BOOK REVIEW

Anti-social socialization of the middle class?

McDermott, N. A. (2020). The Problem with Parenting: How Raising Children is Changing Across America. Praeger

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Intensive parenting as a childrearing strategy and practice has gained territory in families of the Western world in recent decades and its ideologies have infiltrated popular culture and social policies. It has received an unprecedented amount of journalistic as well as academic attention. Nevertheless, little do we know about how these social practices and underlying ideologies are shaping the generations of children who are experiencing them (see, e.g., Schiffrin et al., 2014; Yerkes, et al., 2021). We know even less about how, in consequence, intensive parenting may influence the societies these children shall later inhabit as adults. Nancy McDermott's *The Problem with Parenting* teases apart these recent childrearing practices that form a characteristic pattern she refers to as 'Parenting', with a capital P. The author traces how they have emerged in response to subsequent turning points in the development of the American (middle-class) family and how they have become woven into the fabric of late twentieth and early twenty-first century American (and Western middle-, and upper-middle class) society.

McDermott is a long-time affiliate of the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies at the University of Kent, an interdisciplinary unit that integrates fellows from the fields of sociology, social policy, social research, and psychology. The author has been actively involved in creating and advising Park Slope Parents, an online parents' community in Brooklyn, New York. Park Slope Parents has become a hub for thematizing challenges raised by contemporary childrearing and has provided a rich empirical basis of qualitative information for McDermott's attempt to assess the roots of parents' experiences and anxieties in the US.

The author defines 'Parenting' with a capital p as 'the peculiar ways in which Americans raise their children today' (p. 5). She argues that modern parenting is fundamentally different to the childrearing of the past, and that it emerged spontaneously out of family instability in the 1970s, at a time when the so-called therapeutic values of personal fulfilment and self-actualization replaced more communal values of earlier eras. As parents are unwilling or unable to make children follow social rules, an entitled, narcissistic generation has emerged. McDermott considers this shift 'a decisive break from the values and institutions of modernity – one that occurred so stealthily that we are hardly aware of it' (p. XI), suggesting also that 'the entitled Millennial threatens democracy' (p. 6).

The book employs the term 'Parenting' to refer to a specific, new mode of children's socialization in the US. McDermott attributes the original coinage of the verb 'to parent' to a 1970 parents' how-to manual authored by Fitzhugh Dodson to mean 'raising a child as a parent'. McDermott amplified the meaning of the expression by tying it to a pattern of parental behavior well-defined in time and space (the 2000s and 2010s, the US urban upper-middle class). As easy to understand and inspirational a word as it is, her usage could be misleading from an academic perspective. One may wonder whether parenting as a term and an academic notion has legitimacy in the scientific field as it has become too value-laden to be a useful analytical tool. *The Problem with Parenting* is not intended for a strictly academic audience; it targets a wider, more general readership. At the same time, McDermott's insights into the problems generated by contemporary American parental behavior raise awareness of and reflection on social phenomena perceived by parents as natural. Her work seeks to find answers to the following questions. What are the new values of contemporary parenting? How are they reproduced in people's private lives? What institutional changes perpetuate and reinforce this type of childrearing? And finally, and very importantly, how is the new style of parenting changing society?

Her volume comprises eight chapters organized in two thematic blocks, completed by conclusions and an index. The first four essays define the social phenomenon McDermott labels 'Parenting'. The four essays in the second part of the book scrutinize conflictual problem areas related to the excesses of intensive parenting in the US.

In Chapter One, McDermott grounds her central argument as she traces the emergence of parenting through changes and important turning points in the development of American marriage and family from the 1950s. Taking the bourgeois family as point of comparison, she argues that, historically, raising children was built into the fabric of family life. She describes the American family of the 1950s as a product of disillusionment with traditional American and mostly religious values, characterized by a lack of a sense of belonging. The chapter emphasizes that the classic balance between individualism, freedom, and civic responsibility receded as the post-war family began to embrace the more therapeutic pursuit of self-fulfillment, a shift in mentality that occurred between 1957–1976. The 1960s' counterculture set the scene for the emergence of 'Parenting', as Boomers' primary concern became the experience of rebellion. McDermott points out that social norms were not communicated to Boomers' children, and that the latter's parents' casual indifference and incomprehension of children's needs set the scene for the emergence of intensive parenting. She notes that contraceptive pills, the legalization of abortion, and the liberalization of sex complemented by women's increasing employment and rising divorce rates contributed to family instability. By the 1980s a change of spirit had occurred in the family. Families were not as much organized around the needs of children as before; instead, they became reoriented around the happiness and fulfilment of adults.

