Parental Responsibility, Hyper-parenting, and the Role of Technology

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the impact of technology on parenthood. It draws out some of the themes raised by the genetic enhancement debate, arguing that they reflect some of the current themes in contemporary parenthood. Particularly pertinent is the phenomenon of hyper-parenting, which itself often relies on technology to enable surveillance of children. It is argued that this practice reflects the political and popular rhetoric around conceptions of parental responsibility, which has been picked up and reinforced in the law. The chapter concludes by arguing against an overemphasis on the power that parents have over children to train them to be good citizens and argues for a relational vision of parenthood, recognizing also the power that children have over adults and the way that children can shape parents.

Keywords: Parental responsibility, surveillance, technology, hyper-parenting, intensive parenting

1. Introduction

THE genetic enhancement of children holds both a fascination and a terror in contemporary culture and academic debates. There is considerable soul-searching about a future when parents who decide to have a child head not to the bedroom, but to the laboratory. There they would pore over glossy brochures and select the child's appearance, sporting prowess, sexuality, and musical inclinations. The days when you had to take the luck of the draw and nature determined what child would be yours would seem terribly old fashioned. Why leave it to chance when you can use science to determine what your child will be like: athletic, attractive, and ambitious.

There has been considerable academic debate over whether or not parents should be permitted, or even be required, to manipulate the genes of embryos to produce an idealized version of the child. A vast amount of literature has been written on this topic (Murray, 1996; Agar, 2004; Glover, 2006; Green, 2007; Sandel, 2007). I do not want to add to that literature directly. However, it is astonishing how much attention has been paid to

the issue, given that, to a significant extent, it is the stuff of science fiction. The technology necessary for being able to control the characteristics and abilities of children is decades away, if it will ever be possible. So, why, apart from the fact it raises some interesting academic issues, has it generated so much discussion?

This chapter suggests that the genetic engineering debate, and the substantial media, academic, and professional discussions it has engendered, reflects conflicting emotions about contemporary parenting. The vision of the parent being able to create a child in their likeness who will be a productive good citizen, chimes with and reflects current fears and desires within parenting. In particular, it reflects a wider debate around concepts of the responsibility of parents for their children and a group of parenting practices often known as 'hyper-parenting' or helicopter parenting. This hyper-parenting itself uses technology to enable surveillance by parents of children in various ways. The chapter thus considers the role of technology in parenting by deconstructing understandings of parenting. In a one-way, controlling, hyper-parenting model of parenting, technology is facilitative and useful. However, the chapter concludes by arguing that this model of parenting, and thus the hopes for technology in relation to it, is deeply flawed, because it fails to take into account the full richness of the contingent and mutually nourishing relationships between parents and their children.

Therefore, this chapter looks at what debates and concerns about future forms of reproductive technology tell us about the nature of being a parent, particularly about concepts of parental responsibility in both a legal and a cultural sense. To start the discussion, the chapter focuses on a strand of the argument from the genetic enhancement debate that presents a strong moral case against such intervention, namely that children should be seen as a gift. The chapter then moves to consider the legal concept of parental responsibility before exploring the legal, political, and social discourse that analyses the ways in which parents are taken to be responsible for their children. These discourses of responsibility are strongly linked to parents becoming insecure and engaging in the practice of hyper-parenting. To this end, technologies not only enable parents in their attempts to control their children, but also to enable their children to surpass other children in a range of activities. The chapter concludes by decrying these developments. Children should not be seen as playdough to be shaped by parents into perfect citizens. Rather, parents and children are in deep relationships—they care for and impact on each other in profound ways.

2. Children as a Gift

One of the strongest objections to the idea of genetic enhancement has been put forward by Michael Sandel (2004: 57):

(p. 406)

The deepest moral objection to enhancement lies less in the perfection it seeks than the human disposition it expresses and promotes. The problem is not that parents usurp the autonomy of a child they design. The problem is in the hubris of the designing parents, in their drive to master the mystery of birth ... it would disfigure the relation between parent and child, and deprive the parent of the humility and enlarged human sympathies that an openness to the unbidden can cultivate.

And he thinks (2004: 62):

... the promise of mastery is flawed. It threatens to banish our appreciation of life as a gift, and to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will.

