

Essay

Desire, Jouissance, and Parenting: A Lacanian Critique of Intensive Parenting Under Capitalism

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Abstract

This paper examines intensive parenting as a dominant cultural model within contemporary Anglo-American and Western European parenting cultures, situating it within late-capitalist demands for individual responsibility, optimisation, and future-oriented risk management. This theoretical and discourse-analytic paper advances a Lacanian account of intensive parenting as a libidinal formation structured through fantasy, desire, and jouissance. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, the analysis explores how parental investment in intensive parenting is sustained not only through social norms and institutional pressures but through affective and unconscious attachments that render these demands compelling even when they are experienced as exhausting and exclusionary. While existing feminist and sociological scholarship has documented the classed, gendered, and racialized dimensions of intensive parenting, less attention has been paid to the psychic mechanisms through which parents become attached to these norms. This paper addresses this gap by examining how fantasies surrounding the child's future organise parental desire and enjoyment. Focusing on fantasy, the object-cause of desire, and jouissance, the paper shows how intensive parenting offers moral coherence and reassurance under conditions of uncertainty while remaining structurally impossible to fulfill. These libidinal investments translate market rationalities into intimate life, shaping parental subjectivity and sustaining intensive parenting as a dominant norm. The analysis suggests that this persistence is tied not only to social regulation but to the way desire is organised around an unattainable future object. The paper concludes by reflecting on how this analysis reframes relational modes of being in parenting, suggesting that attending to lack, contingency, and relational openness may support forms of care that move beyond imperatives of control, productivity, and future optimisation.

Keywords: intensive parenting; desire; jouissance; Lacanian psychoanalysis; neoliberal capitalism; parental normativity; fantasy



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1. Introduction

The concept of intensive parenting, first articulated by [Hays \(1996\)](#) as the ideology of intensive motherhood, describes a dominant cultural model in contemporary Western societies in which parents, particularly mothers, are expected to devote extensive time, emotional energy and financial resources to raising children. This model is strongly shaped by professional and scientific expertise, especially developmental psychology and, more recently, neuroscience. Within this framework, good parenting is defined through constant attentiveness, emotional responsiveness and the continuous cultivation of children's skills and capacities ([Gerhardt,](#)

2004; Wastell & White, 2012). Over time, these expectations have intensified, producing what some scholars describe as hyper-intensive parenting (Nelson, 2010).

Research in sociology and cultural studies shows that intensive parenting now functions less as one parenting style among others than as a normative benchmark against which parental conduct is evaluated and moralised (Arendell, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Reich, 2016). Public discourse frequently invokes figures such as helicopter parents or tiger mothers, images that portray parenting as a project of vigilant supervision and strategic investment in children's future success (Reich, 2016). Within this framework, parenting becomes closely linked to broader political concerns about risk, responsibility and the future. Parents are increasingly positioned as responsible not only for their children's development but also for wider social outcomes such as educational attainment and social cohesion (Gillies, 2011; Lee et al., 2010).

Feminist, sociological and political economic scholarship has documented how these developments are shaped by neoliberal transformations in welfare, labour markets and family policy (Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2014). This work demonstrates that intensive parenting is deeply embedded in classed, gendered and racialised structures and that it privileges forms of parenting associated with white middle-class norms (Gillies, 2011; Jensen, 2010; McKenzie et al., 2016). At the same time, the ideology of intensive parenting often rests on strong assumptions about parental determinism. Parenting practices are treated as decisive predictors of children's future trajectories, transforming everyday care into a highly moralised social project (Lee et al., 2014).

While this scholarship has revealed the structural inequalities embedded in contemporary parenting norms, less attention has been paid to why these norms remain compelling to parents themselves. Many parents recognise intensive parenting as demanding and exhausting yet continue to orient their practices around its ideals. Understanding this attachment requires attention not only to social regulation but also to the affective and psychic investments through which normative expectations become meaningful.

This article makes three related contributions to scholarship on parenting culture. First, it advances a Lacanian psychoanalytic account of intensive parenting as a libidinal formation structured through fantasy, desire, and jouissance, thereby extending existing feminist and sociological analyses beyond questions of governance and social regulation alone. Second, it introduces the concept of overstructuration to explain how ordinary parent-child relations become reorganised through anticipatory logics of optimisation, developmental monitoring, and future-oriented evaluation. Third, the article contributes conceptually to critical studies of parenting and neoliberalism by showing how intensive parenting persists not only because it is socially imposed, but because it organises parental desire around an unattainable future object that sustains attachment through the very impossibility of fulfilment. Methodologically, the article develops a conceptual and discourse-theoretical analysis that synthesises existing empirical and theoretical literature through a Lacanian framework.

Approaching intensive parenting through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis allows for an examination of these investments at the level of desire and fantasy. Rather than challenging sociological and political economic critiques, the analysis builds alongside them by asking how parental attachment to intensive parenting is sustained psychically as well as socially. Feminist scholarship has shown that contemporary parenting cultures moralise devotion, sacrifice, and vigilance, producing powerful attachments to ideals of good parenting even as they intensify parental self-scrutiny and guilt (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Faircloth, 2014). Empirical research further indicates that adherence to intensive parenting norms is associated with increased stress, anxiety, and exhaustion (Liss et al., 2013; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Schiffrin et al., 2014).

