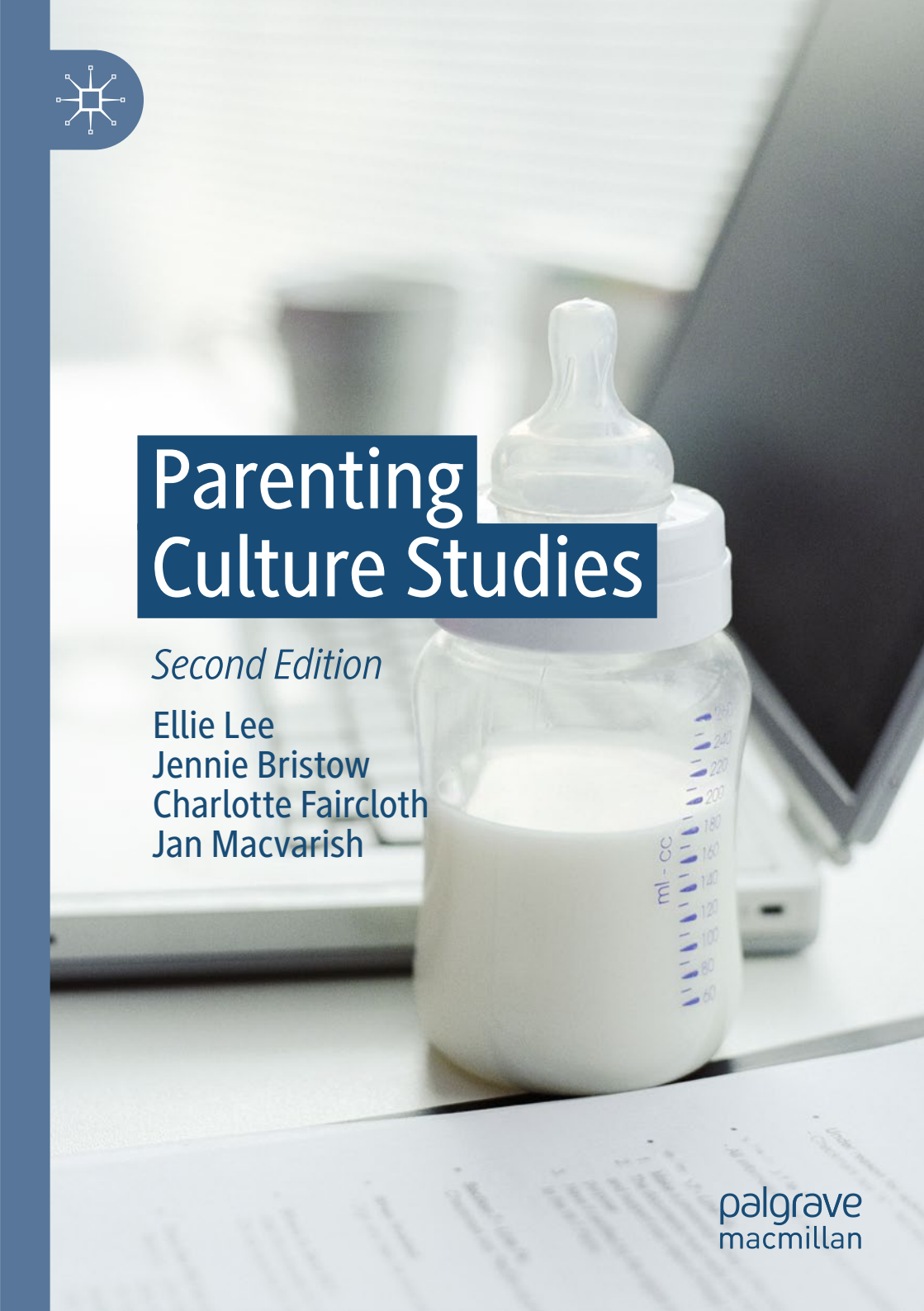

Parenting Culture Studies

Second Edition

Ellie Lee
Jennie Bristow
Charlotte Faircloth
Jan Macvarish

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In memory of our greatly missed colleagues and friends, Helen Reece (1968–2016) and Helene Guldberg (1965–2022); two of the brightest minds we had the privilege to benefit from, whose contributions we continue to draw on, and who are forever in our thoughts.

