


# Challenging the challenge: *The Ethics of Early Intervention*

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**IMPORTANTE PER IL MESSAGGIO CHE CONTIENE.**

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## research/interventions

### Challenging the challenge: *The Ethics of Early Intervention*

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#### *Abstract*

Early intervention (EI) programs face severe and often condemnatory critique. Some common criticisms arising within the social science literature concern the burden of moral blame that EI programs supposedly place upon parents; the use of inaccurate or misleading scientific ‘evidence’; and the absorption of children from minority or peripheral backgrounds into the dominant culture. These criticisms might be unwarranted and must be questioned. In this paper, I draw from ethnographic research conducted with ‘Preparing For Life’ (PFL), an EI program operating in Darndale, Ireland. Research with this population provides ways of responding to criticisms frequently levelled at EI. In defending this argument, I propose approaching the debate about EI from an ethical rather than political perspective.

**Keywords:** Qualitative Methods; Cultural and Linguistic Diversity, Social Development, Preschoolers, Parent Training

#### **Sfidare la sfida: l’etica dell’intervento precoce**

#### *Riassunto*

I programmi di intervento precoce sono oggi sottoposti a severe critiche da parte delle scienze sociali. Tali critiche riguardano per lo più il senso di colpa che tali programmi attribuirebbero ai genitori; l’uso di “evidenze” scientifiche inesatte o fuorvianti; e l’assorbimento di bambini provenienti da background minoritari o periferici all’interno della cultura dominante. Queste critiche potrebbero tuttavia essere ingiustificate. Pertanto, si ritiene necessario metterle in discussione. In questo articolo, si attinge dalla ricerca etnografica condotta presso “Preparing For Life” (PFL), un programma intervento precoce che opera a Darndale, in Irlanda. La ricerca ha suggerito nuovi modi per rispondere alle critiche summenzionate. Nel difendere questo argomento, si propone di affrontare il dibattito sull’intervento preventivo dal punto di vista etico piuttosto che politico.

**Parole chiave:** Metodi qualitativi; Diversità culturale e linguistica, sviluppo sociale, bambini in età prescolare, formazione dei genitori

## 1. Introduction

Between 2016 and 2017 I conducted 12 months of ethnographic field-work among the staff of Preparing For Life (PFL), an Early Intervention (EI) program operating in Darndale, a disadvantaged area of north side Dublin. The aim of the research was to observe the interaction between mothers enrolled in the programme and the mentors they were paired with, in order to understand the ethical implications of intervening in the early years of these women's children. My long-term engagement with them resulted in observations that contradict some recent publications on the politics of EI. In this article, I illustrate some of the arguments advanced by authors that are critical of EI and explain how my observations fundamentally question these arguments. In this way, I propose a different way of approaching the EI debate.

EI in child development is currently scrutinized by experts in various disciplines with an intellectual attitude reminiscent of the hermeneutics of suspicion (Akrivoulis, 2017). These authors proceed as if the principles, ethics, and evidence-based discourse utilized to represent the means and aims of EI were but a surface narrative carefully crafted to attract the interests of funders and clients whilst covering a much less positive truth: that EI is, essentially, a way to manipulate children's lives for the sake of perpetuating and reinforcing the post-industrial, neoliberal, economic system (Gillies, Edwards, & Horsley, 2017: 131-153).

Initially, a decisive contribution to forming the critical attitude toward EI came from US sociologist Sharon Hays's description of a "new" conception of parenting, labeled as "intensive". Intensive parenting is baby-centered and baby-led, for it is based on the fundamental premise of attunement. The point of the criticism lies mainly in attacking the attitudes that parents are supposed to develop with respect to intensive parenting. Since, supposedly, attunement (and all that is expected to derive from it) cannot be taken for granted, parents should welcome the intervention of an expert. Their emotions as well as competences must be carefully examined, for these are believed to have a crucial impact on the development of the child. Parents, according to the "intensive parenting" dogma, should become aware of what they do, and how they feel as they do it. In this respect, expert advice is intended to provide them with an array of best practices to look up to. In order to meet those standards, and this is the core of the criticism, parents are expected to work intensely.

The criticism against this idea highlights "*the intrusion of experts into family life*" (cf. Fass and Mason, 2000: 24) that, according to the critics, deprives parent-child relationships of their spontaneous search for equilibrium via a supposedly

more natural process of trial and error. As opposed to an allegedly instinctive interaction, parents are expected to develop the ability to self-evaluate in relation to external standards. The “*risk of getting it wrong*” (Macvarish, 2016: 10) becomes even more frightening because of the positivistic character of the scientific discourse: if science says that you will almost certainly get it right if you follow the advice, it goes without saying that you will almost certainly get it wrong if you don’t. The criticism thus takes the form of a reaction to the determinist pressure on parents, and that of an argument for decreasing the expert intrusion in family life.

However, at different levels of society the expert intrusion into family life has become increasingly fashionable along with the idea of citizenship as individual responsibility. In the United Kingdom (UK), the critical attitude towards expert intrusion became more intense as a consequence of the translation of the intensive parenting discourse in the policy programs of the late 1990s. Intensive parenting was not just a consequence of cultural shifts in the scientific and public discourse. It was becoming the objective of programmatic efforts for the supposed improvement of society.

