

# The Cult of the Child

Subjects: [Psychology](#)

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The concept of the "cult of the child" highlights a radical change in child representation. Having been neglected and even disrespected for centuries, children are now valued, and their interests are placed above all others. This change in views of children, reflected in changes in laws, institutions and practices, has also spread to two pillars of our democratic societies, the family and the school, with a number of consequences for parents, teachers and children.

burnout

authoritative

permissiveness

needs

## 1. Introduction

Intergenerational studies have presented a worrying picture of the new generation (i.e., iGen/Gen Z, born 1995–2012). Since 2010, researchers have observed a decline in mental health indicators in the United States, i.e., decreased happiness and increased loneliness, anxiety and depressive symptoms ([Duffy et al. 2019](#); [Twenge et al. 2018](#)), a decline in vocabulary skills (see ([Andreu and Steinmetz 2016](#)) for France and ([Twenge et al. 2019](#)) for the United States) and even mixed attitudes similar to those of previous generations toward environmental protection in both Europe and the United States (e.g., [Gray et al. 2019](#); [VanHeuvelen and Summers 2019](#)).

One explanation for this trend can be found in the intensive use of new technologies by IGen, born precisely at the time of the rise of social media. Many studies have shown that excessive use of smartphones and social networks has a negative influence on these mental health and cognitive indicators (see [Twenge 2020](#)). This effect is direct, but also indirect, via a disruption of in-person social interactions, interference with sleep time and quality, exposure to a toxic online environment and reduction in time spent in reading books ([Twenge 2020](#); [Twenge et al. 2019](#)). However, other recent cultural changes, that may have been neglected so far, can also explain these generational changes, particularly in the educational sphere.

## 2. The Cult of the Child in Parenting

### 2.1. The Advent of Child-Centered Parenting

Until the 19th century, the family environment was considered as a place of intimacy with the paterfamilias (who held power over his wife and children) at its head. The state did not intervene.

At the end of the 19th century, children become of greater interest to the state. Poverty, crime and vice were widespread in industrialized cities, and the state began to see children as the future of the nation ([Bullard 2015](#)). It became necessary to protect them, not for their own sake, but to change and protect society as a whole. The idea began to gain ground that parents were responsible for the future of their children and that the state could intervene (by force) in families who were unable to ensure that their children survived and were brought up properly ([Michel and Varsa 2014](#)).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the First World War led to a fall in the birth rate, leading to a concerted drive to reduce infant mortality. Mothers were perceived as key to children's survival and were therefore encouraged to adopt new hygiene practices and to breastfeed their infants. Because children not only needed to survive but also represented the future of the nation, concrete measures were taken ([King 2016](#)), such as regulation of child labour ([Somavia 2002](#)), compulsory schooling ([Miller 1989](#)), child protection laws ([Walsh 2020](#)), the creation of juvenile courts ([Thompson and Morris 2016](#)), or the implementation of youth assistance or family support services through which the state could intervene in families that were deemed defective in order to protect children ([Walker 2012](#)). At the international level also, crucial political changes occurred, with the recognition for the first time of specific rights of children and the responsibility of adults in upholding these ([League of Nations 1924](#)), the creation in 1946 of the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 ([United Nations 1948](#)), the Declaration of the Rights of the Child ([United Nations 1959](#)), and ultimately the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) ([Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989](#)). Besides instituting the rights of children, the CRC outlines the duties of those responsible for them, particularly parents, and the importance of the role of signatory states in supporting parents in their complex task, monitoring them, and intervening (by force if necessary) when parents are not acting in the child's "best interest".

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Committee for European Social Cohesion published a report aimed at identifying the implications of the CRC for parenting ([Daly 2007](#)). This report sought to define the notion of "good parenting" using the

concept of "positive parenting". The experts who participated in this committee relied on the scientific knowledge at that time about child development to provide guidelines on the parenting practices to be favoured or proscribed ([Daly 2007](#)). They were mainly influenced by two particular fields of research. The first was attachment, where research emphasized the importance of emotional security for optimal social, cognitive, affective and physical development (e.g., [van Ijzendoorn et al. 1995](#)), the influence of the caregivers' sensitivity and mentalization competencies, and the lifelong consequences of attachment failure for the child's development and health (e.g., [De Wolff and van Ijzendoorn 1997](#)). The second field was that of parenting styles. In reference to Baumrind's seminal work on parenting ([Baumrind 1971](#)), the authoritative style (as opposed to authoritarian, indulgent and neglectful styles) was associated with better cognitive, academic, emotional and social development, as well as with greater well-being and health for children. Accordingly, the combination of warmth and democracy seemed to be the formula for optimal parenting.