Foreword

The 2nd Edition of *Parenting Culture Studies* is published at a time when the relationship between mothers and fathers and their children has turned into a permanent subject of controversy. There is a constant proliferation of parenting styles, leading to unhelpful competition between them. Therapeutic parenting is vying with traditional parenting, while gentle parenting contrasts itself with attachment parenting. A growing obsession with parenting identity has led to the emergence of a confusing taxonomy of parenting styles such as High Achievement, Disciplined, Free-Range, Child-Led, Helicopter, New Age, strict, and so on.

The unprecedented significance attached to parental styles and identity is fuelled by the growing tendency to politicize child-rearing. Western culture attaches such significance to parenting because it is represented as the source of virtually every social problem that afflicts our communities. Poor parenting, or the absence of so-called parenting skills, is held responsible for the cultivation of dysfunctional children who in turn become maladjusted grown-ups. From this fatalistic perspective, the 'parenting deficit' is blamed for children's mental health problems, educational difficulties, anti-social behaviour, and poor coping skills, and the destructive consequences of bad parenting last throughout a person's life. According to the wisdom that prevails amongst policymakers and experts, everything from crime and drug addiction to teenage pregnancy and self-harm can be traced back to the way that mothers and fathers brought up their children.

Alarmist accounts of parental failure leading to the radicalization of youngsters and an outburst of anti-social behaviour have become a regular theme promoted in popular culture, and not just in popular culture. When France descended into a state of violent riots and civil conflict in June 2023, President Emmanuel Macron reminded the nation's mothers and fathers that it is 'the responsibility of parents to keep them at home'. He added that 'it's not the state's job to act in their place' (*The Local*, 2023).

As it happens, public authorities continually query the ability of parents to act responsibly without their assistance. From the standpoint of public policy, parenting has mutated into a skill, which is best learned through the medium of training and expertise. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s campaign titled 'Parenting Is Also Learned' offers a paradigm where mothers and fathers are expected to follow the wisdom of professional parenting expertise (UNICEF, 2018). Typically, these campaigns are in the business of raising the awareness of parents. In the relation between the awareness raisers and their target audience, the parents are reduced to the role of social inferiors.

Expert authority justifies its intervention in the field of child-rearing on the grounds that it provides the intellectual and moral resources for the exercise of responsible parenting. Like Macron, it believes that irresponsible or illiterate parenting is the source of many of society's ills. UNICEF and numerous awareness-raising campaigns insist that it is never too early to rely on expert wisdom to influence the life of a child. They believe that unless from birth children are reared in accordance with expert advice, there is a risk that their development will be compromised. This outlook—best characterized as parental determinism—constitutes the dominant theme of professional expert advice.

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

The pathologizing of parenting should not be construed as merely the secular variant of a very old religious theme. God's warning was addressed to those fathers and mothers who actually committed a sin. In present times, it is not just a small group of irresponsible mothers and fathers who

are seen to constitute a problem, but *all* parents. In its pure form, the condemnation of the parent as a problem was first crystallized in the writing of eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's belief that people had to be saved from the detrimental effects of customs and traditions underlay his hostility to the authority of the father and the mother, for 'parents are the agents who transmit false traditions and habits from one generation to the next' (Shklar, 1987, p. 170).

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

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

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

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

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

The chapters in this book provide an innovative approach towards the conceptualization of what is distinctive about contemporary parenting culture. Their arguments suggest that this issue is too important to be monopolized by one academic discipline. Since the publication of the 1st Edition of *Parenting Culture Studies*, the approach outlined in these essays has had a significant impact on scholarly literature on child-rearing. Readers will see that the chapters published in this edition take forward the insights of this exciting field of scholarship.

Professor Emeritus
University of Kent

Frank Furedi

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Ellie Lee is Professor of Family and Parenting Research and the director of the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies at the University of Kent, where she has worked for two decades.