The EI discourse took particular traction during the conservative government of David Cameron who, following the American trend inaugurated by the popular version of nudge theory, set up the Nudge Unit, also known as the Behavioral Insight Team. The ideological apparatus that supports both nudge theory and the agenda of the Unit is a British version of libertarian paternalism strongly associated with evidence-base paradigms in subjects such as neuroscience, behavioral psychology, and social work. Among the issues influenced by this trend in the British welfare agenda, EI became a topic of heated debate.

The broader ethical argument for “intervening earlier” is based on the scientific discovery that negative psychological traits are not inherited by means of genetic material but rather result from environmental influence. Efforts to improve society and the individual lives of children should, the paradigm asserts, be directed towards the earliest possible points of exposure to external influences. This assertion has been emphasised as both a matter of social justice and economic policy. On the one hand, the argument is that children have no responsibility for the conditions they are born into, but will bear the consequences of bad luck throughout life, and so this should be remedied as a method of addressing unjust and undeserved inequality. On the other hand, James Heckman’s economic argument in favour of EI policies is recurrently used. While the idea that all parents should “attend parenting classes” (Cameron, 2016) became increasingly controversial in the EI debate, the UK politi-

cal agenda has gradually focused on families perceived to be most “at-risk”. Parents have, according to the Life Chances Speech, a duty to raise their children in such a way that they become able to function autonomously in our contemporary societies. That is not especially innovative.

Scholars in philosophy, education, politics and other disciplines have traditionally associated the development of rationality and autonomy with the project of creating liberal and, later, neoliberal citizens (Macleod & Miller, 2016; Keddie, 2016). Philosophers Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift note that the idea of limiting parents’ autonomy for the sake of developing children’s autonomy has precursors in liberal thinking. They write that “*liberal theory has tended to focus on children’s interest in developing rationality and autonomy, and this owes a good deal to liberalism’s understanding of itself as concerned specifically that children be prepared for citizenship*” (2016: 16).

It seems, thus, that EI has become a new way to represent a longstanding argument, which has unsurprisingly called for a renovated version of the corresponding, and equally longstanding, criticism. Is there anything substantially new about the way this debate is constructed in the context of EI? The way in which I intend to answer this question is by arguing that the practical ethics approach to EI, as opposed to one that looks at power relations, is a better approach to understand these issues.

## 2. *Models of parenthood and models of government*

The history of the relationship between models of parenthood and models of government is as old as philosophy. Karen Smith has efficiently reorganized these models building on Chris Jenks’ images of childhood (2005), and produced a synthetic framework while being aware that “the danger of using models of childhood in this way is that complexity and contingency may be sacrificed for a cohesive narrative.” Her models (Dionysian, Apollonian, and Athenian childhood) take into account “pre-modern” forms of childhood, contrary to Philippe Ariés’ concept of “childhood”, as a product of early modern thinking.

The Dionysian child is a conception of children as wild and flawed. The child can be ameliorated and even perfected through a combination of Christian sacraments and Western wisdom. This conception was prevalent in pre-modern, pre-liberal, authoritarian, Christian Europe, with foundations in the doctrine of the Original Sin (Jenks, 2005: 62-3). Philosophical antecedents of it can be found in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. It is a fundamentally pessimist perspec-

tive on human life that perceives nature as a threat that humans (read, adults) tame with socially constructed virtues. Children are naturally devoid of virtues and should be brought up in a way that ensures their deep socialization into upright moral subjects (White and Hunt, 2000: 103). Parents should be present; they should intervene by exercising strong domination, control, and authority afforded to them on the basis of both science and tradition, but they also need the help of the church, for innocence is not natural. Although Catholicism and Protestantism differ as to how innocence is achieved (infant Baptism for the former, virtuous education for the latter), they both consider it a post-natal concession.

The Apollonian child emerges as a concept in modern times along with political and philosophical emancipatory discourses, the new order of industrial societies, and a more positive outlook on human life. The pedagogy changes as children are seen as not in need of much correction, for they are naturally, intrinsically good. The Apollonian conception stands to authoritarian adultism as the democratic revolutions stand to the European monarchies. Philosophical antecedents of this conception can be clearly identified in the treatises by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who saw children as inherently virtuous and, as such, deserving to be treated as children rather than adults-in-the-making and, by implication, less than a person.

These oppositions become much subtler in the Athenian model devised by Smith. However, it is not just a matter of opposing libertarian and authoritarian pedagogies to their corresponding forms of political power, so much as blending them to reflect the fact that, in post-modern thinking, individual freedom has become a form of control. From the point of view of the post-modern adult, the child can simultaneously be conceived as a threat and a victim, rather than either suffering the moral training intended to remove its wildness, or enjoying the freedom that will protect its innate innocence. Rather than being either governed or freed, the child born in advanced neoliberal regimes is trained to self-govern as a competent, almost independent “child-actor”. Children are no longer seen as separated from the adult world, as was the case in the Dionysian and Apollonian conception. However, their participation is conditional upon their development of a sort of functional competence.

