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Why parents shouldn't feel guilty if they can't devote time to their toddlers [1]

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EXCERPTS

Any parent who has felt guilty about putting their child in a nursery or felt under pressure to sign them up for baby music classes to give them a head start in life will note with interest the opening of a conference at the University of Kent this week. The event will look at what organisers call "the extreme focus on early childhood".

Academics will argue that parents of babies and toddlers - especially mothers - are subject to ridiculous levels of pressure to "get things right" that leads to "unwarranted anxieties and guilt".

Led by John Bruer, author of The Myth of the First Three Years, they say the neuroscience backing claims of the importance of parental connection in the early years has been hyped and that social policy focusing on the parent-child bond is "a waste of resources".

The conference reflects views that have been developing for a while. These take a stance against the arguments largely based on nurture theory which are advanced by the likes of psychotherapists such as Oliver James, author of They F*** You Up, and Sue Gerhardt, author of Why Love Matters. For a decade, this camp has argued persuasively that all the research shows children become psychologically and emotionally hardwired in the first three years and that the support of a close parental figure is crucial.

Gerhardt has warned of the potentially damaging effects of poor quality childcare: "Babies need to be with people they are attached to well beyond nine months," she says. "The first two or three years are the crucial window when various systems which manage emotions are put into place. In particular, it is when we learn to exercise self-control and to be aware of other people's needs. Without these basic emotional skills children may not grow up emotionally competent."

Much of Gerhardt's research is about the effect of the hormone cortisol, which is produced in the brain at times of distress. In normal situations, cortisol production is not harmful, but if a baby or toddler is left uncomforted for too long or exposed excessively to a stressful situation, the cortisol levels will spike. This is linked to depression and anxiety, and, alternately, to violence and aggression.

The effect of these views has been far-reaching, especially for working parents who rely on childcare. Last week a friend, the father of a 10-month-old boy, said to me sadly: "We've had to put him in nursery. It was either that or not have him (their son) at all." He works in the public sector. His wife is a teacher. Like many, they see childcare as a compromise.

For the anti-nurture camp, this emergence of guilty parenting is disturbing. They contend that children are resilient and continue to develop throughout their lives. As sociologist Ellie Lee of the University of Kent puts it: "It's making motherhood into a miserable enterprise when it should be fun and life-enhancing. Also, there is no culture of supporting parents, so they end up thinking, 'If I don't do this for my child, no one will'."

This week's conference will focus on the effect on women of this intense focus on the early years. Glenda Wall, a sociology professor from Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, will present a paper based on interviews with middle-class Canadian mothers. "The focus on maximising children's brain development has had the effect of further intensifying the job of mothering," she writes. "Not only are mothers responsible for children's physical health and safety (the standards of which are also increasing), their psychological health and happiness, but now also their future brain potential and intelligence."

Her case studies include comments like: "I have gained 60lb in four years. If I went and worked out, I would feel so guilty that I wasn't spending time with my son." When one mother was asked about recreational time alone with her spouse, she said: "We were together 10 years before our son was born. We are devoted to our son. My recreation time and my entertainment time is my son."

Wall adds: "The mothers in my study were typical in the sense they were more likely to be the ones in the family who made career sacrifices and cut back on hours at work to make extra time to spend with their children." And we do this, it is said, because we want to do the "right thing".

"Parenting expertise takes parental deficit as its presumption," says sociologist Frank Furedi, also speaking at the conference. "There is a fear about what would happen if mothers, particularly, were not existentially and emotionally close to their children."

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Psychologist Stuart Derbyshire of the University of Birmingham recently wrote a stinging polemic for Spiked online about what he calls "the pseudo-science of the parent bashers". He argues that the popular idea that a person's fate is determined in the first five years of life is "completely baseless". "Any deficiency that children may suffer due to the inadequacies of their early years can be addressed later in their lives. Scientists who opportunistically promote early-years intervention to justify publications and grants risk turning neuroscience into a joke."

Many experts now argue that we simply cannot draw meaningful conclusions from the neuroscientific data available. Warnings of the dangers of "neurotrash" or "neuro nonsense" are gaining ground, voiced by the likes of philosopher Raymond Tallis and neuroscientist Cordelia Fine. John Bruer is against what he sees as a trend of using "neuro facts" to back up parenting theories and public policy. "Parents have been sold a bill of goods that is highly destructive, because it overemphasises infant and toddler nurturing to the detriment of long-term parental and educational responsibilities."

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