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Teaching parenting in a pandemic: social and pedagogical discourses

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ABSTRACT

In many countries the COVID-19 pandemic has been managed through lockdowns including school closures which require parents/guardians to take responsibility for overseeing children's education. Lockdowns also left parents supervising more of their children's informal time. Parenting has always been the subject of adult education, both formal and institutional and informal via networks, books and media advice. This article undertakes a critical discourse analysis of a small selection of media texts offering advice and guidance on parenting in the pandemic. The analyses suggest that the pandemic context generated a discourse of crisis and urgency which intensified pressure on parents to conform to a specific model of the 'good parent'. 'Good parents' follow the guidance of experts and closely discipline and regulate themselves and their children through the careful management of time, space, emotions and relationships. During the temporary suspension of societal institutions, most notably schools and workplaces, which normally perform these disciplinary functions, parents and families are in the spotlight and their performance is therefore subject to more intense informal education and management.

Introduction

In many contemporary cultures, parenting is a public and social function as well as a private role. There are unspoken assumptions about what constitutes the 'good parent' as well as more overt statements about good practice. A media offering of informal parental education is widely available, alongside state sanctioned parenting classes. Citizens do not become parents simply through birth or adoption, but through cultural and educative processes (e.g. Aarsand, 2014; Faircloth et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2014; Richter & Andresen, 2012). In this piece we explore some of the efforts to highlight social norms and ideals about parenting for the wider public. In particular, we examine a small selection of media texts offering advice and guidance to parents in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scholars have addressed the importance of studying the pandemic through the lens of adult education and learning, to highlight, for instance, social, economic, educational and digital inequalities, the resilience and fragility in contemporary society, and the multiple forms of risk and solidarity emerging in times of crisis (e.g. Boeren et al., 2020; James & Thériault, 2020; Milana et al., 2021; Waller et al., 2020). In causing fundamental challenges in societies the pandemic can also be understood in terms of a 'disjuncture' in people's lives creating major learning possibilities, yet in uncertain and fearful circumstances (e.g. Bjursell, 2020; Salling Olesen et al., 2021). Such

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demanding times may trigger the development of new knowledge and practices and there is value in examining closely the resources provided to adults to navigate the situation. Here we discuss media providing advice for parents about thinking, talking, managing and acting adequately in day-to-day situations.

It is well established that adult learning is not confined to formal education but takes place in everyday life (Lave & Gomes, 2019) and includes at times, powerful and transformational learning (MacKerarcher, 2012). This everyday learning encompasses learning from multiple textual forms, which adult education scholars have explored using various methodologies, including observations, conversations and interviews with adults about their learning from texts, such as Wright and Sandlin's (2009) work with women watching the television series *The Avengers*, Jarvis and Burr's (2011) work on transformative learning through television, and Hoggan and Cranton's (2015) examination of promoting transformative learning through fictions. Gouthro (2019), drawing on interviews with authors, notes that fictions can offer 'rich insights into factors that shape individuals who have experienced difficult backgrounds' (p. 191). Verran's (2019) work with bookclubs explores the potential offered for enhancing understanding of science and epidemiology through the analysis of texts, whilst Harris (2019) considers how the tv-programme *Dr Who* offers insights about identity to trainee teachers. There is also work which focuses on the texts themselves as pedagogical, using textual analyses to examine their educational processes or debate educational intent. Jubas et al. (2015) refer specifically to 'textual and discursive analyses' as research methodologies in their edited collection. Jubas (2005) discusses Mistry's *A Fine Balance* as an educational piece focusing on globalisation and community. Jarvis analyses the capacity of various fictional forms to operate as critical adult education (Jarvis, 2018), and Timanson and Schindel (2015) undertake a discourse analysis of workplace learning in the tv-series *Nurse Jackie*. Our article operates within this tradition of textual analysis in adult education, by using critical discourse analysis to explore the educational function of newspaper and website material teaching adults about parenting during the pandemic.

Compulsory schooling requires parents to cede responsibility for their children to the state for much of the working week. Some children's time outside school is also organised into a range of physical, cultural and social activities, such as sports clubs and music classes, where again, parents relinquish the management of their children to others. Lockdowns have been a common feature of the COVID-19 pandemic in many countries often including closures of schools and extra-curricular activities. These closures leave parents with direct and full responsibility for their children for long periods of time. Schools and colleges have mostly maintained responsibility for curriculum and assessment, but parents have been responsible for overseeing these in the home. The usual institutions which control children's actions, activities, movements and timetables during the day have been suspended, giving a higher profile to parents as managers of their children's time, activities, and learning.

A plethora of media has addressed this issue, offering advice and guidance to parents. In this article we undertake a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of five of these pieces, to consider how the pandemic has affected the pedagogical work on parenting. Our analysis is informed by the existing literature discussing parenting guidance as a form of adult education, and by Foucault's (1991) work on disciplinary practices, applied in this instance to the management of young people and children's bodies in time and space. We begin by setting the context with a discussion of the literature on parenting, and a brief summary of the Foucauldian ideas on which we draw. The article then outlines the CDA methodology, followed by analyses of two feature articles in a UK newspaper and three websites produced by international and national NGOs and government bodies.

