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## Meaning in Parenting and Why it Matters

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# Meaning in Parenting and Why it Matters

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## Abstract

The central premise of this article is that parental choices are influenced by economic factors and associated cultural values. Intensive parenting repertoires such as helicopter parenting have come to the fore as social mobility has stalled and economic pressures resulting from neo liberal policies have increased. As a result child rearing has become more of a technical craft than a fulfilling act. Seeking a meritocratic bulwark against increasing inequality parenting has been recast as a technocratic approach to the rearing of successful offspring. Investing in children has become more technical and politicised in order to meet the demands of globalisation. This chapter provides a road map for a realignment of child rearing practices directed towards sustaining the value of parenting as a common good and a source of wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Parenting, Fulfilment, Merit, Sustainable parenting

## Introduction

Many parents are struggling with a new reality. It is clear that the two long years of Covid restrictions and anxieties have had a detrimental impact on parental wellbeing. For each and every one of us parental wellbeing matters because upbringing and family life shapes us and our connections with wider society. This article considers how social pressures, rising costs, commodification and the pandemic are negatively impacting on parental wellbeing and crowding out many of the motives and reasons that make parenting an attractive life choice (Corfe and Bhattacharya, 2021). Parents actively engage in projects of worth which are of benefit to children, communities and wider society. They are occupied with doing things that they love and that are of value in an independent way.

While the importance of parenting is clearly recognized by most people the incentives constraints, and sense of personal satisfaction that influence and reward parenting behaviour are not so clearly understood.

This paper considers how parents can live meaningful fulfilled lives now and into the future.

It begins with a discussion on how changing political realities, their accompanying cultural shifts and economic consequences have impacted on parenting practices and beliefs. Economic conditions, how equal or unequal a society is, have an important impact on parenting practices and on what is regarded as good parenting (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019). Beginning in the 1970s and at an accelerating rate thereafter, as inequality has grown, the dominant ideas and

social norms about good parenting found expression in a new model of intensive child rearing based on a modified authoritative parenting approach (Putnam, 2015). The predominant use by parents of promotive strategies to ensure that their offspring have competitive advantage in an uncertain and unequal world, are manifested through increased parental investment in education, recreation and the acquisition of cultural capital.

These strategies are powerfully consequential when it comes to the achievement of parental fulfilment. Parenting fulfilment can no longer be taken for granted when positive child rearing becomes synonymous with increasing parental investment in meritocratic projects in order to offset the negative consequences of stalled social mobility and rising inequality. Under these circumstances parents compromise their status as socially valued custodians of the next generation. Instead they rely on instrumental parenting practices, which sustain inequality, erode solidarity between families and narrow the social space available for community engagement, to further their children's success in life. The article concludes with suggestions on how meaning and fulfilment can be restored to parenting through a re-valuing of work, revitalisation of the education system and a re-purposing of parenting support programmes.

### **Parenting Choices**

Parenting style, a developmental psychology concept referring to the approach adopted by parents to raising their children, is informed by what kind of skills, competencies and attributes parents think will be required by their offspring to succeed in life. One of the most influential typologies of parenting style originated in the work of Diana Baumrind a developmental psychologist of the University of California, Berkeley. She identified three main parenting styles: *authoritarian*, *permissive* and *authoritative* (Baumrind, 1966). An authoritarian parent will rule, control and monitor their children's behaviour. Discipline, often administered by corporal punishment, instils obedience and compliance. Permissive parents adopt a less controlling hands-off approach to child rearing. They promote self-reliance and independence by letting children make their own choices. An authoritative parent seeks to direct and influence their child's choices by persuasion and argument. Historically the authoritarian style dominated child rearing practices until the early 1960s. Declining inequality led to permissive parenting and the demise of authoritarianism. Changes in technology created opportunities for independent well educated children to gain well paid employment. However as levels of inequality increased in the US, UK and some European states during the 1970s authoritative parenting was in the ascendency. Clearly a Euro-North American choice of parenting style and accompanying cultural script is not taken up in the same way around the world – demographic and cultural values all determine to a greater or lesser extent how it is received and perceived (Faircloth et al, 2013). What is certain, however, is that this globally circulating ideal script is to a greater or lesser degree recognised internationally as the 'proper' way of 'doing' parenting (Arendell, 2000). While rising inequality may in principle have affected all parents, perceptions varied among parents as to how best to shape and influence their children's futures. Throughout the eighties and nineties cultural values associated with authoritative parenting such as hard work, respect for authority and habit formation were reinforced by growing right wing political beliefs that individual freedoms and social justice are not readily compatible.