It is at this point that the discourse of EI intersects with the Athenian conception of childhood. As Smith writes, the “idea of the competent, participative child opens up new opportunities for children while simultaneously facilitating forms of control which place potentially onerous responsibilities upon the young (Kampmann, 2004: 129-30). This apparently contradictory interconnec-

tion between freedom and control brings us to the heart of the idea of governmentality.” It is this problematic coexistence of freedom and oppression that critics of EI have projected on the EI debate. To demonstrate this projection, I concentrate on three of their criticisms: EI is (1) burdensome for parents; (2) based on misleading elaborations of scientific evidence for the sake of bio-political control; and (3) intended to absorb children within the dominant culture for the benefit of the neoliberal, capitalist system.

## 2.1 Burdensome for parents

In the EI discourse, the term ‘parents’ often serves as a euphemism. What it really means, most of the times, is ‘mothers’. Implicitly, parent blame is gendered and, particularly but not only during pregnancy, responsibility and blame tends to fall onto women. Jan Macvarish, in her book *Neuroparenting*, identifies a brain-focused version of this kind of gendered blame as a pivotal component of EI. The title of her book has a clear negative connotation, intentionally suggesting the unsuitability of this neuroscience sub-discourse in the context of parenting. What it indicates is a conception of parenting that concentrates on the effects of the environment on the brain of the children and seeks to minimize negative impacts. The effects of the environment can be controlled, according to the neuroparenting discourse, as early as when the foetus is forming in the uterus. Making sure that the uterine environment is healthy enough is itself the premise upon which parents are encouraged to carry a series of heavy burdens.

Virtually all parents, realizing their lack of scientific knowledge necessary to understand the influence of the uterine environment on brain development, inevitably find themselves in circumstances that, even before birth, inculcate and cement in them the “universal claim that parenting is generally so important and so difficult that it cannot be left to parents.” (Macvarish, 2016: 74). The intuition that it is possible to intervene as early as *in utero* suggests to parents that the intervention should be the job of an expert. The “*first three years project is about normalising the idea that parenting is too difficult for parents to do without recourse to expert training*” (p. 51) writes Macvarish. What’s worse, though, is that if parents don’t let the expert intervene, they will bear a lifelong parental culpability: the effects of the intervention, or lack thereof, will last forever. The moral judgement is on them, for the neuroparenting discourse, with its emphasis on micro- rather than macro-determinants, implies that responsibility is individual rather than structural. Accepting the intrusion of a brain development

expert has, thus, become inextricably linked to the meaning of being a “good” parent.

It seems like a paradox: the appeal to brain science, whilst being used to moralize parents, simultaneously frees governmental and interventionist attitude from a moralizing discourse because it provides a, supposedly, objective theory of what “good parenting” is meant to be. This feature is not specific to neuroparenting and rather belongs to its broader encompassing category of infant determinism, as identified by Jerome Kagan (1998).

The apparent contradiction is resolved by Macvarish who clarifies: “rather than being an attempt to engage with scientific discoveries in a wider discussion about moral and political questions, neuroparenting is an attempt to avoid moral and political questions by using science and nature as an eternal, universal, unquestionable source of truth.” Attempt is the key word. Neuroparenting *attempts* to be value-free, but fails. It is a moral discourse that tries to mask itself as if it was beyond good and evil. The evil of neuroparenting, according to Macvarish, manifests itself in the pressure it puts on parents. “*Parents must be continually reflective on their own behaviour and dispositions and above all, be aware of the risks of getting it wrong*” (p. 10). “*Mothers in particular are placed under considerable pressure to conform to this new idea of intensive motherhood: doing more and doing it earlier*” (p. 95).

Similarly, but focusing on “the politics of EI” more generally rather than on neuroscience in particular, Gillies, Edwards and Horsley argue that EI enthusiasts put parents in disadvantaged families under significant pressure rather than attempting to relieve them from their existing burden of disadvantage. By measuring their likelihood to compromise the optimal development of their children (Gillies *et al.*, 2017: 8-35), the EI discourse holds parents responsible for the perpetration of their condition of disadvantage, which will be transmitted intergenerationally unless they accept the intervention.

Gillies, Edwards and Horsley clarify that not all EI practitioners necessarily believe in such a morally-blaming version of EI, nor base their professional conduct upon it. However, one of the strong points of criticism advanced by these authors is that the notion of sub-optimal, deficient parenting is “implicit” in EI programs, manuals, models, and policy documents (p. 133). That, they argue, necessarily projects on parents all the responsibility for the reproduction of inequality and lack of opportunities.



## 2.2. Based on misleading evidence

The idea of a critical period in child development received much attention in recent years. Although it has been criticised in both academic and non-academic outlets, infant determinism, namely the idea that a child's future can be heavily influenced by early experiences that are deeply engraved in the brain, remains a contentious issue. The focus on brain damage, and the extent to which this can be permanent or temporary, is a relatively recent development. However, at its core it is but another version of an old-age concern with the welfare of children. In particular, one aspects of this brain-focused version of infant determinism differentiates it from earlier editions of the same narrative: the idea, as Macvarish has put it, that “‘*we now know*’ (by implication, once and for all) *how children ought to be raised*” (Macvarish, 2016: 1). This positivist presumption might be considered as the double-edged sword of EI: on the one hand it has provided professionals in the EI industry with a culturally-accepted narrative that has secured their social acceptance as well as political and economic benefits; on the other, it called for a wave of political criticisms.