This kind of argument, which in the genetic enhancement debates has proved influential (although controversial), is very relevant to the current debates about intensive parenting and the concept of parental responsibility. Hyper-parenting is often driven by a desire to make the child the best they can be and to protect them from all dangers; the very motivations that might be behind those who seek to promote genetic enhancement. For those who find Sandel's claims attractive, there is a tension between a parent accepting a child as they are—as a gift—and being responsible for the shaping of the child. Sandel (2004: 62) directly draws this link: 'the hyperparenting familiar in our time represents an anxious excess of mastery and dominion that misses the sense of life as gift. This draws it disturbingly close to eugenics.' He expands on his fear in this passage:

the drive to banish contingency and to master the mystery of birth diminishes the designing parent and corrupts parenting as a social practice governed by norms of unconditional love ... [It is] objectionable because it expresses and entrenches a certain stance toward the world—a stance of mastery and dominion that fails to appreciate the gifted character of human powers and achievements, and misses the part of freedom that consists in a persisting negotiation with the given (Sandel, 2007: 82–83).

Rather, we should accept children 'as they come', 'not as objects of our design' or 'instruments of our ambition'. Quoting theologian William F May, he calls for an 'openness to the unbidden' (Sandel, 2007: 64).

There is an obvious difficulty for these kinds of arguments: at face value, they may argue against a parent agreeing to any kind of medical treatment or improving intervention, rather than letting the child be (Kamm, 2005). Sandel (2004: 57) is clear that this is not what he arguing for. He claims that 'medical intervention to cure or prevent illness ... does not desecrate nature but honors it. Healing sickness or injury does not override a child's natural capacities but permits them to flourish'. To enliven his point, he distinguishes between good running shoes, which help bring out an athlete's natural talents and are appropriate, and taking drugs to enhance athletic ability, which is not. Much weight is therefore carried by the distinction between interfering in a child's natural capabilities and designing them, and removing barriers which might inhibit a child's natural

flourishing. The difficulties are demonstrated by Frances Kamm's (2005) observation that cancer cells (p. 407) and tornadoes are parts of nature, but we should not honour them. The line between enhancing natural ability and creating abilities that are not there in nature is not readily apparent. But, difficult though it is to draw, it is certainly a line that has proved popular in the literature. It is a line that is relevant to the debates around the legal conception of parental responsibility.

3. Parental Responsibility

At the heart of the legal effect of parenthood is the concept of 'parental responsibility'. This is defined in section 3(1), Children Act 1989 (UK): '“parental responsibility” means all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property’.

It is not a particularly helpful definition. However, it is reasonably clear what the drafters of the legislation had in mind. They wanted to move away from language referring to the rights of parents to language that instead emphasizes their responsibilities. The Law Commission (1982: para 4.18), whose work was so influential in the development of the Children Act 1989, observed that 'it can be cogently argued that to talk of “parental rights” is not only inaccurate as a matter of juristic analysis but also a misleading use of ordinary language'. The Commission (1982: para 4.19) went on to say that 'it might well be more appropriate to talk of parental powers, parental authority, or even parental responsibilities, rather than of rights'. This view was undoubtedly seen as progressive. Children were not objects over which parents had rights, but people they had responsibilities towards. Any rights the parents did have were to be used responsibly to promote the welfare of the child. As Lord Fraser put it in *Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech AHA*: 'parents' rights to control a child do not exist for the benefit of the parent. They exist for the benefit of the child and they are justified only in so far as they enable the parent to perform his duties towards the child, and towards other children in the family'.¹ That said, it would be wrong to suggest that there is no scope for parental discretion as to how their responsibilities are carried out. As Baroness Hale has observed, '“the child is not the child of the state” and it is important in a free society that parents should be allowed a large measure of autonomy in the way in which they discharge their parental responsibilities'.²

In many ways, the emphasis on parental responsibility was a positive move and no family lawyer would want to regress to when a father was seen as having a paternal right to dominate or abuse their child. Yet, since its origins as the modern version of parental rights, the talk of parental responsibilities now has taken on a sinister (p. 408) overtone, as discussed in the following sections, particularly in reaction to social problems that 'poorly parented' children are seen to cause.