Parenting knowledge and competence

Research shows how information about contemporary parenting employs the language of education, knowledge and competence (e.g. Edwards & Gillies, 2011; Gillies, 2011; Lee, 2014; Ramaekers

& Suissa, 2012). Distinct from being a 'natural', integral part of relationships in the family, child-rearing emerges rather as a complex and demanding task for adults, where they are positioned as subjects in need of particular skills to carry out their parental role successfully. Hence, there are normative layers of parenthood and parenting practices at work manifesting predominant ideas about what is recognised as 'good' (e.g. Sparrman et al., 2016). Moreover, parents are not only depicted as important for the development of their own children through the exercise of adequate parental choices and suitable practices and skills but are held to be 'determinants' for society in supplying the state with responsible and well-functioning future citizens (Furedi, 2002; Oelkers, 2012), which makes adequate parenting key to social effectiveness.

The assumption that knowledge about parenting is necessary opens space for a myriad of initiatives promoting acceptable ways for adults to perform as parents. Studies illustrate, for instance, how educational practices (Widding, 2015), family learning (Macleod & Tett, 2019) and partnership models (Hopwood & Clerke, 2016) offer help and support to adults who are invited, even expected, to engage in learning and improve their parenting skills. Likewise, everyday practices such as the media and popular culture seem preoccupied with parenting, portraying themselves as resources for parents. Scholars have illustrated how magazines, newspapers and television take a pedagogical role, often offering 'expertise' on parenting matters, giving advice and pointing out ideas and ideals that parents should possess (e.g. Aarsand, 2014; Assarsson & Aarsand, 2011; Assarsson Aarsand, 2011; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014). Furthermore, the expansion of websites, online discussion forums and blogs focusing on parenting has been noted (e.g. *Mumsnet* in the UK, *Parents* in the USA, *Belly Belly* in Australia, *Familjeliv* in Sweden and *Barnimagen* in Norway), all willingly providing significant levels of information, emotional support, and advice on pregnancy and childrearing. Social media platforms and networking sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram* also offer opportunities for adults to share their parenting experiences, tips and tricks (Lupton et al., 2016).

Everyday spaces addressing and promoting parenting may be seen as ideological practices encouraging particular social norms and ideals, and, also, part of a broader governmental assemblage attempting to shape the field of possible action (Foucault & Blasius, 1993). Embedded within these practices are normative assumptions defining how to think, talk and act, which simultaneously tend to restrict and obscure the alternatives. In contemporary times the dominant parenting style has been called 'intensive parenting' (Faircloth, 2014) and 'involved parenthood' (Forsberg, 2009). What is deemed to be 'good' requires conformity with highly prescribed societal expectations of parental activity, responsibility, and knowledgeability (e.g. Gillies, 2008; Lee, 2014; McGowan, 2005; Millei & Lee, 2007). Parenting metaphors may also appear as gendered illustrated in examples like 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996), 'intimate fatherhood' (Dermott & Miller, 2015) and 'reflexive fatherhood' (Westerling, 2015). Seemingly, however, they can all be subsumed within the intensive parenting style reflective of the wider social and cultural context.

Taken together it seems that contemporary adults are subjected to increased attention, potentially encountering a whole army of 'professionals' to educate, support and discipline them as parents. In the media the tendency to offer 'the right knowledge base' to parents is well-documented. Taking this as our point of departure we undertake an empirical study of selected websites and newspapers featuring parenting in the pandemic. We use critical discourse analysis as a tool to examine how the pedagogical work on parenting has operated during this global challenge.

Discourse and disciplining practices

We draw on Foucault's development of ideas about discourse and power in our analysis. Foucault (1991) demonstrates how disciplining occurs as a result of constant self-regulation, which he likens to the Benthamite concept of the Panopticon, a building which allows constant surveillance, prompting self-surveillance and obedience. The processes he discusses

include the spatial and temporal distribution of individual bodies. Discourses about parenting in the pandemic constitute good parenting as the management of children's bodies in time and space, through structured activity. The relationship between power and discourse is evident in the way that both parenting and child subjects are constituted through discourse, and in the use of language that excludes some approaches to parenting and legitimises those which discipline children's bodies in the way schools are normally expected to do on behalf of society.

The good pandemic parent is presented in the texts we study as the parent who organises children's minds and bodies in time and space through routines, regulation and timetables. This can be understood in the context of Foucault's work in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1991), in which he demonstrates the multiple, overlapping disciplinary processes which develop individual subjects who are both useful and obedient. The central focus of the parenting guidance we discuss is the production of parental subjects, who produce children who normalise and accept the need to constantly regulate their activities in time and space. The homogenous and ubiquitous focus on the parental management of children in this way seems to be an example of the 'meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication (that) are the supports or an accumulation and centralization of knowledge' (Foucault, 1991, p. 217).

