

## Times Higher Education Supplement Mum's place is in the wrong

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Blame culture leaves parents confused and guilty, a conference will hear. Melanie Newman reports.

"Dysfunctional families," Tony Blair said last month, "need to be made to change."

A few days earlier, the Government had announced plans for a "parenting academy" to help beleaguered mothers and fathers raise their children. Last week, Sir Ian Blair, the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, joined in, suggesting that young children in families that contain teenage gang members be taken into care.

While ministers and mandarins blame poor parents for society's ills, and in doing so turn parenting from a private affair into a matter of public interest, academics gathering at a conference in Kent this month will discuss how parents are under more pressure than ever to be perfect.

The academics are calling for a full public "intellectual debate" on the issue to help understand society in all its complex facets and to end the "cheap-fix" blame culture in which parents are left feeling confused, demonised and guilty.

Delegates at Kent University's *Monitoring Parents: Childrearing in the Age of "Intensive Parenting"* conference on May 21-22 will report how choices about childbirth, pain relief, feeding, sleeping arrangements and even how many children a woman has are influenced by moral directives on "good mothering".

In North America, as Rebecca Kukla, professor of philosophy and internal medicine at the University of South Florida, explains, mothers are posed a series of tests and told that failure will have serious consequences.

"A recent article suggested feeding a child one hot dog can set them up for a lifetime's obesity," Professor Kukla said. She also cited a campaign that advises women that one (alcoholic) drink during pregnancy may damage their foetus, although, she pointed out, "there is not one instance where a single drink has caused a measurable problem".

Mary Ann Kanieski, assistant professor of sociology at St Mary's College, Indiana, will discuss how bonding and attachment theories have promoted traditional views of femininity at a time when many mothers work. She said the theories personalised problems by attributing them to the mother's personal choices while ignoring the larger context.

As a result, mothers feel guilty about even their need for rest and sleep, as Stephanie Knaak, a PhD student at the University of Alberta, has found.

And the pressures on parents do not relax as the child grows older.

Anneke Meyer, a lecturer in sociology and cultural studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, will present a paper on paedophilia and "parenting in a climate of fear".

She said: "There's a pressure on parents to give their children space and allow them to develop autonomously, while at the same time they are expected to protect children from risk by supervising them to a huge degree. These demands are so conflicting that parents never feel entirely satisfied with what they are doing."

Conference organiser Ellie Lee, a lecturer in social policy at Kent, said mothers who did not follow accepted thinking on "good mothering" felt demonised, while others felt guilty or confused over conflicting advice.

Dr Lee initially studied mothers who used formula milk, rather than breastfeeding, and found that they "felt they were being monitored and censored by all sorts of people". Mothers unable to breastfeed felt that they had failed. Some even hid their babies' bottles from healthcare professionals, Dr Lee added.

"Women are expected to adopt a highly child-centred approach to mothering.

Anything convenient for the mother or that prioritises the mother's needs is frowned upon," she said.

Underlying these pressures is a new social trend towards individualising parenting.

Dr Lee said: "The parent is seen as entirely responsible for how a child turns out. The past ten years have seen an eradication of ideas that suggest problems develop elsewhere.

"At the level of Government, blaming the parent is a cheap fix. But I see this as reflecting a cultural crisis affecting almost every aspect of our society. We don't have intellectual debates to try to understand society in all of its complex facets and to work out where social problems might come from. That's too difficult, so instead we take the reductionist view - and parents are in the line of fire."

Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at Kent, has written extensively on the "parents as gods" view. "This thinking creates a poisonous atmosphere for child-rearing," he said. "The pressure on parents to 'do the right thing' interferes with their efforts to develop a meaningful relationship with their kids."

Val Gillies, a senior research fellow at London South Bank University, said working-class parents often received official advice that they did not want while their needs for more practical support and specialist services went unmet.

"When specific problems are encountered with a child's health or education, mothers often find help very difficult to obtain," she pointed out. In many parts of the country, for example, there are long waiting lists for access to speech therapists.

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