

Book Reviews

Val Gillies, Rosalind Edwards and Nicola Horsley (2017) *Challenging the politics of early intervention: Who's 'saving' children and why*, Bristol: Policy Press, £22.99, pp. 208, pbk.
doi:[10.1017/S0047279418000387](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279418000387)

Over the last two decades, successive governments in the UK have placed heavy emphasis on the formative importance of parenting, mothering in particular, for babies' brain development and life chances. The idea is that substandard mothering has lasting biological effects on children, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage. Since the late 1990s, policy has shifted from structural explanations for life chances to assertions about the determining effect of parenting on children's future. The explicit linking between brain science, parenting and early years policy was transplanted from the US into UK policy, with the first direct reference found in the *Birth to three matters* report by the Department for Education and Skills published in 2002. Since then a number of government commissioned reports (e.g., Field, 2010, Allen, 2011a and 2011b and Munro, 2011) have been published, all citing neuro-developmental arguments that first appeared at the joint report by Allen and Duncan Smith, *Early Intervention: Good parents, great kids, better citizens* in 2008. These reports propelled a new era of social investment policies that reconceptualised social services as investment opportunities likely to yield not only beneficial social outcomes for children but also financial returns for the shareholders.

This book draws on a two-year study titled *Brain Science and Early Intervention* to investigate how 'evidence-based' accounts about the effects of parenting on the structure and function of babies' brain have underpinned early years policy and early intervention initiatives. In so doing, the authors offer a thorough examination of the political and policy context of early intervention and the interest groups (e.g. politicians, policy makers, directors of statutory and voluntary sector services) that drive it, the evidence from evaluation studies on the effectiveness of intervention initiatives and the neuro-developmental arguments about infants' brain architecture and mothers' role in shaping it.

The book examines the consensus built around the relationship between brain science and early intervention, which is shown to be based on shaky evidence and a conceptual decoupling from the broader context of rising income inequality. An important contribution of this book is to contest this orthodoxy and 'argue that the link between parenting and child brain development is far from being resolved'. The notion that the wrong type of parenting has lasting biological and cultural effects on child development raises important questions, especially when seen through the lens of a recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which raised doubts about 'the prospects for solving UK poverty', confirming that poverty rates are consistently highest among children and their parents (JRF Analysis Unit, 2017).

As the budget for universal services is being cut and austerity is set to continue, policy debates on structural explanations for children's life chances are closing down. Much current national and international policy makes assertions about parenting 'causing' lasting effects on children's brain development while unequal childhoods in terms of structural barriers and unequal access to materials and resources are rarely mentioned. The JRF Analysis Unit concluded that of the 12 million working-age adults and children in poverty, 8 million live in

families where at least one person is in work. Employment no longer leads to lower poverty and further reductions of the incomes of families on low income through rising inflation, changes to benefits and tax credits and high housing costs continue to reduce the incomes available for families in poverty (JRF, 2017). Clearly, reducing income inequality rather than implementing social investment policy models is a better way to tackle social injustice.

The authors set out to write a book that questions accepted orthodoxy and provokes debate. They have fully succeeded in challenging the dominant prevention narrative and its pre-emptive thinking of placing the onus on individual parents by examining the broader structural and cultural context shaping children's developmental outcomes and life chances. The book is a strong reminder that there are alternatives to the current biologised framework of early intervention by arguing for redirecting the focus of public debate and resources from individual risks to social harm, especially if we want to work out what constitutes a good or fair society. Through a thorough investigation of the epistemic and policy base of early intervention, the authors make a strong case for policy to pay attention to the structural barriers in disadvantaged families.

The compelling critique in this book about neuroscience explanations of disadvantaged children's brains as indisputable facts is timely. In our post-truth era, where opinions and feelings are just as true as facts, there is a need to open up the debate on what counts as evidence in early intervention and realise how far reaching this strange new normal of locating risk within families and placing the onus on parents has become. An antidote to this is to contest current policy attempts to manage risk and disadvantage at an individual level and start the conversations about our collective responsibility for human wellbeing.

References

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Peter Taylor-Gooby, Benjamin Leruth, and Heejung Chung (eds) (2017) *After Austerity: Welfare State Transformation in Europe after the Great Recession*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, £25.00, pp. 256, pbk.
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Peter Taylor-Gooby has been pursuing the ways in which the European welfare state has been transformed since the early eighties. He has made a major contribution to building the theoretical underpinnings for welfare politics, extending the analysis from basic historical, economic, political and social relationships in several directions. He has re-interpreted key social policy concepts such as citizenship, dependency culture and risk and has drawn into the