In spite of the fragmentation and apparent de-centralisation of knowledge and communication in contemporary society, we observed many examples of disciplinary processes prompting parents to self-regulate and encourage self-regulation in their children, through rational, normalising discourses. So well embedded are these discourses that suggesting alternatives (such as encouraging the free flow of time, living in the moment – being happy that your teenager wants to stay in bed until lunchtime) seems dysfunctional, silly, or anti-social. We found it interesting that lockdown, which involved the exercise of considerable amounts of what Foucault calls sovereign power (top down, enforceable power) through legislation and sanctions, including fines and imprisonment, created risks in the home which had to be addressed rather via more diffuse and self-regulatory disciplinary power. Schools have been analysed as important institutions through which disciplinary power operates, via the control of bodies through timetables and regulated activities (Ball, 2013). If schools cannot operate, therefore, society risks losing this opportunity to discipline children to accept as entirely normal the requirement to be in a specific place, doing a specific set of tasks at specific times. This regulation of bodies, so essential for the functioning of an industrial and post-industrial economy, was handed to parents during this pandemic.

Methodology

We present below a critical discourse analysis of two newspaper features from *The Times*, UK, and from three websites. Critical discourse analysis involves detailed and close reading, and our choice of texts was inevitably selective, rather than comprehensive or fully representative. Nevertheless, we attempt to offer an analysis of more informal 'infotainment' material by considering the newspaper features, as well as the websites from NGOS and government organisations. We settled on the two Times articles, because they illustrated how a format which purported to offer the views of experts approaching the issues from significantly different positions was to some extent bounded by the same discourse of regulation and control. Alternative discourses exist, but our wider reading of media material from lockdown periods indicates that the broad thrust of the discourses we outline was widespread.

The term critical discourse analysis is used in different ways and in different contexts. It has been discussed and theorised as a suitable tool for the analysis of educational experiences and encounters (Rogers, 2011) and has been developed and applied by different scholars (see van Leeuwen, 2008 for a synthesis of approaches). It is broadly understood as the study of language as a social practice. Drawing on critical theory, CDA positions discourse within a social context, characterised by power structures which discourse both reflects and constitutes. Van Leeuwen (2008) for example,

considers how discourse uses legitimisation methods including authorisation, a process which is prevalent in the texts we considered, where approved approaches to parenting and the management of the child are legitimated through reference to societally approved experts.

CDA views discourse as not just representative, but constitutive of ideologies, thought processes and the operation of power. Fairclough (1995) argues that analyses of power need to take account of discourse and language, and that the study of language needs to consider questions of 'linguistic form and style as well as content' as these may also be 'ideologically invested' (p. 70). Our methodological approach involved paying close attention both to the words used and to the rhetorical features employed in the texts. Following Fairclough, we recognise that 'ideology invests language in various ways and at various levels' and is 'both a property of structures and a property of events' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 71). We attended to the linguistic structure of the texts we analysed, to their form and metaphorical features, the structure and layout of the webpages and newspaper articles, but also to the events in which they are situated. We were mindful, therefore, of the significance of the specific historical and social context of parenting and the very specific historical, cultural and geographical moment of the COVID-19 pandemic in Western societies, as the texts we examined largely addressed a Western audience.

Fairclough (1995) describes discourse as embedded in social relations. He specifically notes that the 'parent child relationships of the family, the determination of what positions of "mother", "father" and "child" are socially available as well as the subjection of real individuals to these positions, the nature of the family, or of the home, are all shaped in the ideological processes of discourse' (p. 73).

Discourse assumes a subject(s) of that discourse, who can interpret the text and decode its obvious and more subtle features. CDA not only considers how language operates but situates this within a theoretical framework which develops from Gramscian ideas about the development of hegemony. It considers how discourse is part of the development of consensus, of particular worldviews which embed power structures and naturalise these. In our analyses we discuss the use of specific strategies to constitute parents as overwhelmed and unable to cope, in need of expert advice and support. One very obvious strategy we noted is what Fairclough (1995) refers to as 'synthetic personalisation' (p. 80), the simulation of private face to face person to person discourse in public mass audience discourse. In the texts we considered, the tone was often that of a conversation with someone 'just like you', who knows how difficult this situation is, or with a friendly health care or support worker.

We also noted that texts constructed the social practice of parenting as crisis as a result of the pandemic and therefore in need of clear rules and social support. Pini (2011), when looking at discourses of educational management organisations in the US, shows how discourse constructs schools as consumers in need of support by creating a discourse in which there is a 'manufactured crisis', requiring the intervention of educational management organisations, thus embedding the power of private organisations and disempowering schools. There are parallels with the discourses we considered which use the real crisis (the pandemic) to manufacture another (the failure of parenting). The consequence of this is the perceived need to turn to parenting experts, limiting parental agency and power.