4. 'The Crisis of Parenting'

In her book *The Parent Trap*, Maureen Freely refers to fact that 'as a nation we have become obsessed with fears about damaged children and endangered childhood' (2000: 13). Parents, she argues, are now terrified that they are failing in their responsibilities to their children:

Never have the odds against good-enough parenting been greater. The standards of performance are rising, just as more mothers are being pushed into work. The definitions of neglect and abuse are growing, and now extend to include cohabitation and marriage breakdown. In the present climate, to speak in public as a good-enough parent is to invite someone else to point out how abysmally we've failed. ... This makes us an insecure and biddable constituency, quick to apologise for our faults and slow to point out where our masters could do better, and the government has taken advantage of our weaknesses to consolidate its power (2000: 201).

These concerns are reflected and reinforced in political and media portrayals of parenthood. Poor parenting has been blamed for a wide range of social ills, leading to what Frank Furedi (2011) has described as the 'pathologizing of parenting'. Newspaper headlines paint a bleak picture of modern day parenting: 'Parents Blamed Over Gang Culture' (BBC News, 2008); 'Gordon Brown Says Parents to Blame for Teenage Knife Crime' (Kirkup, 2008); 'Parents Blamed for Rise in Bad Behaviour' (Riddell, 2007); 'Parents of Obese Children are "Normalising Obesity" say NHS boss' (*Western Daily Press*, 2015); 'Pupils are More Badly Behaved than Ever and it's their Parents Fault, say Teachers' (*Daily Mail*, 2013). In the light of such views, unsurprisingly, parenting has been described as a major 'public health issue' (Dermott and Pomati, 2015: 1).

This bleak picture of parenthood is reinforced by talk of a 'crisis of childhood' (BBC, 2006), although in truth humankind has probably been worrying about childhood since time began (Myers, 2012). In 2007, a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report ranked children's well-being in the UK as being the worst of 21 developed nations on measures such as health, poverty, and the quality of family and peer relationships. In 2011, a report issued by the charity Save the Children placed the UK 23rd out of 43 developed countries in terms of children's well-being (Ramesh, 2011).

(p. 409) Politicians have been responsible for much of the parent-blaming headlines. There has been an interesting shift in the political rhetoric from emphasis on family form (and particularly marriage), which was emphasized in the Conservative Government of the late 1980s, to the modern emphasis on parental practices (Collins, Cox and Leonard, 2014). Parents are seen as responsible for ensuring children become active citizens of the future (Janssen, 2015). When he was Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg said, '[p]arents hold the fortunes of the children they bring into this world in their hands' (*The Telegraph*, 2010).

The 'riots' in the summer of 2011 were particularly strong example of parent-blaming (De Benedictis, 2012; Bristow, 2013). Kirkup, Whitehead, and Gilligan (2011) reported the response of David Cameron, the Prime Minister at the time:

The Prime Minister said that the collapse of families was the main factor which had led to last week's turmoil and said that politicians had to be braver in addressing decades of erosion of traditional social values ... The question people asked over and over again last week was 'where are the parents? Why aren't they keeping the rioting kids indoors?' he said. Tragically that's been followed in some cases by judges rightly lamenting: 'why don't the parents even turn up when their children are in court?' Well, join the dots and you have a clear idea about why some of these young people were behaving so terribly. Either there was no one at home, they didn't much care or they'd lost control.

Social commentators warmed to the theme. Alice Thomson (2011) wrote:

It's not a class issue. There is divorce, dysfunction and dadlessness in Croydon and Chelsea. Parents work too hard or not enough. Few of us know how to discipline our children properly; they've become our friends and we are nervous even to suggest that they make their own beds ...

And it was certainly not just politicians on the right who identified the problem as being 'sub-standard parenting' (Bennett, 2008). Without much political opposition, the government proceeded with a series of initiatives designed to help parents fulfil their role. 2011 saw the launch of the 'Troubled Families' programme targeting 120,000 families in Britain who live 'troubled and chaotic lives' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2013). This promoted directed interventions through social work. The kind of thinking behind these interventions was explained by the Home Office (2008):

Parenting is a challenging job which requires parents to discipline, guide and nurture their child effectively. Parents have a responsibility to the child and the community to supervise and take care of their children and prevent problems in their behaviour and development which, if allowed to go unchecked, could present major difficulties for the individual, the family and the community.

Parenting contracts and orders are a supportive measure designed to help parent(s) or carer(s) improve their parenting skills so that they can prevent problems in their child's behaviour and steer them away from becoming involved in anti-social and offending behaviour.

