

**Book Review**

# Challenging the Politics of Early Intervention. Who's 'Saving' Children and Why

Gillies V., Edwards R., and Horsley, N. (2017). Bristol: Policy Press.

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Like *Blinded by science: The social implications of epigenetics and neuroscience* (Wastell & White, 2017) that was reviewed in *Children Australia* in September 2017, this book is also about neuroscience and children's brain development. But the focus in this instance is on how this science is being used by early intervention advocates to advance a moral and political agenda.

The authors of this book articulate the way in which early intervention policy and services in England have been taken over by lobby groups. These groups are committed to rescuing babies from parents whose inability to provide essential nurturing care causes trauma that damages an infant's brain. These advocates also argue that this trauma has long-term consequences, not only for an individual child, but for society as a whole. They even go so far as to propose that such damage leads to mental health issues and criminality, as well as a lifetime of welfare dependency and other social ills – all of which, according to these early intervention advocates, will occur if the child's first 3 years of life are mishandled by parents. At best, or maybe worst, this is a highly deterministic and linear view of child development; and it is the work of these early intervention advocates, and the moral and political implications of their activities, that this book critically analyses.

The book has eight chapters which the authors describe as follows. Chapter one 'The politics of early intervention and evidence' starts with an examination of Bruce Perry's dramatic image of two 3-year olds brain scans that was published in 2002, one normal and the other allegedly involving extreme neglect. This image became iconic to such an extent that it was reproduced on the cover of the Allen report *Early intervention: Smart investment, massive savings* (Allen, 2011), a report to the UK government. This report promoted the notion that early intervention services for children under the age of 3 years was a sound social investment derived from a neoliberal philosophy (much like property investment) that would ensure children so served would grow to be sound, rather than problematic citizens, and who would be devoid of social ills.

The iconic image unfortunately tells us nothing about the origin of these brain scans or the circumstances that led to the conditions that produced such images. Attempts to establish the origin and circumstances of the scans, in spite of vigorous attempts to do so, have proved to be impossible (Wastell & White, 2017). This raises serious questions as to what agenda Perry was seeking to promote when he chose to use these distressing images in this way.

In chapter two 'Citizens of the future', historical ideas about intervention in family life are examined 'highlighting earlier attempts to shape children's upbringing for the sake of the nation's future' (p. 17). This includes concerns about the likelihood of poverty, crime and disorder being handed down to the next generation. The authors also note how the 19th century concerns about children's moral development led to a preoccupation with physical health and genetic heredity which eventually included physiological development and, finally, to the present day concerns about an infant's neurological architecture.

Chapter three, 'Rescuing the infant brain' 'focuses on the quality of parenting and infant brain development' (p. 17) and how theories about brain development are used to support early intervention services. This is then combined with the issue of social investment as mentioned earlier.

In chapter four 'In whose best interests', consideration is given to various organisations and how their selective use of evidence and partial information is used to support the arguments that underpin the drive for early intervention services. This includes a network that embraces businesses, politicians and professionals.

Chapter five 'Case studies of interests at play' presents more information about key organisations or interest groups. This starts with the Wave Trust (WT) and then proceeds to examine the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) and, finally, the Parent Infant Partnership (PIP). In doing so, it highlights their activities in promoting early intervention not just at a service level but through political lobbying. In fact, these organisations have, to a large extent, shaped government social policy in regard to early

intervention services. This chapter also details the large amount of money obtained from government by these three organisations to support their activities.

'Saving children' is chapter six. This chapter explores the way brain science and neoliberal ideas (the origin of the social investment model) shape the way people working in the field of early intervention services think and practice. Brain science, as currently promoted, is giving rise to the belief that early intervention is a way of 'saving' children from inadequate parenting, especially by mothers. Whether this is an anti-feminist position is a question worth asking especially as the majority of the workforce in early intervention services is female.

In chapter seven 'Reproducing inequalities', the focus is on the way gender, social class, race/ethnicity and poverty are 'embedded and reproduced by early intervention services especially those that invoke brain science' (p. 19). In particular, this chapter asserts that poor working-class and minority ethnic mothers are held up as the source of individual, and social and national problems, as well as the solution to them provided they embrace the edicts of early intervention advocates.

The authors again see this as females being held responsible for the individual child's development and any ills that may arise as the child moves towards adulthood.

The final chapter, chapter eight, is 'Re-claiming the future: alternative visions'. Here the plea is for caution about the rise of prevention science of which neuroscience is a founding discipline and its promised brave new world. And this is based on the capacity of the state to optimise and regulate human behaviour through the use of science-based evidence.

The alternative vision is for humane and socially just practice much like that put forward in *Re-imagining child protection. Toward humane social work with families* (Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014) – a book that was also reviewed in *Children Australia* in January 2014 – that concerns practice which respects people's individual differences and complexity, respects each person regardless of their limitations and does not simply go for the technical fix.

Whether this vision is achievable or whether it is overly idealistic is yet to be seen. The public outcry about wel-

fare dependency and child abuse and neglect that the popular press see as attractive material suggests this vision is open for debate. What is properly not for debate is the notion that everyone, including children, expect and deserve to be treated with respect and to be dealt with justly.

In many ways, this book runs parallel to investigative journalism. It is an exposè of how special interest groups can capture government attention and gain substantial resources by carefully presenting yet-to-be fully settled science as if it is the complete story. This is especially so when the story seems to offer an objective way of addressing long-term concerns about the health of children and indeed of a nation as a whole. While this book is about early intervention services in England, information about infant brain development that is derived from debatable sources is increasingly common in Australia where it is being taught and promoted. This book and its contents should cause Australia to be cautious about this incomplete evidence and not rush in the same direction as England has done, at least until the science is much more settled than it is now.

### Editor's Note

*The Guardian* (2014) has also reported on concerns about the political use of the brain scan images and issues of evidence for this area of neuroscience. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/apr/26/misused-neuroscience-defining-child-protection-policy>.

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