Authoritative parenting prepared children for an uncertain competitive future where upward social mobility was reduced.

### **Helicopter Parenting**

Middle class parents, in particular, resorted to an intensive strain of child rearing which found expression in the term ‘helicopter parenting’.

“... the expression *helicopter parenting* is widely used to refer to the heavily involved, time –intensive, controlling child-rearing approach...the trend toward more intensive parenting is not just about supervising and protecting children but also about getting immersed in how children perform in school, which activities they pick up, and even who their friends and romantic interests are” (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019 p.51).

Helicopter parents restrict their children’s independence and invest heavily in their education. When helicopter parented children enter the educational system the greater investment in childrearing of the middle classes is manifested in two ways. Firstly the children are better equipped to learn and secondly their parents continue to engage in helicopter parenting through investment of substantial time and money in supporting their offspring’s involvement in extracurricular activities. Ranging from sports and artistic pursuits to involvement in civic projects such activities have broad implications for children’s futures. They offer participants a diversified portfolio of resources: a range of cognitive skills, personality attributes and soft skills which are crucial to positive self-definition and the creation of identity capital. Extracurricular participation is an indicator for upward mobility and there is a substantial class gap in participation levels (Smyth and Craig, 2017; Putnam, 2015)

### **Meaningfulness**

The rise of helicopter parenting and associated authoritative child rearing strategies is a contributing factor in the promotion of class-based parent-child relations which are, on a global level, creating and sustaining social divisions which consolidate damaging parenting gaps (Hendrick, 2016; Jensen,2018; Faircloth, 2014). Hegemonic values framing these authoritative parenting practices were culturally embedded in the 1980s and 1990s as a political swing to the right gained momentum in the US and the UK. Doepke and Zilibotti (2019) argue that the increase in inequality, during this period- resulting from less redistributive social protection policies, lowering of taxes, scrapping of income transfers, rising education premium for business and STEM graduates- incentivised competitive individualism and rewarded parental behaviour which “facilitated good child outcomes, social mobility and aspiration” (Jensen, 2018, p.108). Popular consent for the cultural values of neoliberalism was brokered by an appeal to the superiority of freedom over duty and personal altruism. As neoliberal doctrines gained credence as ‘common sense’ ways of organizing social, political and economic dimensions of people’s lives they:

“... produced a form of individualisation which in emphasising what many see as a minimal, risk averse and freedom seeking self, malevolently affected parenting with

regard to trust and security, love and obligation, duty and patience, and the rule of justice and fairness” (Hendrick, 2016, p.212).

In a philosophical sense, parenting is being drained of its meaningfulness. Child rearing becoming more of a technical craft than a fulfilling act. Self-interest and duty to a politics of self-optimization has refracted parent-child relations in order to produce human capital rather than human character. Self-interest channelled through parental narcissism encourages the presumption that all social phenomena should be considered as sites for personal development and survival. Shaping our lives to a level which makes it difficult for us to find fulfilling anchorage in the wider community.

“In place of empathy for children, parental narcissism privileges a confused distorted anxious and essentially self-regarding sense of self, particularly when through parent education it is emboldened by exposure to the deception of neoliberal ‘empowerment’. The apparent benefit that comes with the mastery of child rearing ‘skills’, promises self-esteem and self-confidence-the nirvana of contentment- portrayed as an essential prerequisite for mastery of one’s children and, by implication one’s own life” (Hendrick, 2016, p.24).

Mastering technologies of parenting demonstrates a commitment to self-management as one element of an expanding entrepreneurial self. For the entrepreneurial self-parenting activity is then subsumed into a wider self- optimization project alongside friendship network enhancement, career advancement, skills and personal development. Status anxiety is now commonplace and reduces our lives to a constant struggle to up our game so that we do not find ourselves in the slipstream of life (Mau, 2019: Brinkmann, 2019).