(p. 410) This emphasis on the responsibility for parents for the bad behaviour of children has been reflected in the law (Hollingsworth, 2007). Increasingly, authoritarian measures have been used against parents who were seen to be causing anti-social and criminal behavior by not supplying sufficient levels of parenthood (Gillies, 2012). Parenting Orders (Magistrates' Courts (Parenting Orders) Rules 2004: Statutory Instrument 2004 No 247) allowed magistrates to require parents to sign parenting contracts, parenting programmes, or even to attend a residential parenting course. As Le Sage and De Ruyter (2007) put it: '[t]his parental duty can be interpreted in terms of control, i.e. that parents have the duty to supervise, control or guard children, inhibit their antisocial impulses and attempt to create an environment free of antisocial temptations.' In sum, this picture of

politics and recent social change shows how the responsibilities of parents are now highlighted as a social narrative, but in a strongly negative sense. Parents are failing the state by failing in their responsibilities to their children.

5. Hyper-parenting

It is not surprising that the emphasis on the responsibilities in parenthood has led to what has been described as a 'paranoid parenting' (Furedi, 2014). By 1996, Sharon Hays (1996: 8) was writing about intensive expectations on mothers. We expect, she claimed, 'emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive' mothering. The media presentation of this issue is fascinating. As in other areas, mothers cannot win. Either they are 'Tiger moms' and overly pushy for their children (Chua, 2011), or neglectful mothers for failing to give their children the best start in life: 'mothers who can't teach basic life skills are failing not just their own children, but everyone else's too' (Roberts, 2012).

In popular media, the insecurities and guilt of parents has been reflected in a huge growth in literature designed to equip and train parents. This can be found in the extensive literature of popular books aimed at parents seeking to improve their skills. The fears and pressures are reflected in the titles: *How to be a Better Parent: No Matter how Badly your Children Behave or How Busy You Are* (Jardine, 2003), *Calm Parents, Happy Kids: The Secrets of Stress-Free Parenting* (Markham, 2014), *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting: The Revolutionary Programme That Transforms Family Life* (Janis-Norton, 2012). Some readers may be sceptical of the realism presented by these books and show a greater affinity with the author of *Go The F**k To Sleep* (Mansbach, 2011).

(p. 411) As the importance of parents in the life of children is emphasized in the media and by the law, it is not surprising that this has produced some modern phenomena of parenting seen as excessive (Honoré, 2009). Janssen (2015) separates out several styles of excessive parenting:

- (1) 'helicopter parents' who try to solve all of their children's problems and protect them from all dangers ...
- (2) 'little emperor' parents who strive to give their children all the material goods they crave ...
- (3) 'tiger moms' who push for and accept nothing less than exceptional achievement from their children ... and
- (4) parents who practice 'concerted cultivation' by scheduling their children into several extracurricular activities to provide them with an advantage ...

These forms of hyper-parenting are seen as parents (always, of course, other people!) who are excessive in their parental role. Driven by the belief propagated by politicians and the media that parenting has the power to impact hugely on the well-being of children and that parents need the skills to excel in parenting, they sacrifice everything to ensure their children thrive. They are constantly engaging their children in improving ac-

tivities to ensure that they 'succeed', by which is meant they perform better than other children. Carolyn Daitch (2007) has written of it as 'a style of parents who are over focused on their children ... They typically take too much responsibility for their children's experiences and, specifically, their successes or failures'. Ann Dunnewold (2012) refers to the practice of over-parenting: '[i]t means being involved in a child's life in a way that is over-controlling, overprotecting, and over perfecting, in a way that is in excess of responsible parenting.'

The explanations for this behaviour has been summarized by Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise (2001):

This is happening because many contemporary parents see a parent's fundamental job as designing a perfect upbringing for their offspring, from conception to college. A child's success – quantified by 'achievements' like speaking early, qualifying for the gifted and talented program, or earning admission to an elite university – has become the measure of parental accomplishment. That is why the most competitive adult sport is no longer golf. It is parenting.

It may be that hyper-parenting is linked to the great inequalities in our society. The consequences of succeeding or not succeeding are seen as so significant in financial terms that considerable parental investment is justified (Doepke and Zilibotti, 2014).