Gillies, Edwards and Horsley developed much of their criticism against the politics of EI around the issue of the evidence base. Although EI enthusiasts claim that policies and practices are based on the best scientific evidence that early negative experiences can cause perennial brain damage, these authors insist that the evidence is actually not quite there. They list numerous studies that illustrate how the link between adverse negative experiences and long term negative outcomes should not be interpreted deterministically. Furthermore, other studies that they cite show that EI initiatives are often ineffective. It follows that, both from the point of view of the damage and the cure, the EI hype is supported not by scientific evidence but by the extrapolation of evidence. Hence, they criticize EI agencies for inferring simplistic conclusions from the complexity of inconclusive findings.

The evidence is indeed inconclusive. Several studies concluded that EI programs tend not to deliver the intended results (Roberts, Kramer, & Suissa, 1996; Blauw-Hospers, Cornill, & Hadders-Algra, 2005). In many cases, the intended results were achieved only in a moderate or low degree (Peacock, Konrad, Watson, Nickel, & Muhajarine, 2013: 1; Van Sluijs, McMinn, & Griffin, 2007: 703). Other studies suggest that EI initiatives can be beneficial (Kendrick *et al.*, 2000; Feldman, Sparks, & Case, 1993; Bruder, 1993, Anderson *et al.*, 2003), and some even demonstrated long-term benefits (Aronen & Kurkela, 1996; Olds *et al.*, 1986). However, some studies also demonstrated

that positive effects of EI initiatives are limited and tend not to last (Anderson, 2008).

Such differential results might not necessarily be the proof that EI does not neutralize the negative influences of being born in disadvantaged circumstances. They might be the consequence of specific difficulties in studying EI programs, as the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) suggested. The most common pitfalls that weaken the evidence of EI evaluation studies include the absence of a robust comparison group, a high drop-out rate, the bias resulting from the exclusion of some participants from the analysis, the usage of invalid or unreliable measures, small sample sizes, the lack of long term follow-up, and others (EIF, 2018). One might attempt to establish a general tendency on the basis of meta-analyses of published studies. However, their comparability is limited by several factors. Evaluation methodologies tend to be different depending on the type of intervention, resulting in intervention type bias. As a consequence, it is difficult to apply similar methodologies to study effectiveness. Interventions tend to be designed according to the specific features of their context of application, and outcome measures are often different in different studies. Differences in outcome measures result in theoretical challenges, practical compromises, and methodological weaknesses. Efforts to create standardized evaluation procedures that are suitable for subsequent comparison have been made (Nicholas & Broadstock, 1999). However, despite the insistence on rigorous methods of evaluation, particularly by governments that only intend to fund the most effective programs, researchers have reached “*distinctly agnostic conclusions*” (Moss, 2016: 91) regarding the general effectiveness of EI. Given that it is neither possible to prove the permanent damage inflicted by early negative experiences nor the effectiveness of parenting interventions, the critics argue that EI should be challenged rather than encouraged.

### 2.3. Absorption into the dominant culture

“21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberalism has become entirely detached from the classical liberal belief that market-based logic is rooted in human nature and realisable only when free from the distortions of the state (Soss *et al*, 2011). Instead market behaviour is perceived as learnt rather than natural, requiring the firm hand of government to secure the future through childhood intervention” (Gillies *et al*, 2017: 38). Whose future, though? Gillies, Edwards, and Horsley argue that EI is essentially a form of reproduction of inequality, hence it is the future of the system itself that state intervention is intended to secure. Children, thus, are *the means* through which the system will be perpetuated. That is what the cover of

the book *Challenging the Politics of Early Intervention* is hinting at: doll heads transported on a conveyor belt. This is a eloquent, visual representation of the criticism that sees EI as more preoccupied with the reproduction of inequality through the standardization of souls rather than the neutralization of economic, physical, and cognitive gaps.

This interpretation of the cover image reflects the explicit content of the book, where it is stated that the “*state is mobilised on behalf of the market to secure the production of clear-thinking, flexible, self-directed brains able to withstand the pressure of a global competitive system.*” (p. 36) “*Intensively parented children [...] would be better able to navigate and capitalise on post-industrial opportunities. But the job of cultivating competent minds, fit to compete in the global knowledge economy, was regarded as too important to be left to untrained parents*” (p. 31). “*As a neoliberal orthodoxy spread across continents, overriding and undermining collectivist agendas, the need for a strategic state to strengthen market compliance and protect business interests became obvious. [...] In this scenario, social investment proved to be the perfect bridge between laissez-faire neoliberalism and an active interventionist state. [...] Thus rather than undermining neoliberal philosophy, social investment approaches sustained and intensified it*” (p. 71).

This way of writing the history of the relationship between states, markets, parents, and children corresponds to the suspicious attitude mentioned at the beginning of this article. It conceives of morality as being always the morality of the ruling classes disguised as embracing a larger portion of society. According to its traditional formulation, the correct way of thinking the values and norms that regulated industrial societies is as a mean instrumental to the perpetuation of unequal relations of productions. The suspicion towards the EI industry is a projection of this hermeneutics onto the production of humans: although EI presents itself as a political project intending to neutralize inequality, it actually reproduces it.

