



## Boost your preschooler's brain power! An analysis of advice to parents from an Australian government-funded website



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### SYNOPSIS

It is argued that expectations of mothers intensified over the course of the twentieth century, culminating in an ideology of intensive mothering, which many find difficult to meet. This intensification was a natural corollary of the widening definition of a mother's responsibilities towards her child over the last century. In this paper, I examine cultural messages communicated to parents concerning their responsibility for fostering their preschool child's cognitive development through an analysis of a selection of content downloaded from an Australian government-funded parenting website. The analysis shows that the message that parents are responsible for fostering their preschool child's cognitive development pervades the analysed content. It is conveyed through the 'pedagogic discourse' of the content, by the discursive construction of parents as 'pedagogic subjects' and bolstered by the scientific framework in which the information and advice are embedded. This expectation demands intensive parenting practices, and it is directed at mothers to a far greater extent than fathers. This paper argues that early years parenting in Australia has become increasingly cognitively-focused and that the gender neutral 'parent' is subject to the expectation that she should foster her child's cognitive development in the preschool years.

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### Introduction

Few would question the assertion that parenting entails responsibilities. Yet how these responsibilities are understood and enacted are very much a matter of time and place. The social context in which parenting occurs influences roles and expectations and changes in parenting practices are reflective of broader social change (Arendell, 1997; Coltrane, 2000; Hays, 1996). Over the course of the twentieth century, the tasks and responsibilities assigned to parents have greatly expanded (Furedi, 2001; Stearns, 2003; Valentine, 2004; Williams, 2004). At the turn of the century, when infant mortality rates were high, mothers' primary responsibility was keeping children alive (Wrigley, 1989). If a mother managed to raise a healthy child, she had fulfilled her role. By the 1930s, as infant mortality rates began to fall in response to medical developments, better hygiene and nutrition (Ehrenreich & English, 2005), the emphasis shifted from infants' physical to their psychological health (Apple, 2006; Cunningham, 2006; Quirke, 2006). The

endorsement of maternal deprivation and maternal attachment theories in the 1950s and 1960s emphasised the importance of a prolonged period of infant–mother bonding to ensure optimal physical, psychological and intellectual development (Coltrane, 2000; Kociumbas, 1997), a redefinition of maternal responsibility that 'vastly increased the child's demands on the mother' (Kociumbas, 1997: 210). The expectation that parents should foster their child's early cognitive development was evident in the parenting advice literature in the 1970s and 1980s (Hardyment, 2007; Hulbert, 2004) and has further intensified since the 1990s, 'the decade of the Brain' (Bruer, 1999a: 649). Over the course of this decade, 'new' research in the field of neuroscience emphasised the importance of the early years for optimising children's cognitive development, in effect laying the foundation for future educational success (Furedi, 2001; Nadesan, 2002; Quirke, 2006; Wall, 2004).

Writing in the mid-nineties, Hays (1996) argued that intensive mothering is the dominant ideology of socially

appropriate child rearing in the United States. It holds that 'children are innocent and priceless, that their rearing should be carried out primarily by individual mothers and that it should be centred on children's needs, with methods that are informed by experts, labour-intensive and costly' (1996: 21). Contemporary literature on fatherhood also draws attention to the emergence of the engaged, active, involved father and the general consensus is that today's fathers are more involved in their children's lives than previous generations of fathers (Arendell, 1997; Glass 1998; Mannino and Deutsch 2007; Smith 2004; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Nevertheless, there is ample evidence to show that, despite the increase in maternal employment, women still shoulder the lion's share of responsibility for children (Craig, 2006; Doucet 2006; Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005; Mannino and Deutsch 2007; Monna and Gauthier 2008).