Marano (2008) suggests that overparenting can arise where a woman leaves her job in favour of full time mothering. Especially where highly educated and driven, her ambition is put into the child. Indeed, perhaps in an attempt to justify her decision to leave her career, she provides intensive levels of parenting. More convincingly, Bayless (2013) locates fear as the root of hyper-parenting, suggesting 'a fear (p. 412) of dire consequences; feelings of anxiety; over-compensation, especially parents feeling unloved or neglected as a child and deficiency in own parents; peer pressure from other parents.' The last factor has led some commentators to prefer the notion of competitive parenting (Blackwell, 2014). This reflects the anxiety that one is not doing as much as other parents and therefore one is failing in one's responsibilities (Faircloth, 2014). O for the technology that could ensure our child is ready packaged, pre-destined to good citizenship and we need not worry that we are not doing enough to ensure that the child is receiving the best possible start in life (*The Economist*, 2014). And we are back with the debates over genetic enhancement.

As we have seen, 'parent blaming' has become a powerful feature of contemporary culture (Bristow, 2013). Parents are expected to have a particular set of skills and to exercise those with competence and care. A failure to do so is a failure to be a good parent and, as a result, society is negatively affected. The remainder of this chapter will take a critical look at the messages sent about parenting and the impact these developments have on parenting. It is argued that the expectations placed on parents set them up to fail; that the burdens placed on parents are excessive; that the burdens are highly gender- and class-based; that the identity of the child is subsumed into that the parent in the

current discourse on parenting; and that parenting has become privatized. The chapter concludes with an alternative vision of the parent-child relationship.

6. Parents Destined to Fail

The requirements or expectations on parents are excessive. Frank Furedi (2014) focuses on the role of experts and the 'scientification of child rearing' in relation to parents and their ability to take personal responsibility regarding their children:

Contemporary parenting culture exhorts parents to bring up their children according to 'best practice.' In virtually every area of social life today, experts advocate the importance of seeking help. Getting advice – and, more importantly, following the script that has been authored by experts – is seen as proof of 'responsible parenting.'

Parenthood has become a matter for experts, or at least 'supernanny'. Parents need special skills and training to do the job. This, however, can set up parents to fail.

Reece (2013) is concerned by the government advice (Department of Health, 2009) in *Birth to Five*, where positive parenting is promoted as a response to discipline issues. She quotes this passage:

(p. 413)

Be positive about the good things ... Make a habit of often letting your child know when he or she is making you happy. You can do that just by giving attention, a smile, or a hug. There doesn't have to be a 'good' reason. Let your child know that you love him or her just for being themselves... . Every time he or she does something that pleases you, make sure you say so (Reece, 2013: 61).

For Reece, although this image of positive parenting might not sound particularly arduous, 'positive reinforcement is far-reaching and nebulous: extending infinitely, it is impossible to define or fulfil. This is parenting without limit.' Parents will inevitably fail to be as positive as they could. She also refers to the advice of one parents guide on listening to a child:

It's not as easy as it sounds. To listen, first of all you have to think about your body language. Sit her in one chair, and you sit in another chair, facing her. Make good eye contact; have a relaxed facial expression; give feedback to show you're listening; nod in the right places (Reece, 2013: 63).

As Reece (2013: 63) points out, despite sounding like common sense, the requirements are in fact arduous and impossible to fulfil: '[t]he fine detail of such advice reinforces the impossibility of success: you may have given praise, in a positive tone of voice, but did you nod in the right places.' Can a parent ever be 'listening' or 'positive' enough? The parent is required to be the 'reflective parent' and Reece argues that this is, in fact, coer-

cive. It denies parents the opportunity to be natural and spontaneous. It is not surprising we have seen growth in the 'how to be a good parent' market, and the increased 'outsourcing' of child-rearing responsibilities to experts.

7. The Excessive Burden on Parents

The second aspect of social messaging about modern parenting is that there is no appreciation of the impact on the parent of the advice being given. Take for example these comments in *Birth to Five*: 'eat your dinner nicely so that your toddler will eat his dinner nicely; put away your clothes neatly so that your toddler will put away his clothes neatly' (Home Office 2008). While, again, appearing to be good advice, the expectations thereby placed on parents are considerable. Dare to be slightly untidy; eat without immaculate manners; consume an unhealthy snack; or utter words that should not be spoken and your child is destined to life of debauchery. Of course, that is not what the Government advice is trying to say, but given the general atmosphere around parenting, that is how it could be understood.

