditionalisation narratives, authoritarian policies and iniquitous austerity measures. New opportunities are emerging to question taken for granted conceptual frameworks and moral sensibilities. Women and children must be at the very heart of this recalibration.

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<sup>15</sup> See Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Child Poverty in the UK  
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