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PART I

Parenting Culture

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Ellie Lee

The origins of this second edition of *Parenting Culture Studies* go back to the mid-2000s when Charlotte Faircloth and I became involved in research projects about a very necessary but ostensibly mundane aspect of being a parent: feeding babies. Back then, we both spent time interviewing and talking with mothers, and reading and reviewing existing research from disciplines including sociology, political science, anthropology, philosophy, and history. We wrote up and published our work (Faircloth, 2010, 2013; Lee, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2011; Lee & Bristow, 2009) and developed an active dialogue with colleagues doing similar research to our own (Blum, 1999; Knaak, 2005, 2006, 2010; Murphy, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2004; Wall, 2001; Wolf, 2007, 2011). We also discussed our research in many non-academic forums, with healthcare providers, advocacy groups, in newspapers, and in TV and radio debates. These were typical comments sent to us, in response to observations we made:

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

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> I am a mother of a seven-month-old and I have chosen to formula feed. I have been amazed at the amount of pressure placed on women to breast-feed. In the early days following my daughter's birth, I felt under a huge amount of pressure to attempt breastfeeding at a time when I was too tired and emotionally vulnerable to protest. (Sabina)

Historical studies indicate that how babies are fed has long been construed a matter of public debate and public interest. Yet, as the accounts from Sabina and Emily showed us, mothers in the twenty-first century can experience feeling a remarkable level of pressure around how they feed their babies, and in turn report a strong sense of having to 'explain' or 'account' for their decisions and actions. Sabina found there was manifest 'pressure to breastfeed' and Emily found herself needing to 'account' repeatedly for what she ended up doing, when she found breastfeeding did not work out. Both these women indicated they experienced not breastfeeding as a measure of failure; indeed, Emily stated she had to 'give an excuse … as to why I *failed my daughter*'. The socio-cultural environment in which babies are cared for, this suggests, is one in which the relation between maternal success, failure, and how a baby is fed is deemed to be a direct one. These women's accounts also show public surveillance and monitoring of maternal decisions has not receded in the twenty-first century, regardless of drastic declines in infant mortality and morbidity associated with very early childhood in the past. This monitoring strongly influences the formation of their experience and identity.

As we indicate in other parts of this book, feeding babies has also become connected to an ever-widening set of claims about children's 'success' or 'failure', which make what parents do determinant for 'outcomes'. For example, the biological core of a person—their brain—has come to be viewed as profoundly and directly impacted by the way that person was fed as a baby (O'Connor & Joffe, 2013). Since the first edition of this book was published a decade ago, the feeding of young babies has subsequently become absorbed in the UK as one component of a politically dominant and largely unchallenged framework for parenting termed '1001 Critical Days'.

According to this framework, it has been proven by science that the 1001 days from conception to a child's second birthday are 'critical' for future mental and physical health, and so the prevention of social problems. This means, 'Two is Too Late!' (Leadsom, 2021, p. 5). Members of the British monarchy led by the Princess of Wales, Kate Middleton, have, through The Royal Foundation, increasingly taken on a leadership role in

this area. The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood was launched in 2021 to 'drive awareness of and action on the extraordinary impact of the early years, in order to transform society for the future' (Royal Foundation, n.d.). 'Big Change Starts Small, We're on a Mission to Transform Society Through Early Childhood' declares the homepage of the Centre (Centre for Early Childhood, n.d.).

As Jan Macvarish has argued, key to this mission of 'raising awareness' is addressing the perceived deficit in parental recognition that what happens in the early years is more important than anything else. As she indicates, however, despite its cheery presentation, this mission constitutes a rejection of parents' sense that 'the quality of schools, opportunities for employment, the housing market, bad luck, and many, many other factors shape our lives far more than how many nursery rhymes we were sung at six months' and, inevitably, 'rather than offering parents respite from external judgement… [encourages] more of it' (Macvarish, 2020).