(p. 414) The technologies available to track and monitor children have added to the burden on parents. During her time as a government minister, Maria Miller stated that it is the responsibility of parents to ensure that children do not view pornography or inappropriate material on the Internet (Lawrence, 2012). That can be expensive and complex role, which in commercial settings is undertaken by trained IT departments.

A whole range of technologies are available to parents take on the responsibilities of protecting children from danger and ensuring they become good citizens. From baby monitors to GPS trackers, parents can use technology keep tabs on their children; yet these require extensive time and financial commitments. Marx and Steeves (2010) comment on the range of devices available:

Technologies examined include pre-natal testing, baby monitors and nanny cams, RFID-enabled clothing, GPS tracking devices, cell phones, home drug and semen tests, and surveillance toys, and span the years from pre-conception through to the late teens. Parents are encouraged to buy surveillance technologies to keep the child 'safe'. Although there is a secondary emphasis on parental convenience and freedom, surveillance is predominately offered as a necessary tool of responsible and loving parenting. Entrepreneurs also claim that parents cannot trust their children to behave in pro-social ways, and must resort to spying to overcome children's tendency to lie and hide their bad behaviour.

And if any parent feels that these are invading the privacy of children, Nelson (2010: 166) reminds them that parents 'praise baby monitors and cell phones for helping them to establish this desired closeness and responsiveness and for enabling them to use the knowledge thus obtained to better control their children.' The availability of this tracking tech-

nology may mean that those parents who do not exercise these options are perceived to be failing to take seriously their role.

8. The Exaggerated Claims of Parenthood

An overarching message sent by contemporary understandings of parents is that they are all-powerful (Faircloth and Murray, 2015). Even if they cannot currently genetically engineer their children, they can still do an enormous amount to influence them. One parenting course advertisement states:

We are the main influence on our teenagers' future. ... Meeting our teenagers' deepest needs, setting healthy boundaries, helping to develop their emotional health and teaching them how (p. 415) to make good choices takes skill and dedication. Taking time to reflect on our end goal can help us to build our relationship with our teenagers now (National Parenting Initiative, 2013).

The assumptions here, and in the law more generally, over the amount of control that parents exercise over children appears to excessive. A good example is the recent decision of the Court of Appeal in *Re B-H*. The case involved two teenage girls who, following the separation of their parents, lived with their mother and strongly objected to seeing their father. Vos LJ said: '[i]t is part of the mother's parental responsibility to do all in her power to persuade her children to develop good relationships with their father, because that is in their best interests.'³ While acknowledging that 'headstrong' teenagers can be 'particularly taxing' and 'exceptionally demanding', nevertheless the mother should change her daughters' attitudes. The President of the Family division wrote:

... what one can reasonably demand—not merely as a matter of law but also and much more fundamentally as a matter of natural parental obligation—is that the parent, by argument, persuasion, cajolement, blandishments, inducements, sanctions (for example, 'grounding' or the confiscation of mobile phones, computers or other electronic equipment) or threats falling short of brute force, or by a combination of them, does their level best to ensure compliance.⁴

Much more could be said about this case (Herring, 2015), but for now three points are worth noting. The first is that the court seems to imagine parents have far more power over their children than might be imagined. How is a mother expected to force teenagers to have a good relationship with someone else? Getting a teenager to do their homework is hard enough; getting them to visit and think positively about someone else is another. This is particularly so given that, in this case, the father had treated the children badly in the past. It appears the court is more interested in placing the blame for the breakdown on the mother than anything else. Second, the case ignores the emotional impact on the mother. The breakdown in this case was bitter. The mother had some good reasons to think ill of the father and oppose contact. While accepting that, following the court's decision, it was best for the children to spend time with their father, it might be reasonable to expect the mother not to impede the contact. To expect her to enable the contact to which

she was so strongly opposed requires an enormous amount of her. Third, the case loses sight of the children's own autonomy. They, too, had reasons for not wanting to see their father. To assume that the children's views were the responsibility of the mother presents an image of children being completely under the influence of the parents. It denies children's agency and is highly paternalistic. This final point is a general concern about the attitudes towards parenting. The emphasis on parental responsibility for the actions of children, and the significance attached to the need for good parenting, overlooks the agency of children themselves.