Our approach to analysing the texts was open. We noted and reflected upon language features generally, including the structure and framing of sentences and larger linguistic units, the way that social actors were positioned in the texts, through vocabulary, use of tenses and the choice of narrative perspective, and the range of figurative language, intertextuality and connotations. Our perceptions were shaped by our interest in the concept of *legitimisation* as discussed by van Leeuwen (2008), *manufactured crisis* (Pini, 2011) and the relationship between power, language, space and time (Foucault, 1991). Our analyses look at how the *legitimisation* of specific approaches to parenting is embedded through some of the discursive strategies outlined in the literature, by drawing on specific concepts which we have italicised below. In order to maintain the flow of the analyses, these terms appear in italics but are not explained and referenced each time they are used.

We draw on the use of *synthetic personalisation* as discussed by Fairclough (1995) through which the writer establishes themselves as a friend or ally of the reader, thereby building trust and on the following concepts as outlined by van Leeuwen (2008): *authorisation*, notably *expert authorisation* and the authority of conformity; *evaluative vocabulary, abstractions and analogies*, which attribute positive values to specific parental behaviours, usually without any overt explanation; *theoretical rationalisation*, which is a form of naturalisation, in which actions which could be critically discussed are presented as objective realities, and elements of mythopoesis, notably the use of *cautionary tales* to demonstrate the dangers of non-conformity to preferred methods of parenting. In terms of Pini's (2011) notion of *manufactured crisis* we noted particularly the use of *evaluative vocabulary* and inclusive humour in the construction of the inadequate parent and the difficulties created by the pandemic. We drew on Foucault, to show how the discourse of the good parent was linked to the idea of *disciplinary practices* through the control of time and space, particularly aligning language of success and well-being of children to this.

We are based in different countries, so writing this article during the COVID-19 period has been a true collaboration in and through digital meetings and email, given the travel restrictions. To accomplish the analysis, we initially divided the texts between us. However, we then reviewed and amended iteratively, each working on all the texts. Through this process, we found a fruitful balance between individual and collaborative contributions, with respect to all elements of the article. Throughout, our work has been characterised by an open, mutual, and critical dialogue, and a shared responsibility for the full manuscript.

Analyses – newspaper features and websites

The first piece we consider is a newspaper feature by Anna Maxted from *The Times*, London, (int) 25 July 2020, entitled, 'How to parent post-lockdown – eight new rules'.

Before introducing expert ideas, Maxted uses a form of *synthetic personalisation* simulating a friendly relationship to reinforce the naturalisation of parenting as a difficult process. She asks the reader, 'Who won't admit that lockdown has played havoc with the way we parent our children?' This positions the reader as someone already in agreement with the statement. It suggests disagreement would be strange and establishes the reader as a member of a community of others also struggling. It normalises parenting difficulties, almost to the extent that a parent not experiencing problems might feel excluded; it could be perceived as contributing to a *manufactured crisis.*

She also uses *evaluative* vocabulary with significant negative connotations when describing parental behaviour, which establishes the position that parents need help. Families who spend all day together are 'frazzled', boundaries have 'slipped', children (and parents) have been 'snacking'. Whilst having a snack might not be considered negative in itself, here it is assumed that the snack is unhealthy, and above, all, contrary to the dominant discourse in this piece, which is that family life (including mealtimes) should be regulated and disciplined. Parents, she says have been 'mucking about' on *TikTok* with their children, 'scoffing popcorn' and watching 'American sitcoms'. The 'American' is interesting – it conceals a textual code aimed at a particular class and culture – middle class UK parents. The assumption appears to be that sitcoms are a culturally low form, and that US sitcoms are particularly valueless (despite the excellent writing and production in many sitcoms generally, and the many critical accolades awarded to those written and produced in the US).

Thus, the introduction establishes that parents are doing a bad job by allowing excessive freedom or lack of structure and failing to maintain middle class ideals. This prepares the reader for the next section, in which Maxted uses *legitimisation,* specifically *authorisation* when she introduces 'parenting expert and sociology professor' Frank Furedi to explain how to cope. Furedi is described using vocabulary which emphasises his credentials, by comparison with the 'frazzled' parents' lack of such qualifications. It provides *legitimisation* for his advice. Professor Furedi, parents are told, is 'an associate of the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies at the University of Kent' and has just written a new book.

Maxted goes on to outline the essence of Furedi's eight new rules for parenting in lockdown. Two textual features stand out. First, there is widespread use of the imperative verb: these are rules, not suggestions. Parents are told what to do in no uncertain terms, just as they are expected to be absolute in their establishment of *disciplinary* structures for their children. So, 'Don't ask questions, make an assertive statement'; 'Understand you haven't got a symmetrical relationship'; 'Make time for your own relationship'; 'Teach them to respect other people's space'; 'Give them jobs to do'; 'Be strict with mobile phones'; 'Have discussions over dinner'; 'Instil family values'; and so on. This creates a didactic and authoritative tone – which perversely positions the parent as the child in need of instruction. It operates in contradiction to much received wisdom about adult education in which the adults' knowledge and understanding forms the basis of the learning, where teacher and student are co-learners.