A similar concern has been repeatedly advanced with respect to strategies “*for governing childhood associated with contemporary neoliberal and ‘advanced liberal’ rationalities of rule*” (Smith, 2011: 24). For example, in the primary school context, Debbie Sonu and Jeremy Benson, argued that it is precisely our normative conception of the child “*as a natural, quasi-human, adult yet-to-come that lays the foundation for neoliberal educational policies and practices to work on the child, rather than with the child*” (Sonu & Benson, 2016: 231).

However, as indicated in the Athenian model advanced by Smith, in post-modern, post-industrial, neoliberal systems the child is not forced into a frame with pre-determined characteristics. Rather, the control of individual behavior is achieved by means of early conditioning, presented as enhancing life chances.

es. Rather than religion or ideology, a different but similarly impersonal and distant apparatus provides the standards of normativity, namely scientific best evidence. Indeed, in the post-modern take on governmentality studies, the power to force individuals into socio-industrial mechanisms for the reproduction of inequalities is not in the hands of other individuals, but rather dispersed and only graspable at the interface where social relationships occur and concretize. Power does not overtly present itself as prohibitive or repressive, but still produces ways of thinking, acting, and relating that facilitate being governed. Numerous scholars, inspired by Michel Foucault's own intellectual life and scholarly trajectory, applied this theoretical framework to explain forms of social control, sexuality, and mental health. The critics of EI appear to be attempting to do something very similar with EI. When applied to the EI discourse, the governmentality approach exposes the repressive ways in which "power" interprets society. It sees disadvantaged families as typologies of deviance. Rather than potentiality, it sees pathology. Rather than social benefit, it seeks to realize social control. In order to do that, it uses specific forms of social engineering.

Writing against neoliberal regimes, the critics interpret EI as intended to prevent children from becoming the kind of actors that will require to be disciplined and punished. EI, hence, only pretends to improve the life chances of children while actually anticipating the discipline and limiting them to the sole destiny of being conducted (Foucault, 2007). Children who are seen as at risk of not becoming responsible, flexible, and obedient taxpayers are intervened upon early enough in order to begin the process of regimentation before it's too late. This is compatible with a typically neoliberal conception of freedom, in which Athenian children are simultaneously free and captive. That is, free to develop the skills that will deprive them of their freedom once they become functional adults, parts of a system-machinery just like the doll heads transported on the conveyor belt.

It is not that their life chances have been foreclosed. To the contrary, the narrative of life chances corresponds to development programs intended to encourage the formation of transferable skills sets. But the inculcation of the skillset base is ultimately functional not to freedom, flourishing, and identity, but to rationality, efficiency, and obedience. Rational actors can better be controlled because their thought processes can be predicted. Given the minimum incentives, they will enter the workforce. The prospect of punishment will be enough to prevent their insubordination from the normal trajectory from

school, to university, to the job market. That is what lies behind the inverted commas of *Challenging the Politics of Early Intervention: who's 'saving' children and why*.

### 3. *Challenging the Challenge*

When I first read that book, I was sincerely curious and hopeful. I was hoping to find the intellectual tools to interpret a social situation that seemed to fit all too well within the framework of governmentality. Darndale, the place where I conducted fieldwork, was controlled by means of several security cameras, some of which were installed up on poles as tall as a five-story building. They towered the peripheral housing estate in 1984ish fashion, contributing to my impression of being on the stage of a massive social experiment. Officially, they were meant to film the area in order to keep video records in the event of a crime. They were also meant to make residents feel monitored. I was told, indeed, that most of the time the cameras were out of order. The image of a mechanical eye on top of a pole, meant not really to watch but to make people feel watched, kept reminding me of the panopticon metaphor in the works of Michel Foucault. Was I observing a typically post-modern training of the soul? If I were to understand Darndale, I thought, I had to consider the analytical framework of governmentality.

My focus, though, was not Darndale as a whole, but rather the EI program that operated from the Darndale Belcamp Village Centre. That is where I applied that framework, along with an analysis of the moral dilemmas that confronted the mothers and mentors at the interface of the PFL program, and their relationship with the evidence base of EI. In these three respects, my observations were radically different from what I found in the book by Gillies, Edwards and Horsley. In the following sections, I deal with these themes as they emerged iteratively from 12 months of ethnographic observations.

#### 3.1. EI, in practice, is not morally judgmental

Although Gillies, Edwards and Horsley did not describe specific cases in which parents lamented being subjected to a judgement of deficiency by the part of EI practitioners and/or policy makers, they claimed that this notion is implicit in programs and policy documents. It follows that the claim that a notion of deficiency is a fundamental component of EI is not demonstrated. Anecdotally, it might be the case that some EI programs, or some EI practitioners, caused parents discomfort by means of a perceivable judgement of them as

'bad parents'. That cannot, however, be assumed to be a necessary characteristic of EI programs.