(p. 416) 9. The Gendered Aspect of Responsibility

The impact of parent blaming is highly gendered. While the advice and media presentations normally talk about parenting generally, the burden of the advice typically falls on mother. A good example is the NHS Choices (2010) discussion of research showing:

A significant positive relationship was found between offspring BMI and their mothers' BMI, i.e. there was a higher chance of the child being overweight/obese if their mother was. The association between child and maternal BMI had become more significant across generations. There was also a positive trend between increased BMI in the offspring cohort if their mother was in full-time employment; a relationship that was not seen in the 1958 cohort.

The link, then, is drawn between the weight of the mother and the work status of the mother and obesity. While, quite properly, the website emphasises the research does not prove correlation, one suspects many readers will receive the take home message as: '[i]f a mother wants a thin child she should be thin herself and not work.' And the flipside 'If your child is obese it is either the fact your working or your own obesity which has caused this.' Certainly the current attention paid to child obesity and the need for parents to tackle it is, the evidence suggests, treated by parents and professionals as primarily aimed at mothers (Wright, Maher, and Tanner 2015).

10. The Class-based Assumptions Behind Parenthood

It is easily overlooked that the popular presentation of the 'good parent' is heavily class-based (Ramaekers and Suissa, 2011). This chapter has already noted how the good parent will be using technology to enable them to exercise surveillance of children's internet use and track their movements. These are only available to those with significant economic resources. The use of 'supernannies', 'trained child minders', parental guides, and courses, not to mention qualified music teachers, tennis coaches, and the like to ensure the child is fit and well-rounded are, it hardly needs to be said, expensive. Nelson (2010: 177) writes of how the hyper-parenting requires the use of economic and social resources:

In short, the attentive hovering of the professional middle-class parents both requires and builds on a vast array of material resources, even though it does not necessarily rely on all available technology; simultaneously, the attentive hovering has roots and dynamics that emerge from, and are sustained by, cultural and social practices.

Another example is schooling. Selection of schools is now an important aspect of parental choice. Yet in reality it is heavily linked to socio-economic resources (Dermott and Pomati, 2015). Responsible parents will exercise their choice with care, but there is only a meaningful choice for those who have the economic and social resources to manipulate the system.

11. Merging of the Parent and Child

In much of the literature on modern parenting, the identities of the parent and child are merged. This is highly apparent in the genetic enhancement debate, where the child is created at the command and request of the parent. The child is a reflection of the parents' values and character. But this presented also as true in the current atmosphere surrounding parenthood, i.e. the competitive parent wants their child to be the best because that reveals that they are the best parent. As we saw earlier, the untidiness of the child reveals the untidiness of the parent. This idea of the child being a reflection of the parent is described by Stadlen (2005: 105), where the mother creates 'her own unique moral system within her own home', allowing her to 'learn not just what "works", but also what her deepest values are, and how she can express them in creating her family' (248). Her family is the very embodiment of her values, 'both her private affair and also her political base' (253). These kinds of attitudes are reinforced by the enormous emphasis placed on the responsibility of parents to raise their children well. The concern is not just that that creates a dangerous merging of the self of the parent and the child. As Reece put it: '[t]his gives a whole new meaning to the term "mini-me"' (2013).

12. The Privatizing of Parenthood

The emphasis on the parent as being responsible for the child ignores the significance of broader social, environmental, and community impacts of children (Gillies, 2011). (p. 418)
The importance of a good environment, good quality education, a supportive community, and high-quality children's television is all lost when the debate is framed in terms of parental failure (Dermott and Pomati, 2015). As Levitas (2012) points out, 'troubled families' were defined in terms of multiple disadvantages, such as having no parents in work. However, perhaps inevitably, the line between troubled families and families who caused troubles soon became blurred. The solution proposed by the government was to help

these parents be better parents, not to tackle the root causes of disadvantage that rendered them 'troubled' in the first place.

13. Towards a Relational Model of Parenthood: The Limits of Technologizing Parenthood

This section brings together the themes of this chapter relating to hyper-parenting—the fetishization of the ability to genetically engineer children, the desire to control and mould children, and the emphasis of the parents' responsibility for children. These themes are all open to technology playing a useful role in 'good parenting', but they are all subject to a single major flaw: they imagine parenthood as a one-way street. Parenthood is something that parents do to children and is designed with the aim of producing good, well-rounded children. The skill of parents is to mould their children to be good citizens, and to be responsible if their children turn out to be otherwise. Parenting has become a verb, rather than a noun (Lee and others 2014: 9–10). As Furedi (2011: 5) puts it: '[t]raditionally, good parenting has been associated with nurturing, stimulating and socializing children. Today it is associated with monitoring their activities.' Parenting has become a skill set to be learned, rather than a relationship to be lived.

