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## **Not Yummy or Slummy, just Mummy** **Published as: All parents need our full support**

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In a recent review of the academic literature on parenting in the UK, I entered a surprisingly dystopian culture. The texts that I read spoke of 'intensive parenting' being an intrinsic part of the over-arching Neo-Liberal project that sits at the heart of contemporary Anglo-American culture, in which the primary role of parents has become ensuring that their children become school and thereafter, employment market ready; a pressure that equally impinges upon practitioners through exacting 'accountability' measures. In this way, from the very beginning of their lives, human beings become valued only to the extent that they are able to contribute to the current and future economy.

The construction of modern parenting that emerged from the literature depicted parents, mothers in particular feeling torn between paid labour and parenting, worried that they did not have enough time to do a good job in either role and being constantly weighed down by the prospect of being negatively evaluated by others through exacting performance targets at work and in their parenting role, for example through media constructions of 'yummy and slummy mummies' (Bradford 2013, online). In this way, Neo-Liberal values carried by relentless public and social media feeds condition individuals to police both themselves and others, 'creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it... in which all become 'prisoners of experts [whose power is] everywhere and also inside us' (Henderson et al 2010, p.236).

Jensen (2013, p.51) proposes that modern parents 'consume parent pedagogies' resulting not only in cultural indoctrination, but also in voyeuristic entertainment which exhorts individuals to compare themselves to those unfortunate enough to find themselves publicly presented in ways calculated to elicit censure and/or ridicule. While this may make the viewer feel temporarily better about him or herself, Hoffman (2013, p.239) reflects 'what is so ironic is that in the end the power struggles are... between parents themselves'. The state does not therefore need to act directly, as the population enthusiastically sanction and condemn each other.

This situation has recently been poignantly demonstrated in the BBC's high profile dramatisation *The Moorside* which narrates an infamous episode in the life of uber-slummy mummy Karen Matthews, 'twice diagnosed by psychologists as having a borderline learning disability and described in the report as "emotionally vulnerable"' (Williams 2010 online). There is no doubt that what Matthews did was heinous, but given the recency of the incident and the vulnerability of so many of the people involved, is it really a suitable topic for prime time entertainment? Or is it yet another example of the twenty-first century psycho-social Roman Circus that continually plays within various 'reality' media products, from *The Jeremy Kyle Show* to *Super Nanny* where victims are brought out to be fed to the 'lions' of public opinion?

George Monbiot (2016, online) comments 'perhaps it's unsurprising that Britain, in which Neo-Liberal ideology has been most rigorously applied, is the loneliness capital of Europe [where individuals]... blame themselves for their failures, even when they can do little to change their circumstances.' What he presents in his thesis of *The Zombie Doctrine* is a dystopian environment in which contemporary parents and practitioners feel over-controlled, surveilled and continually criticised, not only by the state, but also by faceless others in an endless hall of cyber-mirrors.

Surely then, one of the issues we should be urgently raising as early years practitioners is how to deeply engage at the local level both with each other and with all parents, 'slummy, yummy, chummy and crummy' (Bradford 2013, online) to raise collegiality, self-esteem and confidence. By collectively refusing to participate in a mass bullying culture that isolates, labels and shames individuals we could begin to bring parents and practitioners together to debunk the insidious societal mechanisms that magnify our inevitable flaws, and by so doing, celebrate our shared humanity. And who knows; perhaps wider society might eventually follow where we lead.

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