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**Well-being of children and labour markets in Europe
Different kinds of risks resulting from various structures and changes in the labour
markets**

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**Changing Expectations on Employees and Parents and the Well-Being of
Children**

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**1 CHANGING EXPECTATIONS ON EMPLOYEES AND PARENTS AND
THEIR CONSEQUENCES**

In many respects, parenthood today means something different than 40 years ago. The preconditions have changed and parenting has become more demanding. This situation has to do with the changed attitude towards children, with the new importance of a child's well-being, and with the establishment of new approaches, such as the "new fathers", the "successful upbringing", or the "responsible parenthood". The consequences of this development are not yet known. But it is certain that new regulatory tasks are going to follow for state and society.

Especially in countries with a low birth rate, the state and society must carefully decide what kind of support they want to grant parents. This process requires a new social construction of parenthood. It is a fundamental step towards the reordering or framing of generation and gender relationships.

Gender is mentioned here, because parenthood is still completely different for fathers and mothers in most European countries. Mothers still perform most of the child-rearing tasks, often with the consequence of a renunciation of a higher social status. With the transition to parenthood, a long-lasting re-traditionalisation of the distribution of functions and duties

within the relationship takes place. Women often perform a larger proportion of the housework and parenting (e.g. Rost and Schneider 1995). This gendering of task sharing appears after the birth of the first child and significantly increases after the second birth (cp. Quaiser-Pohl 2001).

The unequal distribution of family tasks to the detriment of mothers already burdened by the growing demands of child-rearing is one main reason why parenthood is increasingly experienced as a strain, especially in such European countries where fathers are still widely exempt from child care duties. International empirical studies show, in the case of Germany, that the strains of balancing job and family result from a perceived discrepancy between an ideal role of the wife and the reality of women's position in society, and from a special feeling of insecurity with regard to the up-bringing of children (cp. Werneck et al. 2001). This feeling of insecurity develops in the context of high achievement-oriented parents and their perception of their maternal and paternal roles, and their pronounced sense of duty to do everything right as a parent.

Especially "new fathers" are in a highly undefined situation right now. In the process of changing the father's role from a supporter to a co-nurturer, fathers want to be more involved in the upbringing and care of their children. But they have to realise that their attempts conflict with increasing job demands requiring mobility, flexibility, availability, and readiness to work. These increasing demands of the family and work place lead towards a paradoxical situation. Unlike their fathers' generation, the "new fathers" are more, and at the same time, less involved in family life today. On the one hand, fathers are more prepared to have an active role in parenting and are more involved in family life, but on the other hand, the number of fathers, who spend less time with their children, has increased because of the high divorce rate and higher job demands (Mintz 1998).

Mothers are faced with the problem of balancing job and family in a different way. While men have to integrate a higher involvement in parenting en route to "androgynous parenthood" (Amato and Booth 1997) into their working life, women have to integrate their job into family life. Either one is hard to manage. This difficulty is due to the fact that the maternal role is based on an enormous continuity. Women have traditionally been expected to conform to a solid core of role expectations, which are focused on the maternal responsibility for the physical and psychological well-being of the child (cp. Schütze 2000).

Only one fundamental change is obvious. Society is slowly parting from the idea that motherhood requires women to give up their employment to dedicate themselves fully to the task of child rearing. As a consequence, social acceptance of working mothers has increased, and the need for a stronger family commitment on the part of the fathers is recognized as well. But social structures often hinder the actual realisation of this normative change.

2 “THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD”¹ – IN THE INTEREST OF CHILDREN?

The idea of how to guarantee qualitative reproduction is subject to social change, and shapes the framing of the parent-child-relationship substantially. The best interests of the child are the focal point of the current social construction of parents’ rights and duties. Safeguarding the subjective and objective well-being of the child is defined as a central task of parenting (cp. Fthenakis and Minsel 2001). Let us critically reflect upon this idea for a moment.

An important stimulus for this idea of parenthood came from the “Child Savers” movement, which has a long historical tradition in the United States. A main concern of this movement was to guarantee every child a childhood. Its efforts have led to many positive consequences. But there are critical voices too, which mention the problematic issues of overprotection and “sacralization” of the “king child” (cp. Zelizer 1985).

The recognition of children’s rights is one of the most important achievements of the last century. But: Aren’t we in the very act of overreacting?