In many families parenting has become a mechanical and impersonal pursuit of hedonic happiness - pleasure seeking, avoidance of pain and acquiescence to the imperatives of a moral order endorsing the results that competitive markets generate. While morality and meaning may complement each other the possibility that what adds meaning to a person’s life will diverge from what morality allows is constant. These drivers of child-rearing behaviour crowd out many of the motives and reasons that lie at the heart of fulfilled parenting. Philosopher Susan Wolf’s (2012) probing analysis and scrutiny of meaningfulness as a critical dimension of good lives is a call to recognize that meaning is something worthwhile in life- something we wish to experience. Her conception of meaningfulness -*meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way*- is essentially an evaluative framework for human wellbeing which is the central concern of parenting. Wolf argues that it is

“... an idea of a significant way in which life can be good , a category or dimension of value, if you will , which we have a serious reason to want for ourselves and those we care about, and which is neither subsumable under nor reducible to either happiness or morality” (Wolf, 2012, p.8).

The category of value which she refers to involves subjective and objective elements suitably interwoven together. Love is a profoundly subjective emotional act engaging attitudes and feelings while the requisite focus of the interaction must be ‘worthy of love’, thereby invoking

an objective standard. According to this conception “meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf, 2012, p.9). In short a person’s life can be meaningful only if they care strongly in a tangible way for something worthwhile. Parenting perfectly encapsulates these features.

### **Parental Fulfilment**

“Let us refer to the feelings one has when one is doing what one loves, or when one is engaging in activities by which one is gripped or excited, as feelings of fulfilment” (Wolf, 2012, p.14).

It must be acknowledged however that while feelings of fulfilment are generally pleasing there are many other varieties of feelings that while pleasurable have nothing to do with fulfilment. Good pleasurable feelings may be triggered through eating a tasty dinner, buying a new car or going on an exotic holiday. However even a person who has regular access to opportunities like these for gratification may still find something (subjectively) missing in their life. Furthermore living a fulfilling life is not a promise of happiness. As Wolf (2012) insists, many of the activities that engage or grip us may make us vulnerable to pain, disappointment and stress. Parenting while it has the potential and capacity to be fulfilling will struggle to achieve this potential when parental choices are dictated by the economics of an unfair social order.

“Conventional Irish cultural norms present people with a mental image of parenthood as a vital cog in the operation of a good society. In reality many people are not affirmed or happy as a result of choosing to become a parent. They find that there is a gap between their experiences and the public image of parenting as a utopian project that will secure their happiness” (O’Doherty, 2015, p.65).

To be meaningful and offer fulfilment, an activity or pursuit, in Wolf’s (2012) philosophy, must offer a person a subjective return and an opportunity to contribute to something larger than themselves.

“A meaningful life is a life that a.) The subject finds fulfilling, and b.) Contributes to or connects positively with something the value of which has its source outside the subject” (Wolf, 2012, p.20).

So, while doing things that one loves can be fulfilling what is required for them to be meaningful is that from an external or objective perspective such activities must be seen to be good. Why should this concern us? Why do we need external affirmation?

“At least part of the answer I believe, has to do with a need, or at least an interest or concern, to see one’s life as valuable in a way that can be recognized from a point of view other than one’s own” (Wolf, 2012, p.28).

This all stems from our social nature and our sensitivity to each other. We have the ability and desire to see (or attempt to see) ourselves from the outside and to think well of ourselves- a need for self-esteem.

Therefore, through living in a manner that is focused to some extent toward producing and sustaining value that originates outside of themselves a person does something that others will esteem. Through engagement in projects of independent value we create the possibility that others will positively regard what we are doing or at the very least recognize the values that motivate us. In this way we can belong to a community with shared values and attitudes. Now it can be argued that meaning in life is more easily found if you are from an affluent or privileged section of society- if you are struggling with the basics of survival concern over whether or not you are engaged in activities of independent worth may seem like a luxury. Just because an interest in a meaningful life may be lacking until other more pressing needs are met is no reason to doubt its importance in our lives however. Parenting undoubtedly meets these criteria.

Parents actively engage in projects of worth. They are occupied with doing things that they love –perhaps not all the time- and that are good in an independent way. Child rearing is objectively valuable and even if it is not subjectively fulfilling all the time (which is generally the case) it still has the potential to be a project of worth for the parent. So why is parenting becoming meaningless? The key factor accounting for this trend is the depreciation of the objective value of parenting.

