

The challenges of parenting in a dynamic world
Professor Silvia Fargion
Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science
Trento University

The sheer number of publications setting normative prescriptive models and standards for parenting in the last decades has been impressive. It seems that nearly everybody, professional or other, has something to say about the way children should be brought up and cared for. In this maze of instructions, where is the voice of those directly involved in the enterprise of rearing children, what is known of the way they perceive their tasks, of their lay pedagogical theories?

Our Dyckin research project in South Tyrol aimed at comparing the views and constructions of parenthood by experts and professionals with the views of those with parental responsibilities. We wanted to understand how mothers and fathers construct parenting in the insecure territory represented by our contemporary society.

Parenting happens in social contexts which are constantly in flux, affected for example by the speed with which technology develops and supports - or impinges on - our daily lives; thus technology represents one of the main issues impacting parenting. However, other sources of uncertainty include perhaps more 'traditional' ones, such as poverty, or the multicultural context – with the latter proving to be an important resource – which can nevertheless be seen as sources of instability and insecurity

Among many factors, we can single out three further crucial aspects that contribute to uncertainty: firstly the transformations in family structures (Widmer, 2016), secondly the changing relations between genders, which affect parental roles, and thirdly the new definition of childhood in society.

Within this landscape, we explored the views of 50 parents and 40 professionals in South Tyrol, through qualitative interviews. We will focus here on the views of parents while providing only a few comparisons with the expert views.

The first issue to emerge is **time**. Whereas experts and professionals often remarked that parents did not devote enough time to their children, what emerges from parents is the struggle to reconcile an often very flexible work timetable with a need for quality time with their children. This often results in a need to find more unconventional times which are sometimes not recognised by experts. (?)

The second main point is **authority** and uncertainty. The notion that parents nowadays do not have authority is quite widespread / is quite common place.

Parents reported on the high number of decisions they have to take every day; most think that the models they absorbed from their parents are not viable in the present circumstances. Children live in an environment in which they are bombarded with stimuli, as well as witnessing / noticing a variety of behaviours in other children. In consequence, parents say that they are constantly faced with novel requests and need to decide whether to allow or not allow things, whilst being unable to determine whether such things are positive or negative for their children's growth. Parents moreover find it difficult to keep up with the new risks associated with technology.

In this context one of the challenges parents perceive as increasingly difficult (both fathers and mothers) is how to maintain / uphold strong emotional connections with their children.

Overall, most parents talk about feeling lonely in carrying out their difficult parental tasks. There appears to be no alliance between adults in educating children, with parents often feeling judged and assessed on the basis of unrealistic (and sometimes meaningless) standards. The position of teachers, social workers, psychologists is obviously specular to the one expressed by parents: they think parents are against them.

It could be hypothesised that the empty space left by outmoded models has been filled with ideal standards which may appear to be rational, but are in fact abstract and impracticable. Additionally, since all adults involved in parenting – professionals and parents – both feel judged by others and feel entitled to judge others, they are easily trapped in adversarial relations.

However, what we found - particularly looking at parents - were very relevant examples of how mothers and fathers are developing innovative strategies for coping with the challenges of parenting on insecure ground (examples). Usually, such parental

coping strategies involve creatively connecting crucial aspects of their internalised models with the new characteristics of the educational environment they have to face. Parenting nowadays more than ever seems to entail elements of research in a trial-and-error process. What is emerging, in agreement with other researches, is that in this landscape peer-to-peer relations with other parents are valuable: now more than ever it appears crucial to provide informal spaces for parents to exchange views, share strategies and find new ways of coping with the demands of rearing children.