The modern model of parenting described in this chapter involves children as passive recipients of parenthood. The parent-child relationship is not like that. The modern model overlooks the ways that children 'parent' the adults in their life. Children care, mould, control, discipline, and cajole their parents, just as parents do their children. The misdeed of a parent seeking to genetically engineer or hyper-parent their child is not just that the parent is seeking to impose a particular view of what is a good life on their child, although that is wrong. It is the error of failing to be open to change as an adult; failing to learn from children, failing to see that the things you thought were important are, in fact, not. It is failing to find the wonder, fear, loneliness, anxiety, spontaneity, and joy of children, and to refind them for oneself (Honoré, 2009).

(p. 419) Parenthood is not about the doing of tasks for which one has been trained, with technological tools. It is not a job to perform with responsibility; it is a relationship. Should we not look for parents who are warm, kind, loving, and understanding, rather than well-trained, equipped with technology, and hyper-vigilant (Stadlen, 2005)? This is not least because being a parent is not accomplished by possessing a skills set in the abstract. It is a specific relation to a particular child. It involves the parent and child working together to define what will make a successful relationship (Smedts, 2008). Sandel (2004: 55) says that 'parental love is not contingent on talents and attributes a child happens to have.' This, perhaps, is what is wrong with hyper-parenting. The child is not a project for parents to design and control. The language of children as a gift is preferable. That is typically seen as a religious claim, but it can be seen as a metaphor (Leach Scully, Shakespeare, and Banks 2006).

These points are all the more apparent to those of us whose children do not fall into the conventional sense of 'normal'. The notion of parental control and responsibility for what a child is or does seems absurd in this context. The rule books are long since discarded and it is a matter of finding day by day what works or, more often, what does not work. Parents of disabled children come to know that the greatest success for the child will be a failure by the objective standards of any government league table or examination board. But such social standards fail to capture a key aspect of parenting—that children can cause parents to be open to something more wonderful, particularly when they are more markedly different from a supposed social norm. Hannah Arendt (1958) has spoken of the power of 'natality': being open to unpredictable, unconditioned new life that birth brings. And perhaps it is that which seems an anathema to much current political and public talk of parenthood. As Julia Lupton writes, 'totalitarianism knows neither birth nor death because it cannot control the openings of action—the chance to do, make, or think something new—that natality initiates' (2006).

Returning to the issue of genetic enhancement, Frances Kamm (2005: 14) writes:

A deeper issue, I think, is our lack of imagination as designers. That is, most people's conception of the varieties of goods is very limited, and if they designed people their improvements would likely conform to limited, predictable types. But we should know that we are constantly surprised at the great range of good traits in people, and even more the incredible range of combinations of traits that turn out to produce 'flavors' in people that are, to our surprise, good.

And this captures a major argument against the technologizing of parenting, of seeking to use what powers we have to shape our children. Our vision of what is best for our children is too depressingly restrained: a good job, a happy relationship, pleasant health, and to be free from disease. Yet the best of lives is not necessarily marked by these things. Ellis (1989) writes that parents of disabled children suffer 'the grief of the loss of the perfect child'. This is a sad framing of such parenthood because disability can at least throw off the shackles of what is expected. It takes (p. 420) parents out of the battle of competitive parenting, where the future is not a predictable life course and is all the more exciting for that.

14. Conclusion

Rothschild (2005) writes of the 'dream of the perfect child', yet it is the nightmare of the non-perfect child which seems capture the parental imagination today. This chapter has explored some of the impacts of technology on parenting. The 'hope' of genetic enhancement has given glimpses of being able to create exactly the child one would wish for. Until that becomes possible, some parents seek to use technology and other skills to control and enrich their children. Hyper-parenting and competitive parenting reflect the desire of parents to produce the ideal child. Government rhetoric, backed up by legal sanctions, reinforces this by emphasizing that parents are responsible for their children in ways that are increasingly onerous and unrealistic. The chapter concluded with a different vision

for parenthood. Parenthood is not a job for which parents need equipment and special training to ensure production of the ideal product. It is a relationship (Smith, 2010) where the child teaches, nourishes, and cares for the parent as much as the parent does these things for the child.

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