### **Parenting and Constraints**

The intensification of parenting and increasing inequality provide the backdrop for this analysis of meaning in parenting. An analytical framework incorporating a social constructionist perspective has been used to examine the consequences of parenting becoming less meaningful as inequality increases and intensive parenting repertoires become the norm. Such a perspective takes the view that parenting is not solely determined by biological imperatives but that it involves increasing children’s wellbeing through educational, caring and emotional engagement with a view to membership of an intimate community. Parenting is affected by and responds to changes in;

- socioeconomic factors
- cultural norms and factors
- demographic changes
- social policies

Policies and interventions are situated in time and place. The goals and objectives of parenting are regularly revised and redefined according to changes in social context. Parenting narratives and choices are subject to revision and recalibration in response to changing expectations and beliefs about the role and value of family life in sustaining social cohesion and achieving social objectives. Dominant contemporary cultural constraints upholding neoliberal principles encourage parents to choose intensive parenting practices which are represented as normal and natural and which in turn diminish the value of child rearing as a ‘project of worth’ (Hendrick, 2016) . The sustainability of parenting as an ultra-social meaningful endeavour is called into question with parents regularly reduced to the level of mere instruments in the propagation of externally defined parenting goals. Parenting apps are a manifestation of technocratic

overreach and the increasing digitisation of child rearing. Parenting apps can be seen as a continuation of an instrumentalised, scienticised, skills-based understanding of parenting that draws on forms of psychology and neuroscience to provide information, advice and activities to parents and children (Ramaekers and Hodgson, 2019).

Globally parenting has, in the context of neoliberalism, become a key part of a human capital formation project. The overemphasis on investing in children for an economic return is a consequence of the transformation in parenting which has been gathering pace since the industrial revolution but has gained significant momentum since the end of world war two (Doepke and Zilibottie, 2019).

### **Human capital, the rising costs of parenting and the tyranny of merit.**

“Parental concern for child quality implies that parents face two related but distinct decisions regarding their children: how many to have and how much to invest in each of them. Fertility choices then depend on income (or more generally, the resources available to the parents), on the costs of children, but also on the relative attractiveness of investing in child “quantity” (i.e. a large number of children) rather than quality” (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2019 p.223).

Parents are now, under the duress of an unforgiving system of competitive individualism, under pressure to ‘invest in the child ’by ‘parenting optimally’ (Rosen, Faircloth, 2020).

Increasing costs in both wealthy and poor countries are having a detrimental impact on the willingness and capability of adults to commit themselves to parenthood. The negative effects of parenthood on life satisfaction are felt in countries with relatively high GDP per capita and countries with high unemployment (Stanca, 2016). Rearing children is valued less, in terms of life satisfaction, in countries where the opportunity cost of time is higher or where poor labour market conditions heighten the adverse effects of parenthood’s financial costs. Despite some advances in men’s participation in parenting women are to greater or lesser extent still the primary carers of children and incur the opportunity cost of the time spent in their upbringing. So if having another child means having to give up a financially rewarding and satisfying job the opportunity cost is high and the incentive to care for another child is diminished. Women plan to have a child only after they are convinced that they can draw on sufficiently sound and secure economic conditions to enable them to bring up their children properly and to continue pursuing their other life goals (Busetta, Mendola and Vignoli, 2019).

Research (REPRO, EU/OECD, 2013) into why European countries have low fertility rates identified economic uncertainty as being one of the main factors associated with variable fertility rates. Unemployment among men and job insecurity among women were associated with decreased fertility rates. For poorer parents struggling with the adverse effects of parenthood’s financial costs greater sacrifices are called for. Research into the experiences of parents dealing with income inadequacy in Ireland details the coping strategies they employ.

“They ensured they were meeting their children’s needs before addressing their own. This meant that parents’ needs were often severely neglected in the process. For



example, some parents went without a meal on occasion, in order to provide their children with “good food” and parents would forego clothing for themselves in order to have better quality or more variety of clothes for their children: “I put the kids first, and try not to let them see the struggle” (McMahon and McEvoy, 2018, p.20).

