

Parenting in public: ‘Watching the directives’



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Is there anything to be learned about the state of contemporary parenting by watching TV? We think so. Saying that you actually watch TV at all is more of a confession than a statement for good card-carrying academics like ourselves. The cultural script that those of our ilk are meant to trot out with a dismissive half-sneer of superiority is, ‘We don’t watch television’, or conferring more gravitas still, ‘We don’t have a television’. Humbug. If you want to know something of the current culture you’re living in, turn on, tune in or drop out of a big part of understanding it.

Even for keen, if occasional, TV watchers, the broad genre of reality TV can be unwatchable, from the wretched narcissism of *Big Brother*, through the awkward self-consciousness of *The Biggest Loser*, to the aspirational vacuity of endless decorating/renovating shows. No wonder the latter evoked Maureen Lipman’s exquisite observation, ‘I can’t believe it, I’m actually watching paint dry’.

In all of this seemingly fathomless fascination with ‘real people’, it has been hard not to miss the television spotlight that has shone on parents and parenting. And why not? From a television

producer’s perspective, the lure is compelling. Most of us have kids, most of us struggle to bring them up well, most of us have good and bad days with them, most of us love them to bits and wouldn’t swap a day of it and, from a ‘human interest’ perspective, it is fascinating and even secretly comforting to watch others struggle with perennial parenting issues.

The struggles of parents to bring up their children, and what happened when this did not work well, was often a feature of other shows such as *Dr Phil* and *Oprah* and so it was inevitable that parenting would one day have its ‘own show’. *Supernanny* seems to have started the ball rolling, coming over as a kind of kick-ass Mary Poppins for Gen-X parents. *Supernanny* was often criticized for being ‘only’ a trained Nanny and hence not a ‘real expert’. At a more cerebral level in the UK, the intellectual stakes were raised. Enter Professor Matt Sanders from Queensland and star of the series, *Driving Mum & Dad Mad*. Professor Sanders is the developer of the popular ‘Triple P’ parenting programme and he took the much more ‘research-based’ approach of Triple P to essentially the same par-

enting problems. Far from the cerebral, the UK's *House of Tiny Tearaways*, billed as 'TV's first ever toddler sanctuary' (http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/tv/tiny_tearaways/index.shtml), features one Dr Tanya who dispenses professional advice to parents so desperate at the antics of their children (aged 1-8 years) that they are willing to move into a house with their 'tiny tearaways', and submit to the gaze of Dr Tanya along with millions of viewers in a kind of toddler version of *Big Brother*.

Hooking in to the growing panic about childhood obesity and parenting patterns, *Honey We're Killing the Kids* managed the TV double whammy of combining parenting advice with food and diet directives. If only they could have had the kids renovating their cubby houses and had the viewers voting them off the show, the ratings would have gone ballistic. *Honey* had the dubious Foucauldian distinction of not only turning the gaze and scrutiny on to the parents and their overweight, sedentary, kids but of projecting this gaze into the future. Parents stood in horror as a video screen showed their kids as they looked now and then morphed them into what they would look like as the years passed, until there they were, aged 40, usually morbidly obese, bald and virtually tattooed and toothless. Needless to say, after the diet and exercise regime had been followed as per the programme's instructions, and the kids were morphed and airbrushed a second time, mature 40-year-old Brad and Angelina look-alikes beamed serenely from the screen, delighting the reformed parents.

What is so instructive about the parenting on TV reality genre is that it challenges two unwritten conventions and social taboos. The first of these is that it takes the camera inside parenting and makes it a public spectacle. One of us (PD) encountered this phenomena during his PhD where it was clear that parents 'living-in' with their child in hospital experienced a similar set of issues when trying to parent in the sight of, and under the scrutiny of professionals

(Darbyshire 1994). Traditionally, parenting was very much a private practice. The fights or squabbles, the discipline, the disagreements, the love and fun, the tears and resolutions seemed all to happen in private. What the public and the extended family, relatives and neighbours would see, we hoped, was the manifestation of how successful this parenting had been. They would see only the result, the 'nice kid'.

The other unwritten convention that reality parenting TV has challenged is that you never, ever criticize another parent's parenting. We may well *think* 'if those were my kids I'd ...' thoughts to ourselves as we witness the brattish, the drama queen, the petulant, the destructive or the cruel in other people's children (these features of course never present in our own), but powerful social conventions, and indeed the threat of a black eye, dictate that you 'don't interfere' in such situations. To publicly comment on or openly criticize another's child and/or their behavior is simply unacceptable and 'none of our business'. Herein of course may lie part of the reason as to why so many child abuse and neglect cases produce such public puzzlement as to 'why nobody did anything'. Part of the reason is that while the romantic vision of, for example, a Hilary Clinton is that 'It takes a village' to raise a child, we no longer have such villages, either in the geographic and demographic sense, nor do we have them in the sense of social networks and close communities.

Children are not deemed to be public property any more. They too, along with seemingly everything else of value in our world, have been privatised and of course, when it comes to our own private property, we can do with this whatever we wish. As governments sworn to rolling back 'state power' or 'nanny state-ism', celebrate attempts to shift responsibility for everything to do with parenting and child care to individual parents, they cannot be too surprised at this privatization of children that they may be helping create. What happens however when the troubled children of the parents who are not

coping or managing reach our kindys and schools and streets and shopping malls, and later on our neighbourhoods and workplaces? Chances are that the same 'non-interventionist' governments will demand the most public of directly interventionist, punitive responses.