In my experience as an ethnographer of an EI programme, I had the opportunity to discuss with many mothers from Darndale and got familiar enough as to address this topic in our conversations. They knew all too well the meaning of being judged as a "bad mum". However, they were much less concerned about external standards of good motherhood, if at all. What really made them distressed was peer judgement, the feeling of being seen as a deficient mother by other members of their kinship network and/or other residents in the area. Unpleasant feelings were associated with the experience of being seen while doing something that could be taken as evidence of their incapacity. If we were to interpret this finding from the perspective of governmentality, this might suggest that Darndale mothers have successfully internalized the values of 'successful motherhood' and not only hold themselves accountable, but hold others accountable within their community.

Mothers in Darndale thus judge each other according to standards that are not external, for they have internalized them in their community of reference. Other standards of evaluation are not a source of much preoccupation. Mothers are free to subscribe to, for example, the external standard of a parenting program, or not. Even when these standards are explicit, such as is the case with the behaviors encouraged as part of the Positive Parenting Programme (Garcia, DeNard, Ohene, Morones, & Connaughton, 2018), mothers are free to choose whether to engage or not. They can accept to be judged according to those external standards, or refuse by leaving the program or not signing up at all, as many parents do. It follows that even when some forms of judgment are clearly present because they constitutes an essential part of the program (including a formal, written evaluation), parents subject themselves to these voluntarily.

In other circumstances, all judgement is suspended. PFL practitioners are very clear about this aspect of their work. Making mothers feel judged is detrimental to the delivery of the program itself. Although the practices encouraged by the PFL program might be, to use the words of Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, "strictly defined" and "carefully scripted" in manuals and policy documents, PFL practitioners do not act strictly at all. To the contrary, they avoid measuring parents against any preconceived standard. They think that it is essential to ensure that parents feel well, follow through, and stay in the program because they want to.

Hence, how can the content, tone and even the cover of the book be explained? I argue that one explanation is that the the authors intended to argue

against a potential form of coercion, rather than an actual one. The risk to people's liberty and wellbeing might be there, but its materialization is mostly undocumented. In contrast, the consequences of suboptimal parenting have been studied. Even if the inconclusive evidence of neurodevelopmental studies might, and should, be subjected to criticism, this practical knowledge should be used to the best possible ends. Thus, an ethical argument can be advanced concerning the importance of intervening early at the risk of offending individual parents with personal and rather arbitrary moral judgements.

### 3.2. In the absence of certainty, it's still ethical to try

The absence of unquestionable evidence about the effectiveness of EI by no means implies that EI programs do not make efforts to ensure a rigorous, scientific evaluation of their own services. For example, PFL has not only been delivered alongside a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT), but the two activities have been so intertwined as to become inseparable: the experimental ethos of the RCT and its methodological requirements encouraged a rigorous implementation of the programme, including a meticulous handling of participants' data, an iterative review of research and intervention milestones, and an effort to limit the number of dropouts. On the other hand, the embeddedness of the PFL staff in the community gave the evaluation team access to a plethora of thick, qualitative data that it would not be possible to collect solely with a series of non-embedded data collection visits.

More generally, the agnostic conclusions of systematic reviews of EI evaluation studies do not discourage EI practitioners and policy makers from their endeavor. This can be explained as the expression of an ethical concept at the core of EI, that of the 'best bet'. As recently as January 2018, a roundtable of experts of social and emotional learning gathered by the EIF and the Education Endowment Foundation agreed that "while the evidence remains complex and incomplete, there is a need for some 'best bet' answers now" (Waddell, 2018).

This is not necessarily the ethical framework used by the PFL Organizing Committee to argue that delivering EI services in Darndale was going to have individual and societal benefits. The PFL programmatic documents recurrently asserted that the effectiveness of EI in reducing inequalities was proven by the scientific literature. However, none of the quoted sources has gone without some degree of controversy. As an ethnographer working within PFL, I had the opportunity to discuss this aspects with the PFL staff and question the use



of literature that only suggest the positive effects of EI programs. Confronted with my counterarguments, my informants did take the best bet approach.

In representing EI according solely to the literature that suggests its positive effectiveness, the intention of my informant was to prevent the agnostic trajectory of contemporary scientific debates from interfering with the implementation of the programme. It was perceived that the needs of the families were urgent and the mentors, in particular, felt a call to respond quickly. While this attitude might itself be subjected to criticism, responding to children's needs without waiting for scientific debates to settle on a definitive conclusion is a constitutive component of EI ethics.

One point of criticism might be that, in their decision-making process, EI practitioners should consider the possibility of alternative programs rather than applying programs whose effectiveness is not proven. However, no program has 100% probability of success, which is why the best bet approach is used. Still, Gillies, Edwards, and Horsley, in the last chapter of *Challenging the Politics of Early Intervention*, argue that there are a number of alternatives to EI.

The first alternative they propose is essentially collectivist: "unconditional cash support for struggling families" (Gillies *et al.*, 2017: 163). Families, they argue, would benefit from additional income much more than from their participation in an EI program. *"In contrast with early childhood intervention, the simple practice of giving money to poor families 'works' regardless of what measure is applied"* (p. 163).