In this context, laws aimed at regulating parenting started to be introduced. The most emblematic example is undoubtedly the prohibition of spanking, adopted in 37 countries in the last 40 years ([Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children 2021](#)). Never before in history has parenting been so socially regulated. Parenting is no longer a matter of common sense: it requires reference to the rules enacted by the state and to the knowledge disseminated by experts. These experts hold the keys to positive parenting that respects the rights of children and their best interests and seek to optimize their development. All the conventions, reports, rules and laws described in this section testify to the cult of the child and are the direct product of the development in the representation of the child outlined in the historical background section.

## 2.2. Development of Parenting Practices

The institutionalization of childhood in international conventions and national laws has led to changing parental practices. This change has occurred in just two generations and has been driven by experts, including both scholars and practitioners, through (1) the production of scientific knowledge about parenting and its relations with child developmental outcomes ([Bornstein 2019](#)); (2) the transmission of this knowledge in the form of formulas, recommendations or even injunctions to parents to adopt optimal childrearing behaviours (transmitted through online information, websites, popular scientific books, campaigns, etc.) ([Kay 2010](#)); (3) the assessments of parenting practices and the quality of the parent-child relationship by experts working in specialized consultation centres, when the child's development is not considered optimal ([Foran et al. 2020](#)); and (4) the growing number of preventive or curative parenting programs, under the guidance of experts or even self-administered, aimed at training parents to adopt optimal practices with respect to their children (e.g., [Webster-Stratton 2005](#)). Clearly, parenting experts have become important figures in the educational landscape today ([Lee et al. 2014](#)).

It is difficult to objectively state the extent to which parenting practices have really evolved over the last few decades. However, in order to illustrate the cult of the child, i.e., how the changes that have occurred have led to both a decrease in constraints and an increasing concern to meet all children's needs and avoid any dangers, researchers have gathered a set of indicators from several sources.

## 2.3. Consequences of the Cult of the Child for Children

The changes in institutions and practices described above were all made with a view to the best interest of the child. They have in fact had a number of positive effects, including the prohibition (moral or even legal) of all forms of violence against children, the reduction in the risk of unintentional injuries and falls in childhood, and the related mortality ([Grossman 2000](#)), more inclusive education with a greater tolerance for "non-normative" behaviour (e.g., homosexuality), and the increase of intimacy within families and in particular of parent-child quality time ([Collishaw et al. 2012](#)). However, and unfortunately, there have also been a number of negative consequences, which are becoming even clearer and more problematic as the cult of the child intensifies. Researchers focus more specifically on the negative consequences of the above-mentioned changes, for both children and parents.

Although the beneficial effects of positive parenting on children have been widely documented (for a review, see [OECD 2020](#)), the intensification of positive parenting may have become counterproductive. While positive parenting aims at optimizing the development and well-being of the child, its intensification and excessive approaches to which it can sometimes lead, such as EPP or hyper- or over-parenting, have negative consequences for the child ([Faircloth 2014](#)). The system thus ends up working against those it claims to protect. The negative consequences have been empirically demonstrated in some studies that researchers selectively review below.

Researchers will base the review on the consequences of "helicopter parenting", a typical form of parenting embedded in the cult of the child as characterized by the alleviation of disciplinary constraints and frustrations, the prioritization of meeting all the child's needs, and the focus on child protection. Helicopter parenting is by far the most studied of all the parenting styles that have emerged from the cult of the child. The term was coined in 1969 ([Ginott 1969](#)) and has become increasingly popular in the United States since 1990 ([Cline and Fay 1990](#)). It describes parents who are excessively child-oriented, over-involved, over-caring and over-protective. These parents disagree with the idea of their child being exposed to any risk and therefore

behave in an intrusive and controlling way. Prevented from facing any problematic situation and therefore from finding solutions by themselves, overparented children have been called the 'cotton wool kids' ([Bristow 2014](#)).