Secondly, the rules themselves use the language of *discipline* and regulation. Foucauldian analyses of education draw attention to the disciplinary power of schools, operating through the regulation of children's bodies in time and space (Ball, 2013). In lockdown the parent is required to reproduce this. Furedi's argument is that children need 'boundaries' and it is the parents' job to provide these. The inference is that in the pandemic, it is more necessary than ever to take 'back control'. Thus, children's time must be managed, 'No more late nights'; 'limit the time your children spend online'; 'limit the time they have access to you (because you need your own space)'. Furedi uses *evaluative* (derogatory) language to describe relaxed attitudes to mealtimes: 'the cafeteria model of family life'. Discipline is also to be instilled by making children eat what parents choose – controlling their internal as well as their external bodies. When Furedi declares that children should learn independence, the examples he gives are of children carrying out specific acts of labour as instructed by parents: 'encourage your child's independence by giving them tasks such as vacuuming duty'.

Maxted's piece is a vehicle for Furedi's ideas in which the child is a body to be *disciplined*; regulated and managed, and parents are the vehicle for managing all aspects of the child's time and location, thereby ensuring that the child is constantly under surveillance.

The second *Times newspaper* feature is by Rachel Carlyle, from 20 February 2021: 'Why the pandemic will make us better parents'. The formula is similar to Maxted's. Carlyle introduces the topic then summarises the advice of a parenting expert, Dr. Harold Koplewicz. A CDA analysis reveals similarities and differences. Carlyle makes even stronger use of *synthetic personalisation* than Maxted, creating an intimate and jokey tone. She uses humour to disarm criticism acknowledging that 'frazzled' (the word also used by Maxted in her introduction) parents might be annoyed by the idea that they could do better and asks us to 'put down the glass of wine we were about to hurl in his direction and give him a chance to make his case'. The glass of wine has multiple connotations – parents are not coping and therefore need to drink alcohol, and they choose wine, with its middle-class associations, not lager. Like Maxted, Carlyle uses *evaluative* vocabulary which constructs parents as inadequate: in addition to 'frazzled' we have 'inadequate', 'guilty', 'exhausted' and 'stressed'. The expert she introduces, Koplewicz, talks about not wanting to 'add to parents' burdens', hereby constructing parenting as something painful to be borne with difficulty.

The article uses *legitimisation* through *authorisation* in positioning Koplewicz as an expert, like Furedi. The reader is told he is 68, president of the influential Child Mind Institute in New York, former NYU professor, and was 'editor in chief of the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology*' for 24 years. Thus, he is learned, respected and has a long track record. He is also promoting a new book. Additionally, he believes that parents are 'exhausted' and in need of 'evidence-based advice' – in other words they cannot parent effectively without expertise rooted in empirical scientific method. Although his tone is less didactic than Furedi's, this discourse also establishes parents as incompetent without additional education from experts.

Superficially, his approach is more liberal, encouraging a more relaxed parenting style than that of Furedi's and his style is more inclusive. He uses an anecdote about his own lack of self-discipline during lockdown (failing to exercise until advised by his doctor) to establish his own vulnerabilities

and commonalities with the issues parents face – a *cautionary tale*. Later in the piece he talks about his own unrealistic expectations for one of his own children. Using *synthetic personalisation* in this way he creates an 'us'– parental subjects that include him as well as his readers as learners from experience.

Nevertheless, the tone is equally *authoritative*, even though he stresses adopting more relaxed behaviours. He issues emphatic instructions using the imperative verb to signal this: 'Thank them'; 'Ignore cloths and towels on the bedroom floor'; 'save the one critical comment for something important'; 'Don't minimise it'; 'say I get it I hear you'. Sometimes he merely 'advises', but his advice is given in language that tells us it is valuable: 'One of the most important pieces of advice I give'; 'I would strongly advise you'.

The text holds freedom and surveillance, self-determination and parental management in tension. He uses language which suggests parents should be relaxed about their children's behaviour and achievements, both academic and social, during lockdown. Whereas Furedi's language positions discipline and control as always positive for children, Koplewicz positions it in a more nuanced way. He describes many elements of parental control or attempted control using *evaluative* vocabulary with negative connotations: Parents should 'avoid moaning' (compared with Furedi's presentation of parental admonishment as assertiveness and authoritativeness). They should 'give up policing insignificant off-task behaviours'. And parents should 'let failure be an option'; whereas Furedi sets up task for children which are so well managed that they cannot fail. Rather than insisting on everyone eating together, he 'strongly suggests a teenager is allowed to have a meal without you once a week'. Yet, in tension with this apparently liberal discourse, there is a discourse of regulation and surveillance in line with the overarching focus on *disciplinary* practice we have discussed.