Research also shows, however, that even ostensibly 'doing the right thing' as an 'aware parent' does not necessarily offer protection from the monitoring and surveillance associated with this powerful emphasis on the causality of parenting in the development in individual and social dysfunction. The accounts from women who did not breastfeed, above, bring to light something of the way the mantra that characterizes official views—that 'breast is best'—works itself out. Yet *breastfeeding* (especially if a mother decides to carry on giving her baby milk this way for a lengthy time) can *also* be viewed as a matter of concern for others (Faircloth, 2013). Far from being an 'expert-free cultural space', this way of feeding a baby is medicalized and professionalized (Avishai, 2007, p. 27). A professional sector, that of the 'lactation specialist', emerged over the late twentieth century with its own publications, 'academic' journals, and claims to be heard by both policymakers and parents, on the grounds that there is such a thing as breastfeeding expertise.

The conclusions we drew from our research experiences two decades ago informed the central propositions of this book as it first appeared in 2014, and continue to, in this second edition. These can be summarized as follows:

- Parental action and behaviour, in everyday, ordinary life, is considered to have a determining, causal impact on a child's future happiness, healthiness, and success; in the twenty-first century, 'parental determinism' is very strong.

- We live at a time when parents will inevitably be informed, more or less explicitly, that they need to understand that what they do as parents is far more complicated than they might imagine, and they need to be made more aware, educated, and trained to understand this.
- The dominant message communicated to mothers and fathers is that the health, welfare, and success (or lack of it) of their children can be directly attributed to the decisions they make about matters like feeding their children; 'parenting', parents are told, is both the hardest and most important job in the world. Tomorrow depends on it.
- The formation of parental identity is strongly influenced by parental determinism, with important, negative, effects for the conduct of the vitally important task of raising new generations.

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

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

Studies by engaging and debating with academics from other disciplines, such as the philosophy of education, anthropology, psychology, law, and history, and from countries other than England. We hope that is reflected in what you read here.

Second, a key challenge is to develop the best understanding we can of the relationship between continuity and change. The proposition that the sociocultural context in which parents raise their children has changed in recent decades seems, to us, to be strongly supported by the evidence. For example, as we discuss below, a distinct and specific terminology is now used to discuss (and make problematic) what parents do, and this is most clear in the way that raising children is now called 'parenting'. The verb 'to parent' is itself relatively new, and Fig. 1.1 below shows how interest in this new practice of 'parenting' escalated from around 1970.

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

Fig. 1.1 Books about parenting, 1900–2019. (Note: Graph generated by Google Books Ngram viewer)

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

There are three related ideas that, in the view of the authors of this book, emerge from *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* and *Paranoid Parenting* as especially important, and the chapters that follow engage with them in different ways. One is the **historical specificity** of contemporary parenting culture; 'intensive motherhood' or 'paranoid parenting' are contemporary phenomena. While their history can be traced, and their roots and antecedents identified, they constitute a novel cultural development. The second is the usefulness of the concept **risk consciousness** for understanding the development of parental determinism. The third idea is the emphasis that Hays and Furedi place on viewing 'parenting' (in its 'intensive' or 'paranoid' form) as **socially constructed**. Later chapters explore these ideas. This new edition includes a new set of chapters, in which we report our research and discuss our observations on the workings of parenting culture in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the rest of this Introduction, we offer some preliminary comments to highlight the core themes of the book.

'Parenting': What's New?

It becomes quickly apparent to those who start to research the way any routine aspect of bringing up children is now talked about that a particular language is used to describe these activities. Central to this language is the term 'parenting'. There are 'parenting manuals', 'parenting guides', 'parenting classes', and 'parenting education' that all purport to be able to

improve matters in this area of the everyday life of parents (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Furedi, 2008). The same is true for every aspect of raising a child. Feeding children, talking to them, sleeping with (or separate from) them, and even playing with children have become areas of action subsumed under the overall umbrella term 'parenting', and there is 'parenting advice' relating to all of them. If one looks, for example, at the question of how to discipline children, it will become clear this is rarely discussed as a community task or the responsibility of adult society as a whole, whereby adults in general need to take on the demanding responsibility of working out what the role of discipline might be, as part of what it means to 'grow up'. Rather, discipline is discussed as a 'parenting strategy' in which parents develop 'skills' often expressed in the advocacy of the techniques of 'positive parenting' as the ideal 'parenting style' (Daly, 2013; Reece, 2013).

