

Paradoxical parenting practices and Australian higher education

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Background: intensive parenting

Approach to parenting whereby mothers and fathers expected to foreground child's needs and devote significant time, money and energy to parenting (Hays, 1998)

Rise of 'intensive parenting' worldwide

- In Global South as well as Global North; across all social classes (Faircloth et al., 2013; Lave and Benjamin, 2015)
- Linked to ideas about parental determinism (Jezierski and Wall, 2018); shift of responsibility for education from state to individuals (Gewirtz, 2001); and labour market change (Brown, 1990)
- Nearly all research on school-aged children

Background: parenting and higher education

Impact of funding

- 'Southern Europeanisation' (Antonucci, 2016)
- 'Enmeshed autonomy' (Zaloom, 2019)
- Rise of consumerism (Levine and Dean, 2012)
- Universities treating parents as key decision-makers (van Zanten and Legavre, 2014; Lainio and Brooks, 2021)

[financial circumstances in US encourage HEIs] 'to recruit, rather than evade, parents to whom they can outsource a wide array of tasks and responsibilities'

Parents 'often engage in university promotion, conduct admissions interviews; interface with donating alumni; assist with their students' emotional, cognitive, and physical needs, and help them place graduates in valuable internships and jobs competition to attract them is stiff' (Hamilton, 2016, p.9).

Yet some evidence of cross-national variation (e.g. Collins, 2019)



Methods

Interview based study – part of longitudinal
'Life Patterns' project

30 participants aged 50-51; in parenting role
with at least one child over 18

Gender balance; diversity in terms of location
and family size

Broadly middle class

Questions about financial, emotional and
practical support providing to child(ren)

Vignettes (Finch and Mason, 1991)

A student is having difficulties at university. They are finding it difficult to keep up with assignments in one of their classes, and are struggling to understand what is expected of them by their lecturer. What should the student's parent do in this situation?



Foregrounding of 'independence'

Characterised parenting approach in general

Shift when child reached university age

I don't think it's my role at all. They're at university. They can fend for themselves. (Karen)

....

I wouldn't get too involved because, you know, they're an adult and if they're at university, you know, it's adult learning, but maybe just push them in the right direction to get the support they need. (Helen)

Inappropriateness of contacting university teaching staff

I would say it would be different whether they were at university or high school or primary school I certainly wouldn't suggest the parent storming down to the university and standing in front of a lecturer and saying 'What's going on?' (Jack)

And yet very significant forms of support

Financial (completion of university studies seen as end point)

we're hoping to be able to pay all her ... fees so she hasn't got the debt after that and then hopefully after that point she'll be able to get a job and be reasonably self-sufficient (Kylie)

So once they're working they become financially responsible and not dependent on us (Maria)

Coaching approach

I would hope that that student has brought that to my attention and we would sit down and have a conversation and a coaching style conversation about what they think they can do. So usually, you know, in a coaching style conversation people know the answers, it's just soliciting that out of them and then also getting a commitment to action. (Karen)



And yet very significant forms of support

Encouragement to use university services

If I can't help them understand it, I'd tell them speak to your lecturer, that's what they're there for. It's this - and we've done this through high school, I said 'We're paying them to educate you'. (Peter)

Direct academic intervention (parents; networks; tutors)

I would also be looking to get them to come back to me and if they need some sort of tutoring; I can provide some financial help to give them the ability to have some tutoring as an option. (Nicholas)

if that [asking lecturer for help] still didn't work then I would ask them if they wanted a tutor in that subject just so that they could get through it. (Nicole)



Explaining the paradox

Paradox not commented on by any interviewee

Despite well-documented changes to young people's lives, 'independence' as achievement of early adulthood retains considerable discursive power

'Semi-dependence' equated with parental 'failure'?

Social opprobrium (c.f. intensive parenting of younger children)

Kids get older, they're more mature than you think. You don't want to be seen as mothering your children, I don't want to be that umbrella parent that's hanging over them all the time saying 'Do go do this' or 'You should do that'. (Lachlan)

Conclusion

Evidence that intensive parenting extends beyond school years, but approaches differ, with parents adopting a more 'behind the scenes' role; no longer mark of being a 'good parent'

Paradox whereby parents adopt interventionist practices but remain wedded to idea of university as space for securing independence

'Semi-dependencies' documented in UK and US played out similarly in Australia, but not recognised because of commitment to 'independent student' ideal

May limit wider debate about educational policy (transfer of responsibility from state to families), and impede family relations

To find out more....

[Life Patterns](#) project

Brooks, R., Cook, J. and Woodman, D. (2025) Paradoxical parenting practices and Australian higher education, *Sociology*, 59, 4, 663-680.