

## Childrearing in the age of 'intensive parenting'

Child protection, reproductive choices, infant feeding and teenage parenthood (including planned teenage pregnancy and positive experiences of teenage motherhood) are among the topics to be discussed at an international conference on childrearing in the age of 'intensive parenting'.

Hosted and organised by the University of Kent's School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, the conference will take place at the University's Canterbury campus Monday 21 – Tuesday 22 May 2007.

Other discussion topics include: parenting in a climate of fear; parents as risk managers; understanding parenting culture; the 'medicalisation' of motherhood; gender and parenting and the 'intensification' of fatherhood; the emotional management of parents and the sacralisation of 'bonding'; the politics of parenting culture; the regulation of pregnancy and childbirth; and childcare in the early months.

Contributors include: Dr Susan Douglas, Professor of Communication Studies, University of Michigan and co-author of *The Mommy Myth*; Professor Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology, University of Kent and author of *Paranoid Parenting* and *Culture of Fear*; Stephanie Knaak, University of Alberta and author of 'Breast-feeding, bottle-feeding and Dr Spock: The shifting context of choice'; Dr Rebecca Kukla, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Carleton University at Ottawa and author of *Mass Hysteria, Medicine, Culture and Women's Bodies*; Dr Ellie Lee, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, University of Kent and author of 'Infant feeding in risk society' and *Abortion, Motherhood and Mental Health: Medicalizing Reproduction in the US and Great Britain*; and Dr Elizabeth Murphy, Professor of Medical Sociology, University of Nottingham and author of 'Images of Childhood in Mother's Accounts of Contemporary Childrearing' and *Qualitative Methods and Health Policy*.

Dr Ellie Lee, the conference organiser, explained that her own research about women's experience of feeding their babies had led her to want to organise the event. 'The research showed that a basic, everyday aspect of being a mother has become moralised and politicised,' she said. 'The choices women make in this area seemed in turn to have become bound up for many mothers with identity, with potentially demoralising consequences. As I looked further into the issue, it also became clear that this is only one such example among many.'

She continued: 'By all accounts it seems as though mothering is no longer left to mothers and is no longer a social experience they can expect to enjoy. Mothering has become seen as too important to be

left to mothers. As a result, mother- child interaction has become a laboratory, where politicians, professionals and experts of all kinds experiment about an expanding range of problems, real or imagined. It seemed in this light important to bring together in one place those who have investigated the problems of parenting culture in all its forms. The event provides a unique opportunity for critical engagement with cultural and policy developments which shape the experience of all parents.'

Professor Frank Furedi, who will deliver a keynote introduction at the conference, said: 'Since the turn of the century parenting has become a political football. Due to their lack of imagination increasingly policy makers embrace good parenting as the solution to virtually every social problem – poor education, crime, anti- social behaviour, obesity. However the politicising of child rearing has a destructive impact on family life and distracts mothers and fathers from the real challenges facing them.'

**Journalists welcome.**

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*For further information, conference abstracts (where available) and interview availability contact the Media Office at the University of Kent on:*

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*News releases can also be found at <http://www.kent.ac.uk/news>*

**Notes to editors:**

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**To see the conference programme go to:**

[www.parentingculturestudies.org/prog.htm](http://www.parentingculturestudies.org/prog.htm)

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**Background to the conference:** In 2004/2005 Professor Furedi and Dr Lee conducted research about women's experience of feeding their young babies, focussing in particular on mothers who formula-feed. This study sought to build upon developments outlined and discussed by Professor Furedi in his 2002 book *Paranoid Parenting* and by Dr Lee in her *Abortion, Motherhood and Mental Health: Medicalizing Reproduction in the United States and Great Britain* published in 2003.

This study identified a widespread experience of ambivalence and lack

of confidence associated with feeding babies. Women who formula feed in particular reported this experience, recounting an experience of relief and pleasure at finding a feeding method that addressed often unexpected tensions and difficulties, but at the same time speaking of guilt, anxiety, worry and uncertainty. Overall, the study seemed to point to the way that how women feed their babies has become powerfully bound up with their identity as mothers: the choices women make in this area of childrearing have become a measure of motherhood (a summary of the findings can be found at: [www.kent.ac.uk/sspsr/staff/Infant%20Formula-Summary%5Bfinal%5D.pdf](http://www.kent.ac.uk/sspsr/staff/Infant%20Formula-Summary%5Bfinal%5D.pdf)).

The discussion generated by this study seemed to confirm that maternal experience in this area is only one part of a wider experience of ambivalence and uncertainty now associated with child rearing. In particular, it also pointed to the continuing relevance of the concept of 'intensive motherhood' developed in the 1990s by the American sociologist Sharon Hays, to capture the nature of contemporary parenting culture, and how it shapes identity. In this light, Professor Furedi and Dr Lee thought it made sense to set up an event that could give them the opportunity to discuss these issues with other researchers whose work they admired and who are engaged in investigating similar themes and issues.

They hope that the event can provide a genuine forum for open-ended discussion and debate about the nature of parental experience today. They also hope that it can form the start of an ongoing process of networking and development of ideas that critically interrogate this important social problem.