Evidence from time use studies suggests that contemporary parents are devoting more time to their children than previous generations (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Gauthier, Smeeding, & Furstenberg, 2004; Hall, 2005; Sayer et al., 2004), despite the increase in maternal employment and dual-earner households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009; Bianchi et al., 2006; Blaxland, Mullan, & Craig, 2009; Coltrane, 2000; Ehrenreich & English, 2005). This likely reflects the widening definition of parenting responsibilities and how, by the late twentieth century, definitions of 'good parenting' equated it with significant time investment in children (Craig, 2007; Furedi, 2001; Stearns, 2003; Wall, 2010). Indeed Bianchi et al. suggest that 'the amount of time necessary to produce a "good" childhood has ratcheted up tremendously' (Bianchi et al., 2006: 9). Yet despite evidence pointing to increasingly time-intensive parenting, many parents report feelings of time pressure, with many feeling that they do not spend enough time with their children (Nomaguchi et al., 2005; Tucci, Mitchell, & Goddard, 2005). So how do parents develop a sense of what 'good parenting' is and how are they prevailed upon to orient their parenting behaviour towards particular ends?

In this paper, I examine cultural messages communicated to parents (Hays, 1996; Quirke, 2006; Rutherford, 2009) that urge them to orient their parenting behaviour towards a particular end. Specifically, I focus on communications to parents that encourage them to foster their preschool child's cognitive development. I present findings of an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) of a selection of content downloaded from an Australian government-funded parenting website, the *Raising Children Network*. I will identify how 'good parenting' ideals in relation to fostering children's cognitive development in the early years are generated via this 'official' medium. This analysis seeks to shed light on how parents are prevailed upon to foster their children's early learning via these officially-endorsed texts. Among the questions I seek to answer are: Do these texts encourage parents to foster their preschool child's cognitive development? How is this incursion into the domestic realm justified and what are the likely implications of such texts for parents? Crucially, is the text gender-blind (Daly, 2013) and colluding in the denial of parenting as a gendered undertaking?

To place this analysis in context, it is one component of a broader study that sought to explore whether, why and how Australian parents try to foster their child's cognitive

development in the preschool years. It followed two lines of inquiry. The first sought to examine cultural messages communicated to parents concerning their responsibility for fostering their preschool child's cognitive development by analysing a sample of Australian parenting publications and selected content from the parenting website presented here. The second line of inquiry sought to explore whether parents have accepted responsibility for fostering their preschool child's cognitive development, how and why they enact this responsibility and the role that gender and parental resources play in their response. The methods employed to explore these questions were qualitative interviews with parents of preschool-aged children and a quantitative analysis of a nationally representative data set.

Any study of parenting and parenting behaviours must acknowledge that a multiplicity of factors shape and influence parenting attitudes and behaviours, including the market, the state, the media, peers, and parents' own experience of parenting. Yet analysing a sample of texts can give a flavour of the cultural messages and expectations directed at parents.

This paper begins by describing how and why children's cognitive development in the preschool years has become a matter of policy concern. The following section provides a description of the website and the research findings. The final section considers what this depiction of parenting means for parents and their gendered implications. The Western bias of this paper must be acknowledged as it draws primarily on literature from North America, the United Kingdom and Australia. As such, the analysis and critique are more pertinent to those countries and unlikely to reflect the diversity of parenting cultures around the world.

### **Neo-liberalism and human capital development**

As the orthodoxy guiding public policy, neo-liberalism represents 'a political-economic shift from the Keynesian national welfare state to a competition state' (Ball, 2008). It aims to reduce dependency on the state and increase reliance upon 'economies, markets, prices, money and more directly upon ourselves' (Pusey, 2003: 1). Neo-liberalism holds that the well-being of all is best advanced by the unfettered exercise of the market rather than by an interventionist, redistributive state. Features of neo-liberalism include the promotion of the market over the state, reduced government spending, privatisation, and deregulation (Harvey, 2005). The neo-liberal reframing of the role of government has served to engender new ways of thinking about the individual in society. In discouraging dependence on government, individuals are constructed as autonomous, responsible, self-actualizing citizens, and failure to succeed in the future is attributed to exercising poor choice in the present (Ball, 2008; Ican, 2009; Lingard, 2010; Maher, Fraser, & Wright, 2010; Millei & Lee, 2007; Prout, 2000; Pusey, 2003; Rose, 1996). Over the last thirty years, neo-liberalism has become the dominant ideology regulating public policy in capitalist societies and 'hegemonic as a mode of discourse' (Harvey, 2005: 3).

A strand of this neoliberal shift is the emphasis on education and human capital development as the engine for economic growth. The national significance that education has acquired over the last three decades must be understood in the context of the shift from industrial-based economies to

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