In support of their argument, Gillies, Edwards, and Horsley provide evidence from a study of the 1974 Guaranteed Annual Income in the Manitoba province, Canada. Among the positive effects of the program, they list the following: *"fewer incidents of work-related injuries, and fewer emergency room visits from accidents and injuries. In addition, rates of psychiatric hospitalization and mental illness-related consultations with health professionals were also considerably reduced [and] high school students participating in the programme were more likely to stay on in education"* (p. 163).

Although these are positive consequences, they are not necessarily the kind of immediate objectives of an EI program, which often have more to do with the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children, in addition to their physical health and safety. The example cited in support of the claim that unconditional cash support should be bestowed on struggling families instead of EI, thus, is not pertinent.

The second alternative that Gillies, Edwards, and Horsley propose consists of *"listening and advocating for the families"* (p.166). *"Rather than promoting parent education and family intervention, efforts should focus on strengthening and supporting the capacity for such relationships to thrive"* (p. 166). This form of engagement involves direct



conversations between EI practitioners and the enrolled families, “*accepting and meeting the needs that mothers themselves identify*” (p. 166) including “*seemingly mundane issues such as broken lifts in tower blocks, lack of safe play spaces and facilities for children, isolation from shop and amenities, and other quality-of-life factors that impact heavily on the wellbeing of parents and children*” (p. 166).

These mundane matters must be taken into consideration by EI practitioners if they want to develop a “good” relationship with their enrolled families. Since ‘the good relationship’ is an essential component of the program, taking care of family needs and responding with practical solution is already part of EI programs that use the community-based, family-centered approach.

I argue, thus, that the alternatives proposed by Gillies, Edwards, and Horsley are either not pertinent or they are not alternatives at all. Writing more in the abstract, they insist that a different ideological apparatus will better serve the interests of the children, one that: prioritizes “*human relations, social justice and ethical practice above economic rationales of childhood investments and return*” (p. 158); promotes “*social good rather than optimizing individual strengths and capacities*” (p. 158); and posits that “*principles of democracy, experimentation and potentiality might be centered, in place of human capital production and market compliance*” (p. 159). This, however, is a political argument that provides no evidence of any comparative advantage, compared to the existing EI model.

In the absence of absolute certainty about the outcomes of a social welfare program, ethical analysis is much better suited than political analysis to dictate the best course of action. The inconclusive evidence of EI effectiveness does not exclude the possibility of beneficial consequences. The possibility that EI initiatives will have some beneficial consequences supports the case for using the principle of utility to judge whether the intervention should be implemented or not. The best bet argument could then be advanced despite the uncertainties resulting from the agnostic conclusions about the effectiveness of EI.

The *raison d'être* of the best bet is that it is neither possible to determine whether the intervention will be effective or not, nor if implementing it would be a good use of public money and the parents' time. It follows that the consequences of EI should be considered for, at least, these three dimensions and sets of actors. In all these cases, it is not possible to determine exactly how much disutility will be caused by doing EI, just like it is not possible to determine *a priori* how much good will be done. It follows that, from an inconclusive utilitarian perspective, it is not necessarily moral to argue against EI. In the absence of conclusive evidence that EI will do any disutility or some disutility, intentionally refusing to provide a program to children who need some form of

intervention or support would be at least as much immoral as providing it without knowing for sure that it will work.

A better way to proceed would be considering the consequences of EI programs. There is some evidence that doing EI is beneficial, although, sometimes, not extremely beneficial. There is also some evidence that inaction is extremely detrimental. Hence, even if a particular intervention will not work, it would have still been right to fund and implement it, because in a condition of uncertainty it would have been immoral not to try. In the worst case scenario, it will be a waste of time and money, which is arguably less severe a cost than those that risk to materialize as a consequence of inaction, both for individuals and for society at large.

### 3.3. The absorption into the dominant culture

“Some of the parenting programs that are out there seem to have the need to create children who do what society has decided is the correct way of being even if that is contrary to what is actually the natural behavior for the child.” This sentence, pronounced by an EI practitioners during an unstructured interview, suggests that those who work in the EI industry are not devoid of critical reflexivity. They are conscious of the trade-offs involved in interventions that encourage some behaviors and discourage others. For example, as the practitioner said, “society seems to value extroverts and children who are able to speak up, do this and do that. There are certain traits that some societies and particularly the society that we find ourselves in here, value over other traits. So the child who is able to be really, really confident and speak up all the time, that is given almost more importance than the child who actually sits back and might have a deeper wisdom, and a deeper way of processing it, because they are not doing that in the way that everybody around them say they should. ... Sometimes I think that what we are asking children to do is, a lot of times, to make it easier for the adults to handle things that might be difficult, rather than actually looking at it from a more child centred point of view.”

One way to frame this discussion is in terms of the ethics of absorbing children into the dominant culture. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that this idea dominates the EI agenda. It would be more correct to say that EI practitioners and policy makers are aware of this problem as much as of other problematic aspects of EI, but do not think that it should invalidate the ethics of EI. It is still ethical to enroll children into EI programs, they think, even if that means manipulating their lives. That is neither because they are not prepared to do their best, nor because they think that the parents they work with

are unable or unwilling to do the same. Rather, professionals in the EI industry are aware that the world in which they are preparing children to function into is not the “best of all possible worlds”, to say it with Leibniz. They know that, by encouraging the skills that will support the children’s access into the education system and, from there, into the productive workforce, they are simultaneously foreclosing other possibilities of being.