One of the gravest propositions in McDermott's work is argued in the second chapter on the impact of excessive intensive parenting on children's socialization. According to her, this disrupts the natural process of socialization, as children do not learn to negotiate social situations by themselves. The chapter identifies four main areas of impact: Millennials' reluctance to assume the responsibility of becoming a parent; their reliance on expert advice in all personal matters (including a spirited section on the role of life coaches); their ambivalent attitude to gender (discussed in detail in Chapter Seven); and their treatment of intimacy as risk. To argue the last point, she elaborates on thought-provoking examples, such as the phenomenon of 'backward dating'.

Chapter Three draws attention to the changing notions and definition of family in contemporary American society. It emphasizes that until recently all forms of family were associated with children. Recently, it has been generational belonging that influences one's notion of family in the US. While the over-64 age group ('Exclusivists') tend to identify family with legally married heterosexual couples with children, the 'Moderate' 30-64-year-old age group accepts same-sex and cohabiting couples with the possibility of having children as family. For the under-thirty entitled Millennial generation, referred to as the 'Inclusivists', a feeling of belonging and the quality of emotional relationships are the primary components of a family. The final chapter on the new rules of parenting culture in the first thematic bloc revisits fundamental traits hinted at previously. Parenting culture as discussed by Nancy McDermott cultivates the suspicion and hostility towards pre-existing social norms and replaces them with new therapeutic norms grounded in science. It prioritizes expert opinion over intimate knowledge and intuition and provides children with curated instead of unstructured experiences. And finally, it validates children's sense of self over other aspects of socialization.

The second part of McDermott's book contains four individual essays on heated topics related to parenting culture: pregnancy, infant feeding, gender-neutral parenting, and a comparison of an extreme intensive parenting style called 'helicopter parenting' and a contrasting parental movement labelled 'free-range parenting'. Chapter Five connects the medical discovery of fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) with the transformation of notions related to pregnancy. It convincingly demonstrates that, besides being a real phenomenon, a preoccupation with FAS can be interpreted as the medicalization of social anxiety about whether parents can be trusted to care for their children. Chapter Six scrutinizes the moralization of fetishized infant feeding and follows how women's personal preference for breastfeeding in the 1970s evolved into militant breastfeeding activism ('lactivism') by the 2000s. Chapter Seven scrutinizes gender-neutral parenting as a style that is gaining momentum, and its fight against social norms. McDermott argues that the elimination of gender as a social category is transforming American society in unforeseen ways. The last chapter studies parental movements that have emerged as a critical reaction to the negative consequences of excessively intensive parenting, and its underlying system of values.

To sum up, *The Problem with Parenting* puts forward a series of bold and intriguing hypotheses. The author proposes a connection between the excesses of intensive parenting and the rejection of parenthood among young American people, many of whom regard this as a selfish choice at a time when marriage is seen as a route to self-actualization. She also argues that it has been parents' urging of children to 'be themselves' that has generated hostility to social norms and values associated with the past. One of her examples of this is 'gender-neutral parenting', which aims to deemphasize gender, thereby allowing children to choose their own, free from social pressure. McDermott also claims that the suspicion of social norms that have lost much of their ability to govern relationships has led to their replacement by bureaucratically imposed rules. She emphasizes that this mode of socializing a new generation affects how Americans think about childhood, adulthood, and the relationship between the individual and society.

Nancy McDermott has drawn on her personal experience with Park Slope Parents' community; she refers to content produced by journalists when reflecting on problems inherent to the new phenomenon of 'parenting'; and she has made ample use of the academic results of social-science scholarship. The book's thesis follows a plausible line of argumentation with the clear agenda of raising awareness about the new American way of bringing up

children and understanding where it comes from. McDermott's assessment of the development- and value-related changes associated with the American family and the changing goals of parental socialization outline the genesis of intensive parenting set against a backdrop of the therapeutic culture of the last couple of decades.

The volume focuses on parental practices that have emerged in the US, and McDermott shows convincingly how deeply embedded these are in the nation's social history. Nevertheless, excessive forms of intensive parenting have appeared outside the North American continent, too, suggesting the presence of global trends in childrearing practices and ideologies.

Little attention is given in the volume to the variation in this pattern of behavior according to social class or ethnocultural background. Class as a factor that influences attitudes to becoming a parent is discussed in the chapter on socialization; otherwise, it is missing from the discussion. It is important to point out that the book's perspective on intensive parenting is primarily one of the east-coast upper-middle class – a very influential position with a strong mediatized presence. Casual mentions of the role of sociocultural factors in childrearing practices are present, giving the impression that the costly exercise of upper middle-class parenting exists among all social groups in the US.

The Problem with Parenting uses simple language that will make its popular science easy to read and understand for a wide audience. The author has made a few concessions to academic referencing and includes simplified statements that may have needed further support in the text. Nevertheless, Nancy McDermott's bold argument is sharp and thought-provoking, and her hypotheses will likely challenge family scholars. Throughout the book, she handles complex and extensive phenomena and aims at drawing a big picture of how American parenting has changed during the last 40 years, and how it is changing American society.

Nóra Kovács

[nora.kovacs@tk.hu]
(Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest)

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