The well-being of parents and children in these circumstances is compromised and feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment are all too common for the parents struggling to prioritise the needs of their children over their own. Human capital accumulated through education has become the key identifier of quality children reared by responsible parents keen to inoculate and prepare them to thrive in the face of increasing inequality and uncertain futures. The objective worth of a child is thereby reduced to a quantification of their progress through a growth directed model of education and parents must, where necessary compensate, for deficits in education systems. The role of education in determining life destinies has increased as social mobility has declined (OECD, 2018; Putnam, 2015). With the narrowing of channels for advancing social mobility intensive parenting repertoires such as helicopter parenting have come to the fore in an effort to pushback against the increasingly precarious life chances available to their children. Seeking a meritocratic bulwark against increasing inequality parenting has been recast as a technocratic approach to the rearing of successful offspring. Investing in children has become more technical and politicised in order to meet the demands of globalisation.

Sandel (2020) argues that the principle of merit-talent plus hard work equals reward- which scaffolds the authoritative parenting turn results in a hubristic personhood which has a corrosive effect on the social bonds that constitute our common life.

“Meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners too inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It is the smug conviction of those who land on top that they deserve their faith, and those on the bottom deserve theirs, too. This attitude is the moral companion of technocratic politics” (Sandel, 2020, p.25).

Believing that their success is entirely due to their own efforts winners forego humility, there but for the grace of God or random chance go I, for hubristic self-regard. A meritocracy runs the risk of facilitating an individual to exaggerate the part their own efforts played in securing their own bountiful destiny and denying them the wisdom of contemplating the wider factors which may have also played a part in realising their success.

“It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common faith. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny, or unjust rule” (Sandel, 2020, p.25).

The tyranny of merit has, according to Sandel (2020), weaponised credentialism. “The weaponisation of college credentials shows how merit can become a kind of tyranny” (Sandel 2020, p.85). Equating the common good with GDP may legitimate an economic system that has delivered for the better educated who have achieved higher status positions based on merit

and enhanced credentials. Extra cultural capital elevates and acknowledges their status as valuable contributors to the market friendly technocratic conception of globalization. For those who fail to grasp the opportunities presented to them by the new economic order “it is hard to escape the demoralizing thought that their failure is their own doing, that they simply lack the talent and drive to succeed” (Sandel, 2020, p.26) . From a moral standpoint it is not obvious why the better endowed deserve the bigger rewards that market –driven societies confer on the successful.

“Central to the case for the meritocratic ethic is the idea that we do not deserve to be rewarded, or held back, based on factors beyond our control. But is having (or lacking) certain talents really our own doing? If not it is hard to see why those who rise thanks to their talents deserve greater rewards than those who may be equally hardworking but less endowed with the gifts a market society happens to prize” (Sandel, 2020, p.24).

The Pandemic has shown us how important kindness is in our daily lives. Our gratitude to front line workers in hospitals, care homes, supermarkets and public services shows how much we appreciate kindness. Kindness is a pro-social resource which strengthens relationships, develops community, deepens solidarity and promotes positive mental health. It is a cornerstone of our individual and collective wellbeing. Applied kindness can have a transformative impact on our public services. However kindness and care for others are talents which are poorly rewarded in terms of income, wealth, power and prestige in the technocratic market driven systems which have come to dominate labour markets. Denigration of losers who have not flourished in the new economy of credentialed elitism is based on the belief that a fair meritocratic system rewards talent and effort and that those who successfully achieve through their hard work are virtuous and therefore entitled to look down upon those less fortunate than themselves. With inequality increasing (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2019) over the last three decades, meritocratic assumptions have as a consequence gained more of a hold over parenting practices across the globe. Successful parenting is assured through steadfast faith and investment in the meritocratic project. The rhetoric of rising –getting what you or your children deserve in an increasingly inequitable world- is couched in the language of empowerment, achievement and freedom. It legitimises parents taking control of circumstances to produce better outcomes for their offspring. But the relentless drive to gain advantage through educational credentialism and extra- curricular activities also has a dark side. The greater the value a society places on children being self- sufficient and self -made in advancing their life prospects the lower the concern it will demonstrate for the fate of children who are deemed to be less capable and motivated about their futures. In short it can have a corrosive effect on social solidarity and the belief in the common good. The wider political consequences of viewing meritocratic policies promoting equality of opportunity as the answer to increasing inequality and decreasing social mobility for adults and children lacking technocratic educational credentials are stark.