The freedoms are designed to meet a pre-determined end envisioned by the parent and endorsed by the expert. Koplewicz uses the metaphor of *scaffolding* for this. He argues parents are 'not there to impede or control' but to 'protect and support'. The scaffolding metaphor is more liberal than the language Furedi uses, but it still positions the parent as the manager of the child's growth, the shaper of the 'building' they should become. His suggestion that children have some choices and are not constantly criticised is so that parents can 'save the one constructive critical comment for something important' – the parent is encouraged to be liberal as a means to ensuring that they have a strong relationship with their child which enables them to influence them in all important matters. And he also has recommended rules that regulate children in time and space: 'bed by 11 pm having turned off screens'; 'at least a twenty-minute walk outside every day'; and 'keep to three meals a day'. His guidance also ensures children are regulated. He adds an element of emotional regulation; everyone should 'demonstrate gratitude at least once a week. Going round the table at dinnertime once a week expressing what each of you feel lucky or happy about is powerful'. It may be powerful, but it is also *disciplinary*, a surveillance of feelings as well as physical presence and activity. Similarly, he wants parents to understand what their children are thinking: 'spend time sitting next to them as they play or watch' - 'you'll have a better idea of what they're absorbing and can approve or disapprove of the values it presents'. Despite the emphasis on relationships and freedoms, Koplewicz asserts that the most important things parents can do is 'provide routines and schedules'.

The rhetoric in these two newspaper pieces creates discourses which are disciplinary; they position parents as subjects who must survey and regulate their children, and determine where their bodies will be in time and space. The Carlyle piece also positions them as regulators of children's thoughts. They are also themselves to be *disciplined* – under surveillance – and their time and practice (even self-care) regulated by the advice and expectations of experts in parenting.

When we turned to consider the websites, we found that, despite the potentially more global and diverse audience for these, there were remarkable similarities in the discourse. The first analysis is of *the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF's website*[1]. UNICEF works with 190 countries and has a truly global reach. It begins: 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) parenting tips. Expert tips to help you deal with COVID-19 parenting challenges'.

The website portrays the pandemic as a difficult situation that 'has upended family life around the world'. It further says that 'school closures, working remote, physical distancing' create circumstances where there is 'a lot to navigate for anyone, but especially for parents'. Within this context parents are singled out as encountering an even more demanding situation, which depicts and establishes family life as challenging. Thereby it contributes to the emergence of a *manufactured crisis*. By referring to settings and activities that are supposed to bring structure to families and *discipline* daily life such as 'schools' and 'work', the rhetoric defines sharp contours for normalcy. Worries about problems created by 'physical distancing' are given similar prominence, inferring that closeness is a self-evident aspect of people's everyday life in times beyond the pandemic – it claims a very specific model of the family.

In addition, the website includes a photograph supporting the written text. A boy in his early school years sits alone on the floor in a hallway, carefully playing with his stuffed animals. The end of the hallway reveals workspace for adults; a computer on a table, a coffee cup, and a cardigan hanging over the back of a chair. The lonely child playing by himself where adults simultaneously exist but are absent, reinforces the idea that lockdown creates family tensions. Hence, the rhetorical resources position the reader as a struggling adult encouraged to feel part of a group of self-evidently striving parents, *naturalising* parenting difficulties via this process of *inclusivity* and pressurising parents to acknowledge and address the challenges of parenting in a pandemic.

In this way the rhetorical devices on the website establish a situation where adults are positioned as parental subjects in need of advice. As in the newspaper features, the advice is *legitimised* through *authorisation* by establishing the credentials of an expert source: UNICEF has 'teamed up with Parenting for Lifelong Health initiative'. Also, in line with the newspaper material, solutions are offered in a clearly accessible form, like Furedi's 'rules': 'to bring parents and caregivers a set of handy tips to help manage this new (temporary) normal'. The tips written in a conversational tone offer ways to deal with the situation as long as parents make effort. The presentation of the problem and its solution creates a professional relationship; the expert offers knowledge and skills, and the client needs of support and help, to deal with parenting challenges successfully. The discursive resources, such as the concept of 'Lifelong Health' then, suggest wise parenting as not only valuable for the individual, but also for the family and society as a whole – parenting is constructed within an ideological framework supporting the good life.

In the next step, the reader of the website is encouraged to 'explore the parenting tips'. Fifteen tips are listed, each with a link to enable downloading as a pdf-file. The pdf-file features colourful, stylised bubble characters, like images from children's picture books. This way the parent tends to be infantilized – needing childish books and simple tips – in effect deskilled and subject to expert supervision. A closer look at the language features reveal how the tips make clear statements about how parents are expected to understand and orient themselves in the pandemic situation. Each tip has a headline which is followed up by questions and statements, illustrated in these examples: '1: COVID-19 PARENTING: One-on-One Time. Can't go to work? Schools closed? Worried about money? It is normal to feel stressed and overwhelmed', and '3: COVID-19 PARENTING: Structure Up. COVID-19 has taken away our daily work, home and school routines. This is hard for children, teenagers, and for you. Making new routines can help', and '5: COVID-19 PARENTING: Keep calm and manage stress. This is a stressful time. Take care of yourself, so you can support your children'. The tips also make extensive use of language with strongly positive connotations when focusing on certain parental behaviour, for instance: 'make handwashing and hygiene fun', 'praise your child when they are behaving well', 'listen to your kids', 'help your teen manage stress', and 'promote kindness and compassion'. As such, the rhetoric locates and defines potential struggles into multiple spaces of everyday life in the context of the pandemic, which it sets out to deal with by suggesting adequate parenting. It is all done in an *inclusive* tone, thus offering a sense of belonging to a wider community of parents that share the similar situation. The language is supportive, however also *disciplinary*; it demonstrates the necessity to be attentive and mindful of oneself and others in these exceptional times.

