

# **There are no adequate parents. The crisis of parenting between theory and practice\***

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**Summary.** *The social image of the “adequate parent” is depicted with reference to the “parental profession”, which is perceived by parents as becoming more and more problematic, laden with tensions and marked by a deep uncertainty about the issue of the legitimacy of parental authority. The article suggests reflecting upon today’s parental crisis, recognisable by the confusion and uncertainty characterising the educational role of parents. It is increasingly difficult to identify both the content and form of family ties and it is harder to define how parents have to act accordingly. The controls, regulations and support towards parenting provided by the experts confirm complexity and indeterminateness of parental adequacy.*

**Key words:** *parenting, parental authority, parental responsibility, experts*

## ***Uncertainties and tensions of parenting***

Parenting today is widely debated as well as considered increasingly complicated especially where the issue of good upbringing is concerned. The educational role of parents is described and perceived as problematic and as a cause of anxiety and parents are also becoming more and more uncertain due to the differing statements made by the experts on these topics. Uncertainty is provided both by the heterogeneity of channels through which parents acquire knowledge (not only the family group, but

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also books, web sites, magazines, etc.) and by the “progressive development of the social definition of children’s needs” (Maggioni 2011, 18). All this contributes to make the educational role more onerous for parents.

In order to analyse the changes described, it is interesting to take into account the contributions provided by different disciplines. Pedagogy assumes parenting is like a long and continuous apprenticeship aimed at learning the art of being parents, able to care adequately enough and respond suitably to their children’s needs. In addition, children’s needs are different depending on age and development. On the other hand, psychology assumes that parenting is a fundamental part of everyone’s character, a psychodynamic feature developing from birth. This concept is also supported by educational literature as well as on web sites, where parenting is defined as a process supporting physical, emotional, social and cognitive development of children, from infancy to adulthood.

Attention towards parenting is often evident in sociological studies. Before evaluating the moral responsibility of parents or stating that they are unsuitable for their caring and upbringing tasks, sociology looks at the relationships of authority and affection between parents and children, identifying alternating between models and contents of parental authority. Sociology of law describes today’s situation as characterized by the crisis of the principle of authority that has considerably modified the relationships between parents and children (Ronfani, 2013), pointing out significant ambiguities. Even recognizing the parental task of passing on values, ways of doing things, thoughts and feelings and the seemingly far outdated and delegitimized image of parental authority as coercive and imposing from above, the difficulties and struggles reported by parents in exercising their educational role cannot be disregarded. Authority – initially refused by parents wanting to mark its disappearance, it is exercised when in front of their children who are considered as dictators (Marcelli, 2003). More frequently, the latter mirror their parents who suffer under the struggle of adequately caring for their children and fulfilling their needs.

Nowadays it is difficult to define the form and content of the parent – child relationship but an interesting contribution to the sociological approach derives from the literature on family and parental practice (Kellerhals, Montandon, 1991; Morgan, 2002). According to the concept of parental practice, authority acquires a more dynamic character and its legitimacy is defined in its doing, in its referring to the limits and opportunities of the context. Parental practices allow us to understand the exercise of parental authority without considering it as an attribute typical

of a form of authoritarianism. Furthermore, parental practices allow us to describe the situation of parents drawing up solutions to the tension that, from time to time, arise from their educational role when facing the needs of redefining family responsibilities and ties, (Cairano et al., 2008). Parental practice succeeds, at least partially, in understanding the current crisis of legitimacy that, according to parents, is observed in them generally feeling inadequate in the exercise of their *profession*.

For this reason, experts unintentionally undermine the confidence and ability of parents due to their selection and promotion of specific behaviours that they consider to be adequate in the relationship between parents and children, thus, they, the experts, find themselves “in an ambivalent position with regard to the families: both supporting and regulating, when not specifically judging” (Saraceno, Naldini, 2007, 157). Since messages coming from the experts are often inconsistent, they result in parents’ confusion, tension and dissatisfaction and they make the management of parental asymmetry increasingly problematic.

This observation leads us to believe that, according to the messages coming from the experts, the perceived image of adequate parental responsibility doesn’t refer to a specific “*must be*”, but rather to the duty of learning the knowledge necessary to support the biological, emotional, social and cognitive development of the child. Parental authority, despite the crisis of its more traditional forms, is still a prerogative of parenting and it can become an object of disclosure and learning. Therefore, adequate parental responsibility is the result of a complex social construction involving many actors: the parents in primis, as the primary carers and educators, but also the experts who have a significant role, charged with validating the increasingly varied parenting models. Consequently, experts’ opinions and suggestions are not able to heal the parents’ feeling of inadequacy in exercising their own role, unless they do not turn into the co-construction of the educational intervention (Di Nicola, 2007).

### **From parental authority to parental responsibility**

Sociological literature considered thereafter, underlines the crisis of parenting and its significance. The concept of authority, both social and parental, is subjected to a lot of attacks from different fronts and it is considered an obstacle to the individualization process. The crisis of parental authority coincides with the loss of reference models or, in other words, with the absence of a shared validity of its foundations.