“The tyranny of merit arises from more than the rhetoric of rising. It consists in a cluster of attitudes and circumstances that, taken together, have made meritocracy toxic. First, under conditions of rampant inequality and stalled mobility, reiterating the message that we are responsible for our fate and deserve what we get erodes solidarity and

demoralizes those left behind by globalization. Second, insisting that a college degree is the primary route to a respectable job and a decent life creates a credentialist prejudice that undermines the dignity of work and demeans those who have not been to college; and third, insisting that social and political problems are best solved by highly educated value-neutral experts is a technocratic conceit that corrupts democracy and disempowers ordinary citizens” (Sandel, 2020, p.73).

### **Parenting and the Pandemic**

The lives of all parents and their children around the world have been seriously disrupted by the pandemic. However, there is evidence to show that the impact on the less well-off has been more severe. In Ireland, a relatively affluent country, a Barnardos online survey of the experiences of 2,683 families that Barnardos were working with during the pandemic found that 84% of children were missing their friends, 68% missing school, 53% having more difficulty with their bedtime routine, and 38% were experiencing more tantrums and outbursts. The findings also showed that those parenting alone, and those with children under the age of 10 reported feeling the most pressure of the COVID 19 restrictions. Parents reported an increase in stress due to lack of childcare support and working from home. Parents reported less sleep (1 in 3), less exercise (1 in 3), and worrying about the health of family members (1 in 2) as factors adding to this stress. Children were more concerned about family members contracting Covid-19, than they were about themselves contracting the virus.

A surge in the usage of foodbanks across the better off economies of the UK, US and Ireland is an indicator of the severe impact the pandemic has had on sections of society with pre-existing vulnerabilities arising from embedded inequality.

The Trussell Trust supports a network of 1,200 food bank centres across the United Kingdom. People are referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network by local partners in the voluntary, statutory and faith sectors, following an assessment of their financial situation. They are provided with a three-day emergency food parcel, and also receive support that can include help with dealing with benefits issues or signposting to other services. The support food banks provide is available to anyone who is in crisis.

Due to increasing destitution levels of need at food banks in the Trussell Trust network were rising steadily in the years before the pandemic. The Trussell Trust’s network, saw a 74% increase in the number of three-day food parcels distributed over the last 5 years, including an 18% increase in the year to 2019/20. As Covid-19 hit the UK, the Trussell Trust saw an immediate and sustained surge in need across its food banks. In April 2020 there was an 89% increase in the number of emergency food parcels given out compared with the same month in 2019. This included a 107% increase in the number of parcels given to children, compared to the same period last year. Data showed that for the second quarter of 2020 need remained much higher than normal. Almost 100,000 households received support from a food bank in the Trussell Trust network for the very first time between April and June. Families with children have been hit hardest - they made up four in ten (38%) households that needed support from food banks in April 2020, in comparison to one in three (33%) in April 2019.

Save the Children surveyed 3,100 families with children under eighteen across the UK who are in receipt of Universal Credit and Child tax credit in September. The survey found that overall 60% of families had had to cut back on food and other essentials with 6 in 10 going into debt and 5 in 10 falling behind on rent and other bills. Many families had to turn to food banks or other form of charity support due to financial hardship. Overall all families on low incomes have struggled but BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) families and families with a disabled member have been harder hit.

Demand for Food Banks has also risen in Ireland. FoodCloud is an Irish social enterprise that exists first and foremost to reduce the environmental, social and economic impact of food waste by redistributing surplus food to a network of Charity and Community Group partners. Research carried out among 121 of FoodCloud's charity partners identified a 70 % increase in demand for food as a result of Covid-19 (European Food Banks Federation, 2020). In the US a Pew Research Center survey (Pew Research Center, 2020) found that, overall, one-in-four adults have had trouble paying their bills since the coronavirus outbreak started, a third dipped into savings or retirement accounts to make ends meet, and about one-in-six borrowed money from friends or family or received food from a food bank. Black and Hispanic Americans, adults on lower incomes and those without a college degree are more likely to have drawn on government or charitable food resources since the outbreak began.