I discussed this issue extensively with people in different positions of the professional structure, from politicians to project managers as well as scientists and practitioners. Although some were not ready to admit the arbitrariness of choosing the dominant culture as the main point of reference, there was always a point in which they recognized that by providing some opportunities they were, by necessity, not providing others. Some even advanced serious questions about the risks associated to the absorption into the dominant culture, including the suffering of children who, for many different reasons, do not fit in. But no one questioned the need for EI per se. They were confident in the ethics of their enterprise. They believe that parents who, regardless the reason, won’t prepare their children to function in contemporary societies should be helped as much as possible. On the one hand, EI is meant to prevent difficult situations from escalating into child protection issues. On the other, parents who want their children to function in their contemporary society have the right to receive the necessary help for them to achieve this objective.

For this reason, a discussion about the ethics of absorbing children into the dominant culture is perhaps best structured as a discussion of rights and duties. Swift and Brighthouse argue that children have the right to have parents because that provides them with an advantage compared to children who have no parents. However, in order to provide such advantage, parents should be capable, a condition that is not necessarily given. I have already addressed the problem that parents might be placed in an uncomfortable position when measured against external standards of capability. Now the issue is whether the advantage that parents enrolled in EI programs provide can actually be considered an advantage rather than a disadvantage given that, by entering the program, they subscribed to an arbitrary selection of possible life projects.

The possibility that parents have a duty to prepare children to fit into the dominant culture, and thus the possibility that it is ethical that EI programs help them to do so, depends on whether children have an advantage in being better prepared to function in contemporary societies or not. While it is philosophically questionable that such duty even exists, and although it is not possible to determine whether EI programs actually provide the means to increase the au-

tonomy of the enrolled children, I can document ethnographically that the mothers I interviewed in Darndale believe that the point of PFL is precisely to prepare their children to function autonomously within the structures of the dominant culture.

Darndale residents largely perceive their area as a whirlpool of disadvantage that prevents people from achieving just about anything in life. They have a very clear understanding of what the reproduction of inequality means, as well as the process by which inequality is passed on intergenerationally. They understand that the opposite of inequality, namely social mobility, comes at certain costs. They might not be entirely aware of what these costs are because their understanding of how the dominant culture works depends on the peripheral position from which they have been looking at it. However, based on what they know, theirs is perhaps a sufficiently informed choice, if only because they know what they do not want. As a mother said speaking about her teenage son, “I want him out of this area, because this place is actually eating him up.”

These mothers consider that what the dominant culture has to offer constitutes an advantage, hence they deliberately joined an EI program that they believe can increase the likelihood that their children will be better prepared to navigate the structures and strictures of our contemporary, post-industrial, neoliberal system. It makes sense for them because the practitioners who mentor them have been socialized within the dominant culture and can provide these mothers with an insider gaze, with the influence they were not exposed to as a consequence of their peripheral position. At least some mothers sign up because they recognize in themselves the inability to prepare their children to operate within a culture that is for the most part foreign to them. If the dominant culture is the one they believe can provide the best advantage to their children, then it is their duty to do what they can to introduce them to it, including enrolling them in an EI program.

The criticism against EI programs supporting parental efforts to prepare children to function into contemporary, neoliberal societies might therefore be unwarranted. If a better society existed, then parents and EI practitioners would perhaps have a duty – or at least a significant moral reason – to prepare their children to operate into it. But such a society does not exist and is not expected to be realized soon, at least not during the formative years of these children. It follows, therefore, that an argument about the ethics of preparing children to operate in societies that do not exist just yet cannot be advanced.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article I challenged some of the ways in which authors critical of EI programs have questioned some foundational elements of EI, namely the uncomfortable position in which it allegedly puts parents, its complicated relationship with the evidence base, and the controversial absorption into the culture that dominates our neoliberal, capitalist society. There might be other criticisms or negative unintended consequences of EI that have not been considered in this article. Of course they should be weighed up in assessing the ethical acceptability of EI. As long as the three above aspects are considered, I have argued, EI is still an ethical enterprise to undertake.

That does not mean that the criticisms advanced in the literature should be simply rejected, for some of the preoccupations that motivate them might be justified. Critics of EI are justifiably worried that programs dealing with such intimate matters as the relationship between children and parents might be dangerous. EI practitioners have a duty to act in such a way as to minimize the possibility of parents being put in a condition of discomfort, even if that might go beyond their possibilities. Furthermore, people working in the EI industry should not represent the evidence base for the effectiveness of EI in such a way as to suggest that EI has been proven to work universally, or even generally. The best bet approach is ethical enough to justify the need for EI, whereas the dissemination of overblown or otherwise extrapolated conclusions seriously endangers the reputation of the EI industry as a whole.

In conclusion, the overall intention of this article was to contribute to a debate about the politics of EI, not just by challenging some of the criticisms, but especially by showing how the terms of the debate are biased. Rather than discussing the politics of EI, we should discuss the ethics of EI. Looking at EI from a purely political point of view, instead, does not enable us to understand why doing EI, even in the current scientific and political circumstances, is the most ethical thing to do.

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