In the course of social individualisation, the possibility for self-realisation and its diverse options have increased, and the relationship of the partners, as a central foundation for satisfaction in life, has come more and more to the fore. Both are foiled by the obligation to act in the best interests of the child – with the consequence, that fewer children are born. The one-sided focus on the parental role led to a disregard of the needs of the partners in their relationship. And this change happened at a time when new ideas about living arrangements evolved. Increasingly, adults believed they had to live for themselves and not only for their children (cp. Popenoe 1996).

Child-orientation is another popular modern value. Arguing in favour of it is never wrong. But what does “child-orientation” mean? It is a child-centered concept that is in sharp conflict with notions of obedience, duty, performance, and adaptation. It is popular to be careful with children, to be easy on them, and shield them from the problems of the adult world. The correctness of this attitude is dubious. Children are not the weak and vulnerable beings in need of protection, as romanticised today. They are robust, egoistic, and demanding. Children need support and indulgence but require restraint as well. Children need a suitable environment that helps them to become adults. This means that children have to learn to cope with the values of the global economic pressure of competition and achievement – as soon as possible, as gently as possible, and as well as possible.

¹ as formulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 3

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the *best interests of the child* shall be a primary consideration.
2. States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.

In strengthening children's rights and arousing public concern for social problems, such as child abuse, violence against children, child labour and child poverty, we have lost sight of the parents' situation in some respect. The children's situation today is frequently mentioned in connection with society's unfriendliness towards children. In my opinion, we should deal with a societal unkindness towards parents and, particularly in southern Europe, towards mothers. In discussions concerning the future of society, the requirements and demands of the parents often remain secondary.

Concern for the best interests of the child is well-defined as a parental duty. Yet, because parents are extensively left alone with the completion of this task, a growing number are overextended. Their situation is complicated by increasing demands to ensure the well-being and proper education of children. Some couples fail to meet these parental obligations because soaring occupational pressures leave parents less time and energy to fulfil their parental roles. Others face problems because of limited financial resources due to unemployment. In addition, fewer young parents are experienced in interacting with children and many lack the necessary knowledge to take care of them, something which was once quasi naturally learned at home.

Today, parenthood in Europe is an option which appears more and more as a restricting obligation. In times of high employer demands on the workforce, the disadvantages for parents and particularly for mothers are increasing. These hindrances are developing into important reasons why parenthood is becoming more and more unattractive and being avoided. This might be one reason for the current very low fertility rate in eastern European countries. Countries that possess an appropriate infrastructure and basically respect the needs of parents (e.g. France, Iceland) appear to be more successful and have higher birth rates.

As shown in a paper published by the German Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA) in 2001, the collective treatment of social conditions and subjective motives are pushing forward the development of a new "reproductive culture", especially in Germany and some other European countries, in which childlessness is developing into a kind of normalcy in some social settings.

What do the above remarks mean for the social construction of parenthood and the support of the interests of children? More than ever, mothers and fathers must be supported in their parental tasks and duties by the state, by society and by employers. Children need parents who have time and energy for them and their requirements. Only people, who believe they can successfully achieve their personal goals, without significantly neglecting their personal needs, are likely willing to become parents.

3 RESTRICTIONS ON RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD

For a long time, but especially since the 1980s, a long-lasting emancipation of children can be observed in the USA and in Europe. This process is comparable to the emancipation of women. Children are freed from the traditional subordination of the compliant authority of their parents. Today, they are equal partners with regards to their rights – not their duties. Because of this change, they are widely liberated. The consequences of this new social definition of the role of children and their parents are many. One of these consequences is that along with the increasing responsibility of parents for their children, the required time investment for parenting is rising, too. But in today's labour market, there is also an increase of demands on employees, as already mentioned above. Many jobs place such high demands on employees with regard to availability, resilience, and flexibility that a person is almost in a firm's total grasp. As such, stressed employees have two options at the most. They need a person in the background, who cares for the family's interests - this is mostly the option chosen by men - or they do not establish a family relationship at all, which is, most of the time, the only alternative for vocationally successful women.