While the pandemic is a catastrophic event which has significantly increased the pressures and constraints on poorer parents struggling to give their children an upbringing which will through the enhancement of their human capital enable them to succeed in meritocratic social systems it should not distract from the pre-existing reality of inequality in wealthy countries across the globe. The COVID-19 crisis that has engulfed the world during 2020 presents new threats to child wellbeing. Even before the crisis, in the world's richest countries, the daily lives of millions of children fell far short of what anyone would call a good childhood. They suffered stress, anxiety and depression, lagged behind their peers at school, and were physically unwell. Living in a wealthy country did not bring them happiness. Nor did it guarantee them better health or education. (UNICEF, 2020)

The meritocratic sorting machine has entrenched inequality by insisting that equality of opportunity is promoted by technocratic education systems which privilege economic growth over the fulfilment of essential human needs. It is natural that much of the public attention focuses on near-term challenges around health and employment, but the learning losses that follow from school closures will throw long shadows over the economic well-being of individuals and nations. People with lower skills will be less productive, less able to participate in economic and social activities, and more likely to receive social transfers. And different from the direct economic impact of the pandemic, which will be temporary, these effects are likely to remain permanent. Put simply, our schools today are our economies tomorrow (OECD, 2020).

## **Conclusion -Bringing Meaning Back In –Towards Sustainable Parenting**

Parenting is subject to a paradox of meaningfulness – “because meaning requires us to be open and responsive to values outside ourselves, we cannot be preoccupied with ourselves. If we want to live meaningful lives, we cannot try too hard or focus too much on doing so” (Wolf, 2012, p.52).

As outlined, the meaning in parenting- active engagement in a project of worth or value linking us to a larger community - has been sequestered by the success ethics that rule our lives. The meritocratic principles which have politicised parenting and reframed it as a neo-liberal institution promoting competitive intensive child rearing practices have become a justification rather than a remedy for inequality. Meaningful parenting is not sustainable when its independent value, discernible from an external point of view, for community and wider society is displaced by the hubris and humiliation of a technocratic sorting system. The value of parenting is dependent on the moral status of the ends it serves.

An intensive parenting upbringing treads a fine line between promoting equal opportunities in an unequal society on the basis of merit and valorizing the superior value of the contributions of the credentialed elite to society. Without the concept of meaningfulness and a revaluing of the purposes and ends of parenting it will continue to, deepen inequality, accept distorted conceptions of human flourishing and unravel the moral ties that make up all our common lives. Having outlined and discussed why meaning matters in parenting I will now put forward some proposals for a realignment of child rearing practices directed towards sustaining the value of parenting as a common good.

### ***Re-purposing the educational system***

The civic purpose of education is now secondary to its sorting function. More important than educating young people for citizenship and civic responsibility is equipping them to contribute to economic growth and to scale whatever ladder of opportunity is presented to them. Re-calibrated styles – intensive, helicopter- attest to the reframing of parenting as a contractual response to a competitive technocratic meritocratic education system where the stakes have become higher as mobility flatlines and inequality soars. As Nussbaum (2012, p.22) has stated

“...the unfettered pursuit of growth is not conducive to sensitive thinking about distribution or social inequality”.

“Education is for people. Before we can design a scheme for education, we need to understand the problems we face on the way to making students responsible democratic citizens who might think and choose about a range of issues of national and worldwide significance” (p.27).

Parents can begin to wrest control of education from the grip of a market driven globalization system responsible for inequalities of income and wealth that are widening the opportunity gap between among young people across the world. While schools are a critical influence on the development of children much of the work of restoring the moral ties which bind citizens together for the common good can be done in families by reconfiguring parenting as

“optimistically friendly and without reservation, rather than bleakly contractual and authoritative” (Hendrick, 2016, p.14). Schools can in turn reinforce a pro-social style of childrearing where parents engage in child rearing as a project of worth which validates their membership of a wider community. To re-orient the meritocratic sorting machine in this way parents will have to advocate on behalf of their own and other people’s children. It will require all parents to become advocates for a new human development model of education where subjects of the non-cognitive curriculum –particularly citizenship education – are affirmed. Duggan’s (2014, p.223) research into citizenship education in the Irish education system found that “due to the influences of the marketplace and beyond which are conveyed to school authorities by parents and students”, schools promote a technocratic curriculum focused exclusively on exams to the detriment of the holistic development of students and their ability to think their way through a moral dilemma and to critically interrogate matters that impact on their well-being, their community, and society both locally and globally.