What makes the parenting shows so fascinating are the approaches and behaviors of so many of the parents. Now this may be the fascination of watching a car crash but the fascination is undeniable. How can contemporary parents get so many of the simpler and more obvious things about parenting so utterly wrong? Somehow, parenting in the past seemed to be something that mothers, and to a lesser degree fathers, managed so much better than today's presumably more educated and better 'resourced' counterparts. When did it all go so wrong for so many parents and where did we lose these essentially commonsense approaches, so that 'parenting skills' are now something that must be formally taught?

This is not as ludicrous an idea as it may seem. For example, could we ever have imagined a scenario where parents *didn't* think that talking and listening to their babies and young children was important and valuable? One of us was recently part of a research team that evaluated a program in which parents were (court) ordered into programs to learn to positively engage with their pre-school children through play. The aim of this intervention was to reduce the likelihood of further child abuse and neglect. Many of these parents were themselves children who were not played with, not talked to and not listened to. Perhaps this sort of program would not be such 'good' television. After all, who would want to watch parents 'just' learning to play with, 'just' enjoying their children, and 'only' witnessing their utter amazement as children respond positively and joyously to this input.

One of us recently sat on a grant review panel where one of the funded studies was to create resources for parents to help them engage with

their new baby. The rationale for this study was some earlier work which showed that new parents did not find their babies to be 'interesting', and thus worthy of their attention, until they had reached about a year old. This is not an issue unique to Australia. A recent report from the UK suggests that 'As many as half of all children are entering primary schools with impoverished speech and language (...) able to understand only simple instructions' (Harris 2006: 6). A New Zealand infant and child health Plunkett nurse has reported a similar phenomena, noting that, 'In my work with Plunkett I have noticed increasing numbers of children who are not developing early language skills.' (Manchester 2006: 17). We know the usual suspects here; the electronic baby sitters, the 'too busy' parents, the general societal devaluing of childhood and early childhood in particular, the loss of close extended families and communities and even seemingly innocuous contributors like forward-facing prams. Don't we understand that in 'old-fashioned' prams the baby faced you for a reason? This was yet another opportunity to talk to and listen to your baby, to play baby games, and to watch and learn from each other. Fat chance of doing that now as we power them through the shops in their three-wheeled, all terrain, designer 'Panzer Pram'. But who cares, the new ones look *so cool*, and in any case, we can always schedule that 'teaching baby to talk' stuff somewhere in the 20 or 30 minutes per day of 'quality time' that we have managed to allocate them.

Back in TV parentland, we saw a seemingly ordinary family where the mother was 'taught' how to have a fun day 'doing stuff' with her pre-teen daughter. After their day together, they both beamed with delight at the fun they'd had. No surprise there you'd think, until the mum mentioned that this was the first time that they'd ever enjoyed this kind of time together. The girl was about 11 years old and the mum was at home and not in paid employment. How on earth can you raise a child to age 11 and have to be shown how to spend some fun time with them?

What is happening in the thought processes of parents who seem to believe that they can buy their children's good behaviour? A constant trope in these programmes are the parents spending small fortunes in bribes, either so that their children will never ever experience a whiff of disappointment or simply to buy their temporary silence in the supermarket or some other public place. They then seem genuinely confused that their children are so 'demanding' and 'uncontrollable'.

Similarly, what can be said about parents who complain that their child 'has ADHD' and 'won't go to bed and sleep at night' when their bedroom resembles Luna Park and the bedtime routine is having them switch on their bedroom TV and DVD AV system? It was almost heart-breakingly poignant watching one young single mum at the end of her tether 'learning' how to create a quiet bedtime routine and sit with her son reading him a bedtime story. He was rapt in this story, snuggled up beside his mum, his eyelids becoming gradually heavier and heavier until he was fast asleep.

Let us dutifully rap our own knuckles here, for the accepted wisdom is that such bewilderment constitutes criticism, and criticism of parents is tantamount to 'victim blaming' or to 'making mothers/parents feel guilty'. Within this worldview, parents may be sanctified but never criticized. Perhaps we should play safe and stick to criticizing society or the government or some free-floating 'lack of resources', whatever they may be. This is certainly not difficult to do given the nature of our society that seems to demand that all parents will work every hour that God sends, in the name of efficiency and flexibility, and that creates places and spaces in our towns and cities that are increasingly unchild friendly, and that expects that every hour of children's lives should be spent in adult-supervised, adult-sanctioned activity. Some of the toxic effects of this frenzied, time-poor, contemporary culture have become evident in recent work on family aspects of childhood obe-

sity. For many families, the demands of modern life are such that families exist 'in barely manageable situations of stress and pressure' (Jackson et al. 2005: 12). For many parents, it is just too difficult to juggle their commitments to get an extra half hour in the mornings or to be able to leave work in time to walk the children home from school (Jackson et al. 2005).

Somewhere, however, there must be a space in the discussion of modern parenting for the asking of the *Dr Phil* questions, directly to parents, 'Which part of this do you own?' 'Where is your personal responsibility in relation to your children and the kind of family and home and young people that you are helping create?'

Given the state of parenthood, childhood and our current lives, it is almost chilling to contemplate a scenario where the nature of the elemental relationship between parents and children may have changed. Imagine for a moment if, instead of children being unequivocally the most important 'things' in parents' worlds, they were simply one of numerous very important but competing aspects of our adult lives, up there alongside our careers, or relationships, our 'wealth creation strategies' and our aspirations.

Now, imagine if children too began to sense that.

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