Taking the discursive strategies of the website as a whole a dominant discourse of a frustrating and overwhelming situation emerges, in which parents are positioned as experiencing problems and will acknowledge their need and welcome the easy-to-follow expert advice.

The second website we discuss is that of *the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC*[2]. We thought it interesting that this specialist institution also felt that it had to offer advice specific to parenting in a pandemic. It begins: 'Listen FIRST Covid-19. Now more than ever. Listening to children and youth is the first step to help them grow healthy and safe'.

Given the focus of this institution on drugs and crime, there is an unspoken assumption that families are more at risk from criminality and risky behaviours as a result of the pandemic, and need to take specific precautions. The website opens by establishing the universality of its claims: 'Families across the globe are adapting to changes due to (COVID-19)' and adds: 'It is important to remember that as a caregiver you are not alone in such circumstances and your feelings are normal reactions'. It employs *synthetic personalisation* addressing parents directly by using 'you' and situates them *inclusively* as members of a community of adults that encounter the similar situation, indicating that reactions are expected. The emotional discourse at work in the text claims the emotional subject; it establishes that parents across families and nations have feelings around this situation. Without even specifying the emotions, it is made clear that they are within the realm of normalcy. As such, the discourse suggests that if parents are not finding this an emotional time, they are probably excluded from what appears to be average or even natural. A *crisis* is thus set out as expected but is also *manufactured* by the discourse. On the one hand the rhetoric suggests the pandemic situation may offer possibilities: 'while isolation can represent an opportunity to spend time together and develop your relationship with your children', on the other hand specifies that problems are more likely: 'many caregivers will be experiencing conflicting feelings and priorities, as well as practical challenges'. So, although the website acknowledges that the pandemic offers some positives, it tends overall to construct staying home with children as difficult.

Within this emerging context of worry, the website presents itself and the UNODC organisation as a source of expertise, once again using *authorisation* to *legitimise* a very specific and *disciplinary* approach to parenting. In the newspaper articles, specific experts presented their advice, whereas UNODC itself offers expertise in the form of courses by 'strengthening family skills through different programmes'. It establishes its authority by making a reference to the 'many countries across the globe' and 'families living in most challenged and highly stressful settings' it has supported, thus constructing its advice as trustworthy and widely accepted, by stressing that its media platform is a 'flagship', referring to 'relying on this experience' and to its 'partnership' that draws heavily on international organisations. All of this justifies and *legitimises* its dominant representation of parenting as naturally stressful *per se* and supports the unspoken inference that difficulties may increase during the pandemic and be even worse for vulnerable families. Thus, the website has created a discourse which prepares parents to accept that they need 'some tools to navigate this period', which it goes on to offer.

The material for support comes in booklet and leaflet form written in an accessible conversational tone in different languages. After an introductory section quite similar to the text on the website, the first heading in the leaflet reads: 'About you' followed by the questions: 'What might you be experiencing?' and 'What can you do to help yourself'. The next heading: 'About your child' is followed by similarly straightforward questions. The pictures accompanying these sections show a crazy-eyed, stressed out couple unable to sleep, and a child bursting out in tears and anger. The illustrations reinforce the verbal discourse that parenting in a pandemic will create extreme anxiety. In focusing on the role of the parent, the sentence structure and vocabulary constantly build the idea of *crisis* by privileging how contemporary time is difficult. Before delivering the advice, the text says: 'Congratulations – you are taking the first step by recognizing that this is a challenging time with uncertainty and stress that must be managed', and as such it explicitly applauds adults responding to this negative representation of reality. The *evaluative vocabulary* recurs (e.g. 'uncertainty', 'stress', 'challenging time') thus producing parenting as a quite complex and demanding task with subjects

in need of support. As was the case with the newspaper features, these support materials encourage parents to activate specific behaviour which includes to work on themselves (e.g. 'try to stay hopeful and positive', 'look after yourself as much as possible'), their relation to their children (e.g. 'be affectionate with your child', 'look for opportunities to praise your child'), and *discipline* the family by recreating timetables, structure and routines (e.g. 'maintain your routines when you can', 'keep life as close to your usual structure as possible'). It also tends to underplay any notion of it being a blessed release from the restrictions of work and schooling. Neither parents nor children should rejoice in their freedom – rather they are expected to keep themselves occupied with regular chores, work and activities. Adults, teenagers and children are urged to produce and reproduce high levels of regulation of movements and practices.