### ***Re-directing parenting programmes***

Parenting programmes now promoting the authoritative manner engender certain constructions of parenthood which go hand in hand with a market driven meritocratic order. Authoritative parenting techniques are taught to parents through technocratic evidence based behaviourist social learning programmes. Guided by developmental psychology such programmes situate parents according to their fidelity to externally defined parenting techniques. This concentration on techniques means that parents participating in such programmes are distanced from the web of relationships submerged in everyday life which confer meaning on their parenting activities. The notion that parents are always situated between their child and some form of communal life (Ramaekers and Hodgson, 2019) is downplayed. The meaning of parenting as an activity which has an independent value which draws us out of ourselves linking us to a larger community or world in a positive way (Wolf, 2012) is foregone in this way. Family Life Education (Robila and Taylor, 2018) providing an integrated approach to family and parenting support will be a useful tool in the construction of a more coherent and authentic response by the state to meet the needs of hard-pressed and undervalued parents than existing intensive parenting programmes. As Family Life Education is an all-encompassing approach to improving family well-being, it can be used as an umbrella framework to draw together family and parenting support services, typically provided by statutory and voluntary organisations. A co-creation approach embracing co-production – citizens playing an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them- will involve a move away from discipline-specific theories enabling Family Life Education practitioners to use a wide-range of theoretical perspectives in their work. Practitioners from different professional backgrounds (education, social work, community work, social care) will utilise preventative, educational and collaborative approaches to:

- Empower families and individuals wrestling with the challenges which undermine family life/ parenting;
- Deal with the consequences of social stress;
- Support parents in everyday life by promoting family solidarity and social cohesion

### ***Re-valuing work***

Cognitive credentialed achievement, acting as a sorting mechanism in technocratic meritocracies, has become the benchmark for career success across the globe. Manual technical/ practical abilities and social and empathetic skills have been devalued and the working conditions and pay of the people who do the jobs that require these skills reflects their lower social and economic status. The pandemic has highlighted the contribution to the common good of care workers. Can the same be said of the better paid socially esteemed graduates working in the ‘knowledge economy’.

“... The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into focus how reliant societies are on care work. Care workers, including healthcare workers, have been at the forefront in maintaining basic, essential, and life-saving services. As Europe emerges from the crisis, a long overdue conversation needs to be had about the value placed on care work, work which is disproportionately performed by women” (Sweeney, 2020, pp.12-13).

Frontline workers such as care workers are more at risk of contracting the virus for themselves and members of their households.

“Low-wage earners are not only suffering from the pandemic because many are losing their jobs and seeing their livelihoods threatened. A different but similarly negative impact stems from the fact that “frontline workers”, who work in essential services and production that cannot be performed from home, tend on average to be less educated and more likely to earn low wages (OECD, 2020). This concerns healthcare workers, cashiers and workers in food processing. These frontline workers continue to work in their current jobs, but this often implies a higher risk of contracting the virus for themselves and members of their households” (OECD, 2020, p.38).

Intensive parenting is complicit in this ranking of highly valued (by the market) cognitive workers as more worthy of social recognition and esteem than those working in the real economy providing socially useful goods and services. Care work disproportionately performed by women for example demands high level skills and a commitment to the wellbeing of the most vulnerable members of society. During the pandemic it became clear what kind of work makes a real contribution to all our lives.

“Many forms of work have stopped, or are being increasingly done from home. Care work, however, can never be suspended, and it cannot be online. An essential component of care is that it requires human interaction and takes time. It cannot and should not be automated. Care workers are therefore at the front line putting their health and lives at risk for the sake of others. Yet care work is often—outside of the medical professions—poorly paid and precarious” (Sweeney, 2020, p.8).

The time has come to begin a social dialogue process involving consultation, exchange of information and negotiation between civil society organizations representing parents, education providers, government departments and employers, and workers on issues of

common interest relating to what kinds of work are worthy of recognition and esteem and what we owe one another as parents and citizens with a stake in promoting the common good.

Restoring meaning to parenting requires an openness to the emergence of objective value through the reasons and motives of love which subjectively guide day to day childrearing responsibilities. Meaningful sustainable parenting can then be instrumental in rejecting the dynamic of inequality which is upheld by a compromised meritocracy and enable

“... those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity- developing and exercising their abilities in work that wins social esteem , sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning and deliberating with their fellow citizens about public affairs” (Sandel, 2020, p.224).



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