In the past years, social science research has only focused on the situation of the children. This limited approach applies especially to studies on the social and political dimensions of childhood. Children are here mythologized as the "project future" (cp Honig 1992). This discourse focuses on improving the living circumstances and development of the children. But the conditions influencing these circumstances are not discussed adequately in the social science literature. That is true with respect to the parents and their social and personal situation and it applies to the societal environment as well.

It should be recognised that children can grow up in an optimal way, if they live in suitable conditions, and if they have well-supported, content parents. In fact, parental satisfaction is an important factor. To serve the best interests of the child, societal and governmental measures must equally consider the best interests of the parents. As long as parents are left alone with their attempts to balance their familiar, social, and occupational duties, an important step towards supporting children's well-being is missing.

The basis of many parent-child-relationships is a highly emotionalised, equal and egalitarian relationship, with a changed style in bringing up children. An authoritative style, which is open, and interested in children's lives, replaced the authoritarian upbringing – at least normatively. In reality, authoritarian parent-child relationships often exist and are characterized by an authoritarian-controlling, indifferent, neglecting or inconsistent behaviour in raising children. This empirical result is a consequence of the actual situation of many parents: increasing demands on the parental role, connected with little preparation for it, often leads to over guidance. The arising problems are obvious. On the one hand, there are adored and pampered planned children, and, on the other hand, there are children, who are neglected, left to their own resources with poor perspectives of development.

Two additional normative patterns of parenthood can be found in some European countries today. The first pattern accentuates the role of the good mother, who belongs entirely to her child. Based on the conviction that maternal nurturing is important for successful childhood development, this norm is still a predominant social guiding principle. In West Germany and in many Mediterranean countries, women continue to define themselves through this self-portrait, despite empirical results that contradict this notion. The second norm of responsible parenthood is new. Its guiding principle is the capability of parents to take good care of children. It stipulates that couples should only have children if they can provide financial stability to their offspring. This model determines the timing of births and leads – beside other causes – to a further postponement of parenthood to such a high age that it is sometimes only possible to have children with medical support.

But there is one further important point to add. Legal limitations are placed on couples who want to become parents, but are unable or unwilling to have children naturally. A legal right to parenthood does not exist, aside from some exceptions (e.g. California or Portugal). People in certain living arrangements, for example in unmarried and/or homosexual relationships, are denied the right to adopt children or are denied access to the latest techniques of reproductive biology. Heterologous methods of reproductive medicine are not allowed to be used in many places. Why do these restrictions exist? There is a belief that children only grow up optimally if they live with their married, biological parents. But this belief conflicts with social scientific results about the connection of family arrangements and successful child-rearing. Two results, in particular, are noteworthy. First, no research shows that the traditional family ideal is a guarantee for a happy and affectionate upbringing or the optimal surrounding for the development of healthy and well integrated children (cp. Acock and Demo 1994, 231). We can rather assume that a healthy psycho-social upbringing is compatible with a wide spectrum of living arrangements (cp. Graham et al. 1999). It is also certain that childcare outside the family does not principally have a bad influence on the development of the child. If the childcare is of a high quality and based on steady arrangements, it does not influence the quality of the relationship to the parents and often leads to an even better course of development (e.g. independence), as in the case of pure familiar upbringing (cp. Fegert 2000). Second, the financial situation is of primary importance. In other words, the living arrangement is not as important as the financial stability of the home. The negative impact on children living in single parent or post-divorced families is lessened if their economic situation is adequate (cp. Walper 2001).

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

What do the foregoing remarks mean for the social construction of parenthood and the links between family and society? The low fertility rate in many European countries is not a result of a missing will to reproduce, but the product of adverse social circumstances. The socio-political discussion about parental tasks and the best interests of the child can be reduced to two questions: “Who should pay for the children?” and “Are children to be treated as public or as private goods?” If it is true – as often argued – that children are the future of a society, they cannot only be regarded as a private matter of their parents. This conclusion requires that the state and society have to bear more of the expenses of children.

Mothers and fathers must be supported in their parental tasks and duties more than before. This requires efforts on different levels. Predominantly it is a matter of elevating the social estimation of child-rearing, of allotting greater educational investments (also for parental education), of strengthening the care-giving role of fathers, and of creating family-friendly work locations and places to live. Politics alone can not ensure such family-friendly conditions. Businesses must re-evaluate their economic models to allow for a new balance between family and work. In a global economy, family-friendly living and working conditions could develop into an important location factor in Europe.

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