The final example is country specific, taken from *the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies website*[3]. It begins: 'Corona. Advice for parents in vulnerable situations'. Like the other examples we have used, this too employs a rhetoric depicting how 'families all over Norway are experiencing changes to their everyday life' because of the pandemic. It uses *rationalisation* pointing at how the closure of 'schools, kindergartens and workplaces' produces a daily situation where 'we are spending much more time together than usual'. The *inclusivity* in the usage of 'we' displays a friendly tone, and it suggests a collectively shared experience that moves beyond the typical ways people usually arrange their lives. Without necessarily defining contemporary times as troublesome, it nevertheless points out the complex task adults face where 'parents may be trying to balance their work life with their family life'.

However, distinct from what our analysis has revealed so far, this website is more open to multiplicity and differences between families. As might be expected from a centre engaging in violence and traumatic stress studies, the focus is put on crisis and difficulties, so that there is an element of exceptionality in the discourse; it does not, as the other examples do, indicate that all families must be experiencing problems. Even though the reader of the website is included in a community of people who may encounter 'changes', it already at the beginning claims an altered everyday life to be 'more difficult for some families than others'. In adding that 'some families will experience illness and infection', and 'the situation is complex and may feel unstable for many', it acknowledges that this is not necessarily the same for all. It explicitly references families living in 'vulnerable situations' where things 'may get worse'; those who in non-pandemic times have to deal with 'physical or mental illnesses, alcohol or drug abuse, crime or high levels of conflict in the family'.

The website offers advice for such families, and here the discourse is remarkably similar to that in the examples focusing on all families. Again, it is simply written – it assumes that the reader needs very basic guidance both stylistically and intellectually. The crisis centre proposes bullet points of advice 'for how parents can manage the situation' starting out with the heading: 'Get help', where health care services, support from professionals, and help lines are mentioned as available resources. The next heading says: 'Personal advice' mainly referring to friends, family and other social networks, and how to take care of oneself. The final heading reads: 'What can families do?', where advice on how to deal with everyday life is presented in six bullet points, and in addition to relational and practical advice (e.g. 'talk to your partner about what is going on', 'assess what can happen if you or anyone in your family become infected or ill') some aspects of regulation recur. One bullet point suggests 'fixed routines', 'set fixed times for meals and bedtime' and 'you could start the day with a family breakfast'. The advice also connects to positive outcomes, suggesting that such initiatives 'can lower the level of conflict' and contribute to 'your mental health'. Similarly, another bullet point gives the advice to 'create activities at home or outdoors that make you happy or less stressed' giving examples like 'watching movies together', 'listening to music' or 'take walks'. As such, there are elements of *evaluative analogies* at work; it defines situations and connects them to positive effects in and through the activation of particular parental behaviour.

Accordingly, even though this website differs slightly from the others one idea operating in this piece too is the importance of *discipline*; producing and reproducing the similar routines you uphold when you are at school or at work. To cope with the circumstances of the pandemic successfully is to work on oneself, take initiative and engage in activities that reproduce patterns of discipline and control for adults, children and families. As such, parents are expected to take over the regulatory roles of schools and kindergartens as well as those of organised leisure activities.

Conclusion

During periods of lockdown the direct surveillance and discipline (Ball, 2013) of children and adults, normally performed by schools and workplaces weakened. Our analyses suggest that this led to a partially manufactured crisis (Pini, 2011) in the business of parenting – a degree of panic relating to the management of time and space in the home. It had the effect of intensifying pre-existing pedagogical processes across a range of media relating to the role of parenting. Parenting was subject to even more professionalisation and standardisation, including the normalising of certain behaviours and the designation of others as unacceptable. The texts used a range of strategies to generate this discourse of normalisation, standardisation and discipline, most notably the use of 'synthetic personalisation' (Fairclough, 1995), 'evaluative language', which denigrated relaxed, unregulated family life, 'legitimisation' and 'authorisation' of disciplinary parental practices through reference to authorities and credentials, and 'theoretical rationalisation' which promoted the preferred approach to parenting as the only reasonable option (van Leeuwen, 2008). Good parents were constituted as people who replicate the processes previously produced by formal educational institutions by organising their own and their children's activities, spaces and time-tables very specifically. We were struck by the dominant nature of this discourse – in media specific to Norway and the UK, in media designed to be global in reach and in media aimed at parents generally, as well as that aimed at those with specific needs. As lockdowns ease, societies may see some permanent changes, such as an increase in homeworking. Without the surveillance of set working hours and locations, the discourses of self-regulation and self-discipline promoted during lockdown are likely to continue in importance, so that employed parents continue to regulate their own bodies, even when those of their children are given back to institutional control.

Notes

1. https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19-parenting-tips
2. https://www.unodc.org/listenfirst/en/covid_parents.html
3. https://www.nkvts.no/english/corona-advice-on-how-to-cope-with-the-situation/corona-advice-for-parents-in-vulnerable-situations/

Disclosure statement

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