A central source of scholarship for Parenting Cultures Studies is that which has made efforts to understand the development of the terminology 'parenting', and so make better sense of the intense preoccupation with causality, and the perceived problem of parental behaviour and the need to change it. In the first instance *Paranoid Parenting* provides us with this account:

> Child-rearing is not the same as parenting. In most human societies there is no distinct activity that today we associate with the term *parenting*. In agricultural societies, children are expected to participate in the work and routine of the community and are not regarded as requiring special parenting attention or care … The belief that children require special care and attention evolved alongside the conviction that what adults did mattered to their development. These sentiments gained strength and began to influence public opinion in the nineteenth century. The work of mothering and fathering was now endowed with profound importance. It became defined as a distinct skill that could assure the development of character traits necessary for a successful life … Once children are seen as the responsibility of a mother and father rather than of a larger community the modern view of parenting acquires salience. (Furedi, 2002, p. 106)

From this point of view, a trajectory towards placing particular significance on the role and contribution of *the parent*, using their 'skills' to ensure a child's 'successful life', has a long history. It is at least as old as industrialization and, as Hays (1996) details, it may be considered that the basis for contemporary parenting culture lies in the working through of

the separation of 'the family' from the wider economy and society. However, despite its long history, it is also recognized that 'parenting' has acquired specific connotations more recently. 'Whoever invented the term *parenting* was not primarily interested in the lives of children', notes Furedi. 'Until recently, the term *to parent* referred exclusively to the act of begetting a child. Today it is deployed to describe the behaviour of mothers and fathers' (Furedi, 2002, p. 197). It is this more recent turn towards an *explicit focus on the parent and their behaviour* that emerges as the general, distinctive attribute of the contemporary term 'parenting' and the determinism it brings with it.

In the two decades since the initial publication of *Paranoid Parenting*, research efforts have grown that look into the meaning of the words that are now used so commonly to refer to (and make problematic) what parents do (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012; McDermott, 2020). The history of the term has been explored; Faircloth (2013) suggest that 'parenting' as a term became widely used first in specific fields—for example, by psychologists and self-help practitioners—from the 1950s. It would seem, however, as we indicated above, that its popularization into more everyday language (for example, in titles of mass-market books) took place a little later. McDermott, in her account of the development of 'Parenting' in the USA, suggests it was in the 1970s that the use of the word first became common, and entered the everyday life of parents. Her research found it was a Dr Fitzhugh Dodson 'who coined the verb "to parent" in his childrearing manual *How to Parent*' (2020, p. 3).

An interesting contribution from Smith, whose research focus is explicitly on 'changes in language', concurred that '[t]o "parent" as a verb and the idea of parenting are relatively recent arrivals', with 'an explosion' in use from the 'early and mid-1970s' (Smith, 2010, p. 360). Smith also comments on the changing *meaning* of the term. Much older uses of the term 'parenting', he contends, came to give way by the last quarter of the twentieth century to a view that 'parenting' is a 'technical' matter which can therefore be generalized (rather than a personal relationship, by definition not appropriately subjected to technical criteria). Additionally, notes Smith, '*parenting* does not tend to depict the relationship with one's child as an easy or comfortable one' (2010, p. 360, emphasis in original). This suggests that from the outset, the term 'parenting', when used widely, has been associated with the view that parent–child relationships are problematic or deficient. It is, notes Smith, conceived of, 'as a dour business, and in which experts … have a proper role' (2010, p. 360).