In sociology, Weber has stated that authority lies outside of family relationships, which aim at “training youth and therefore adults” (Weber,

1961, 210). Psychological and pedagogical literature underlines the relational dimension of parental authority, based on viewing the parental role as orientated towards the development of children's capabilities and as complying with specific rules. According to Baumrind and Thompson (2002), parental authority is based on the rule of complementarity. This envisages that parents must care and educate their children, whom are entitled to protection and support. In addition to that, literature resulting from the studies and the theory about attachment states that parental authority is based on parents exercising their powers according to the tie that binds them to their children (Carli, 1995). The rule of reciprocity signifies a further step stating that parental rights include their duty to control their children (Smith, 1995). Based on the rule of reciprocity, parents act according to their children's needs. This is an authority based on today's understanding of infancy and adolescence—which depicts children and adolescents as competent and active subjects within their process of growth.

Sociology of childhood also stresses the cultural development towards the concept of infancy which has moved from the familization of children and adolescents to paying attention to their life conditions. Familization means that children and adolescents are identified by culture and welfare policy exclusively as family members, i.e. as children, limited within the institutions of reference, as if they were in danger (Belotti, 2010). This transition coincides with the slow degradation of the private and familistic vision of children in favour of children being considered as subjects who express new requirements of social attention as well as of services that support their rights to be cared for and educated. This idea has an echo on international documents such as the "United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child". According to this new concept and to the children's rights connected thereto, parental authority takes on the traits of parental responsibility, giving rise to a more negotiated structure of relationships between the generations (Giddens, 1999). The principle of parental responsibility marks a further step in the matter of infancy and declines education as revealing the subjective nature of every child and every adolescent" (de Singly, 2010).

### **Experts' debate on parenting**

Experts have an important role in the social construction of adequate parental responsibility, although referring to them may result in mechanising the parental role to the extent that parents may get disoriented about their care and upbringing abilities, which were once considered as natural. It is therefore important to understand which models are conveyed

as these enable tracing the definition of adequate parental responsibility. Nowadays experts focus on aspects such as authoritativeness and closeness of parents and children. Authoritativeness and closeness are perceived as adequate models instead of being authoritarian and the use of punishments.

Authoritativeness mainly concerns the well-known classification of parental styles (authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and neglective) by Baumrind that has started a large body of research in pedagogy. Her studies focused on assessing the impact of different parenting styles, on children's development and behavioural problems (Darling, 1999; Dietz 2000). The prevalent opinion is still that both authoritarian and permissive styles are dangerous for children's development and this assumption confirms Baumrind's statement: the balance between control and support makes the authoritative style the most adequate for the proper development of children. More recently, de Singly (2003) has confirmed the importance of a balanced parental behaviour with parents able to measure the responsibility resulting from their educational role and children's autonomy, without being either too authoritarian or too permissive. Also, de Singly (2010) advocates for the parent the opportunity to play the role of a companion on the child's journey towards self-discovery. The role of "journey companion" makes the parents' role more complex. This model describes a parent who cares about communication and dialogue and spends time telling stories and reading books to children without disregarding the task of passing on rules and values. Also the parental model of "friend-parent" focusing on openness is indefinite (Cardoso, Fontainha, Monfardini, 2008). Openness describes a parent who not only deals with children's care and safety, but also a parent who knows, understands and responds to children's requirements. The image of friend-parent breaks the rigid role hierarchy by encouraging parents to talk with their children and to renegotiate relationships according to equality.

Furthermore, experts report that there exists a relationship between gender and the characteristics of parental responsibility. The duties deriving from parental responsibility, rather than demonizing the father – who has been traditionally identified as the coercive authority, urge him to restore his image precisely from the new social definition of child (Recalcati, 2013).

Experts intervening in determining adequate parenting skills is not a new phenomenon. Since at least the XVIII century, experts have been promoting the adoption of specific parent-child models. At the end of the eighteenth century, a new sensitivity towards feelings and rising intolerance against authority developed and parents began paying more attention to the care of infants and their bodies (Lombardi, 2008). This phenomenon has

been interpreted as a sign of specific interest to the infant age and fathers are protagonists of this phenomenon as they are starting to conceive fatherhood as an extremely emotional experience, thus showing the desire to accomplish their educational role as well as possible. Expressing feelings and not denying them characterizes family relationships that are perceived and lived as being intimate and tender (Giddens, 1992).

### **Conclusion**

The article is aimed at describing the “parental profession”. In today’s concept of the child-centred family, this depicts the parental commitment concerning the care and support of children’s growth. This results in parents being addressed by different and even conflicting messages from the experts which aim to help achieve adequate parenting.

The educational role, traditionally based on parental authority, is today characterized by both the crisis of the principle of authority and the affirmation of the principle of parental responsibility. The latter indicates a situation in which family relationships are organised by taking into account children’s autonomy . In other words, as we have tried to illustrate, the affirmation of the principle of responsibility can be usefully connected with the infancy issue and is specifically related to the attentive task of revealing children’s nature. This duty involves legitimacy problems with reference to parental authority imposed from above and it promotes more adequate forms of family ties (Ronfani, 2013).

Since the XVIII century, the issues of the duties of fathers and mothers and of perfect or good parents arose and these started a social process to build adequate parenting skills. The perfect parent, described by Rousseau, is the parent whose behaviour complies with natural laws, implying the idea of an undisputed parental authority. Accordingly, a good parent is a parent whose behaviour is completely focused on the bond with their child. Today’s image of the adequate parent still includes the idea of perfection but exercising the parental role also involves a responsibility towards children’s needs. Persisting with the idea of perfection leaves (adequate) parents to be subject to anxieties and uncertainties, as they cannot simply apply the rules and requirements suggested by the dominant parental culture, but have to make their own choices on upbringing by taking into account the sometimes conflicting models of good parenting.

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