Interestingly, and somewhat paradoxically, helicopter parenting has negative effects on the child's physical health: over-protective parents severely limit the child's possibilities of exploration, resulting in a reduction in motor activity ([Janssen 2015](#)). Helicopter parenting also has deleterious effects on the psychological well-being and mental health of children ([Kouros et al. 2017](#)). Children of helicopter parents are more anxious ([Spokas and Heimberg 2008](#)) and use more medication for depression and anxiety ([LeMoyne and Buchanan 2011](#)). They also report higher worries and psychological difficulties in emerging adulthood ([Segrin et al. 2015](#)).

Given its excessive focus on the child, it is not surprising that research has found that helicopter parenting is associated with narcissistic traits in children ([Eberly-Lewis et al. 2018](#)) and ego inflation ([Yilmaz 2020](#)). Moreover, by trying to anticipate and solve difficulties before they affect the child, helicopter parents prevent their children from becoming independent and making autonomous choices ([Schiffrin et al. 2015](#)). As a result, these over-parented children consider that they have the right to expect others to solve their difficulties and give them a lot of support of the kind that they received from their parents, creating a general sense of entitlement ([Segrin et al. 2012](#)). These children display a more external locus of control ([Spokas and Heimberg 2008](#)), procrastinate more ([Hong et al. 2015](#)), and show a lower level of school engagement ([Padilla-Walker and Nelson 2012](#)).

The finding that over-parented children show lower school engagement ([Padilla-Walker and Nelson 2012](#)) is somewhat paradoxical, because another facet of over-parenting is overstimulation. In order to optimize their child's development, parents provide numerous structured activities aimed at developing language quality, cognitive reasoning and so on. To achieve their goal, parents use stimulating materials at home, interact actively with the child's school experience and limit play and informal leisure time in favour of learning time. While stimulation through participation in structured activities is important for child development, over-stimulation (i.e., excessive stimulation through too many structured activities) may have negative consequences by depleting children's energy, by not teaching children to organize their time by themselves and by exposing children to extremely demanding standards. Although the links with parental over-stimulation have not been formally demonstrated, it is likely that changes in parenting practices have contributed to the increase in perfectionism among young people. A meta-analysis gathering data from more than 40,000 college students from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom between 1989 and 2016 has shown that young people perceive others as more demanding of them and are more demanding of themselves and of others ([Curran and Hill 2019](#)).

## 2.4. Consequences of the Cult of the Child for Parents

The increase in parental investment and pressure that has resulted from the cult of the child has most likely resulted in increased parenting stress and parental burnout. Researchers describe this development only as a likelihood because, there is no cohort study on parental stress/burnout in lay parents. However, two indirect indicators suggest that parental stress and burnout may have increased over the past few decades. First, the notion of parental burnout, coined in 1983, has become increasingly popular with both the lay public and the scientific community, with a twentyfold increase in the number of publications using the term since the 2000s. Parental burnout (see [Mikolajczak et al. 2021](#) for review) has recently been pointed to as an important research direction in psychology ([Gruber et al. 2021](#)). Interestingly, the prevalence of parental burnout has been found to be much higher in Western countries ([Roskam et al. 2021](#)), i.e., precisely where the cult of the child is the most apparent. The second indirect indicator that parental stress and burnout may be on the increase is a retrospective study by [Mathy \(2019\)](#) on 470 parents, suggesting that the prevalence of parental burnout in Belgium may have been eight times lower in the 1960s than nowadays. As the study was retrospective and conducted on a small sample, the results must be taken with great caution. However, they dovetail with those of the studies conducted in the school domain, where the cult of the child seems to have paved the way for teachers' burnout (see below).

## 2.5. Summary

As the foregoing shows, changes in the representation of the child have been paralleled with changes in parenting practices towards imposing fewer constraints on children and focusing more on their needs and protection. In parallel with this development, cohort studies found a host of negative outcomes for children, and parental burnout is now a hot topic. Based on this evidence, researchers can only speculate that the cult of the child has brought about these negative consequences. No study so far has directly tested the hypothesis of a direct link between the cult of the child and the negative outcomes observed in children and parents. The next section, showing the negative consequences of child-centred curriculums in schools, provides further evidence of the potential effects of the cult of the child and suggests that studies that directly and thoroughly examine its impact on parenting and schools are needed.

## 4/6

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