By looking at the language of 'parenting', a picture emerges of a growing momentum from the 1970s onwards towards the targeting of *parental behaviour* as deficient and also 'parenting' as something of a joyless task or 'job', to be conducted under the watchful gaze of experts. As well as being inherently bound up with the idea of a *deficit* in parental behaviour that must be addressed if children are to succeed, studies of 'parenting' also thus indicate this term is inherently bound up with the idea that *people other than parents* have special insights that can and should be brought to bear. Indeed, one of the dominant observations from studies is that 'parenting' is now viewed as an activity that cannot be effectively carried out 'naturally'.

'(Good) parenting' is, in contrast, considered to be a form of learned interaction, widely discussed as a 'skill set'. In their contribution exploring what it means to view parents as 'educators' of their children, Ramaekers and Suissa thus persuasively identified the way that 'parents are expected … to do things with their children that are in a very specific sense goal-oriented' (2011, p. 198). In this sense, the parent today is not a person who, in their informal, everyday interaction with their child, teaches and guides the child about the world, on the basis of their own experience. Rather, the idea of 'education' associated with 'parenting' is a far more formal one, coming from the outside; indeed, argue these authors, it has become 'something that parents can (and should) do on the basis of scientific research' (2011, p. 199).

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

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

As we noted earlier, 'positive parenting' is the approach validated by parenting experts and policy makers as the means to address perceived deficits, and its advocates are focused primarily on changing parental attitudes and behaviour. For some, this project of behaviour change to ensure parents become skilled-up, 'positive' ones, includes advocacy of use of the criminal law against parents, impelled by an especially strong version of parental determinism. Indicative of this shift, new laws have been introduced in Scotland and Wales since the first edition of this book was published, with the police now expected to bring criminal charges against parents in these countries found to have smacked (spanked) a child. Such laws are predicated on the idea that any smacking should be considered antithetical to 'positive parenting' and as a form of intolerable violence. Very strong opinion is expressed on the allegedly causal relation between smacking and future mental illness and other serious pathologies and disadvantages.

In this aspect of parenting culture there is, however, a noteworthy absence of discussion among those advocating for criminalizing parents about the views of the architect of the concept 'parenting style' in the first place. This was the American psychologist Diana Baumrind who developed the widely cited typology of 'permissive', 'authoritative', and 'authoritarian' to capture significant components of parent–child interaction. Baumrind was intently concerned with the discipline as part of her efforts to capture and express a humanistic view about effect child-rearing. She wrote a series of contributions about 'aversive discipline', including smacking /spanking, during her lengthy career, as part of her exploration of 'parenting styles'. In contrast to those who express such strong certainty about classifying all smacking as violence, and about the deterministic relation between this form of discipline and serious harm to health and welfare, Baumrind was far more circumspect. While she was no advocate of smacking, she was concerned about the veracity of claims made against it, and in turn for the use of State power to discipline parents.

Central to Baumrind's approach was a strong emphasis on recognizing complexity in factors that shape 'outcomes' for children. She argued that any form of punishment 'is intended to be aversive', 'will have costs and benefits' (2001, p. 13), but if it is accepted that adult responsibility for children encompasses discipline, then physical punishment may be part of it, for some parents, in some contexts. Given this, there must be 'Necessary Distinctions' (1997) made in any reasonable discussion about punishment, for example, between beating, kicking, and punching as abusive physical punishment, and controlled, calm use of a smack, in a context of

cultural norms shared between adults and children. She explained that, 'A Blanket Injunction Against Disciplinary Use of Spanking Is Not Warranted by the Data' (1996). Perhaps most importantly of all, she continually emphasized the need for careful thinking about the relation between the State, law, and parents, arguing:

> Parents in a democratic society rear their offspring with different values and perspectives that ensure desirable diversity in childrearing goals and outcomes. The state has significant interests in the well-being of its youth, but in the absence of compelling evidence that socially approved practices have harmful effects, it promotes children's welfare by respecting family privacy and parental autonomy in childrearing decisions. (2001, p. 12)

Policy makers, and advocates of use of criminal sanctions against parents, continue to make use of the concept 'parenting styles'. Yet they simultaneously disregard and relegate this argument central to it, about the significance for the welfare of children of 'family privacy' and 'parental autonomy'. It is not necessary to advocate for or against specific disciplinary practices to acknowledge the troubling strength of parental determinism over policy making circles this reflects and worry about the impact on child-rearing, including for children, when parental authority is so easily set aside.

The key proposition to emerge from this preliminary assessment is that we can be sure that 'parenting' is not a neutral term to describe what parents do as they raise their children. Rather, the transformation of the noun 'parent' into the verb 'parenting' has taken place through a sociocultural process centring on the belief that 'parenting' is a highly problematic sphere of social life; indeed, 'parenting' is almost always discussed as a social problem and in some way blamed for social ills. In turn, 'parenting culture' can be summarized to mean the more or less formalized rules and codes of conduct that have emerged over recent years which reflect this deterministic view of parents and define expectations about how a parent should raise their child.

Risk Culture and Risk Consciousness

The emergence of 'parenting' as described above has thus become a growing focus for scholarship. The chapters in Part I of this book detail further what emerges from research about central aspects of this process. Questions frequently asked by students about the insights of this scholarship are:

How did this happen? Why has the work of bringing up and raising children come to be redefined as 'parenting'? Before moving on, we now offer some general answers to these questions to situate what comes next.

A feature of some of the work that analyses parental determinism is its use of 'risk' as a core concept to understand the rise of this way of thinking. 'Risk' is an underlying concept in *Paranoid Parenting* (a book that forms one of a series of studies by Furedi about the workings of risk culture; see Furedi, 1997, 2005, 2007, 2014). The concept of risk is also central to books about specific topics that have been influential to our thinking. These include, for example, Armstrong's study of the regulation of alcohol consumption in pregnancy (2003), Lupton's work on the monitoring of pregnant women (1999a, 2013a, 2013b), and Wolf's critique of the 'breast is best' discourse (2011). Scholarship about 'risk' has noted, however, that this is a concept that is understood and conceptualized in the vast literature that uses the term in different and contradictory ways (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 1999b). The approach that informs the arguments set out in this book draws on a perspective that is concerned primarily with a *consciousness of risk*, and we now summarize briefly what 'risk consciousness' means. We set out four features of this way of understanding 'risk' and then return to them through the book, through our arguments about contemporary parenting culture, and also about parenting culture and the pandemic.

Risk as Untoward Possibility not Probability

Analysis of risk consciousness begins with the observation that there is an important difference between what 'risk' has meant at previous points in history and what it comes to mean in the present. Fox outlines the shift as follows:

> Before the era of modernity, *risk* was a neutral term, concerned merely with probabilities, with losses and gains. A gamble and/or endeavor that was associated with high risk meant simply that there was great potential for significant loss or significant reward. However, in the modern period, *risk* has been co-opted as a term reserved for a negative or undesirable outcome, and as such, is synonymous with the terms *danger* or *hazard*. (Fox, 1999, p. 12, emphasis in original)

The meaning ascribed to the term 'risk' today, then, is different to the past. Where it once meant 'probability' understood via calculation to

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

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

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

The focus on speculative threats—the 'what ifs' of everyday life—has had a significant impact on the way that children, and also fetuses, are now perceived. Both children and 'pre children' are, we suggest through this book, more and more defined as *de facto* 'at risk', but what exactly the 'risk' *is*, is often admitted as being uncertain or unknown. It is a 'worst case scenario', a possibility rather than a probability. Yet 'risks' of these kinds exert powerful influence over all discussions about childhood and children, from pregnancy behaviour to children's play, to the interaction between adults and children within local communities, and of course in influencing responses to Covid-19. This perception of risk as applied to children also forms a key underpinning of the redefinition of the parent as determinant of the future well-being of the child; indeed what arises from it is the construction of the parent as a *manager of risk*, who has in their power the ability to decide the fate of the child according to how well they perform this task (an idea that we dwell upon throughout this text).

Risk as Free-Floating Anxiety

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

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

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

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

As we detail further in Chap. 2, the meaning of parenthood is reworked through the re-redefinition of the child as 'at risk' in this generalized way; 'Parenting', with its deterministic connotations, is the outcome of this inflation of risk.