Lacanian theory provides a conceptual vocabulary for approaching this attachment without reducing it to simple coercion or false consciousness. While object relations, attach-

ment, and relational psychoanalytic approaches offer important insights into parenting, Lacanian theory is particularly useful because it directs attention to the symbolic and phantasmatic organisation of desire rather than to intrapsychic development alone. The concern of this article is therefore not parental pathology or attachment outcomes but the social and psychic mechanisms through which intensive parenting becomes a compelling normative ideal. Concepts such as fantasy, desire and *jouissance* make it possible to examine how parental practices become bound to imagined futures that promise reassurance while remaining fundamentally uncertain (Lacan, 2006; Žižek, 1997). In Lacanian terms, fantasy refers to the structuring framework through which subjects organise their relation to desire and reality; the *objet petit a* denotes the elusive object-cause that sustains desire without ever being fully attainable; and *jouissance* describes a paradoxical form of satisfaction bound up with excess, strain and difficulty. These concepts make it possible to analyse how social norms become affectively and unconsciously invested rather than merely externally imposed. From this perspective, intensive parenting can be understood as a capitalist form of parental normativity organised around a powerful phantasmatic promise: that sustained parental effort can secure a good future for one's child and, by extension, for society itself. The force of this promise lies not in its fulfilment but in its ability to organise parental action around futures that remain open and unknowable.

Approaching intensive parenting in this way allows it to be understood not only as a regulatory framework imposed through policy and expertise but also as a social site in which desire, hope and anxiety become organised through everyday practices of care. By bringing Lacanian psychoanalysis into dialogue with sociological and feminist analyses of parenting culture, this article examines how contemporary parenting norms become both socially authoritative and psychically compelling. In doing so, it situates intensive parenting within the intersection of political economy and the psychic economy of desire, opening space for repoliticising care and reimagining parental normativity beyond models organised around optimisation, control and future-oriented productivity. The analysis does not focus on a single empirical corpus but engages parenting culture as a broader discursive formation constituted through academic literature, policy discourse and popular representations, with the aim of offering a theoretical explanation rather than empirical generalisation. The analysis does not claim that intensive parenting operates uniformly across all Western societies. Rather, it focuses primarily on Anglo-American and related neoliberal parenting cultures in which developmental optimisation, expert intervention, and future-oriented parental responsibility have become particularly influential.

2. Intensive Parenting as a Phantasmatic Social Formation

Parenting is a social practice shaped by the political, economic and cultural arrangements through which care is imagined, organised and judged. In the contemporary West, intensive parenting has developed within a wider formation that places growing emphasis on individual responsibility, expertise and the management of future risk. It is not only a cluster of heightened parental practices. It is also a normative formation that defines what counts as appropriate care, competent parenting and responsible subjectivity.

From this perspective, intensive parenting can be read as a capitalist form of parental normativity that offers coherence and reassurance under conditions of precarity and uncertainty. It circulates a compelling promise: that sustained, informed and carefully calibrated labour in the present can secure a good future for one's child and contribute to a stable social order. This promise does not remove uncertainty. It makes uncertainty governable by directing parental effort toward continuous action in the present.

Lacanian theory helps explain how such social expectations come to be lived as psychic commitments. Central here is the concept of fantasy. Fantasy is not simply illusion or private

wish. It is a structuring logic that enables subjects to act as if coherence and control were attainable even in conditions where certainty and mastery are unavailable (Lacan, 2006; Žižek, 1997). In this sense, fantasy does not obscure uncertainty but gives it a form that can be inhabited and acted upon. It organises hope, anxiety and responsibility by translating indeterminacy into a practical orientation to the world.

In intensive parenting, fantasy organises the child as a figure of promise, vulnerability and moral significance. Parenting discourse invites adults to orient themselves not only to the child before them, but also to an anticipated child whose future capacities, resilience and success appear to justify present sacrifice. Feeding, sleep routines, schooling, emotional attunement and extracurricular activities are framed less in terms of their immediate relational meaning than in terms of what they are expected to produce over time, whether secure attachment, educational achievement, resilience or future independence (Faircloth, 2014; Gillies, 2011; Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2014). The present is thus repeatedly subordinated to a future that remains uncertain but morally charged.

The imagined future of the child can be read, in Lacanian terms, as functioning like an object-cause of desire. The point is not that parents consciously pursue a specific object they expect to obtain. Rather, the imagined future of the child organises parental desire by giving direction to effort while never becoming fully attainable (Evans, 1996; Lacan, 1998). This formulation does not imply that the child is reduced to an object but that the imagined future of the child operates as a structural placeholder that sustains desire by maintaining a gap between present reality and anticipated fulfilment. Its power lies in its continual deferral. Because it always recedes into the future, it sustains striving instead of bringing it to an end. Desire is therefore not oriented toward a goal that can be reached but organised through a movement that must continue.

This helps explain why intensive parenting remains compelling even when it is experienced as burdensome. Parents are attached not only to the hope of future security but also to the affective rewards generated in striving itself. Effort can produce an immediate sense of attentiveness, devotion and moral adequacy. Parents are reassured not because uncertainty has been resolved, but because action offers temporary confirmation that they are doing what a good parent ought to do. The labour of intensive parenting therefore binds parents to the very practices that often exhaust them. What is secured is not certainty about the future but a present sense of alignment with normative expectations.

Lacan's concept of *jouissance* is useful here. *Jouissance* names a form of satisfaction that is bound up with strain, excess and difficulty rather than opposed to them (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 1992). In the context of intensive parenting, effort, sacrifice and exhaustion may come to signify care, love and moral seriousness. The strain of parenting is not only endured in the hope of future reward. It is also lived as meaningful because it confirms alignment with dominant norms of responsibility. *Jouissance* differs from adjacent concepts such as guilt or anxiety in that it does not simply constrain behaviour but attaches a form of satisfaction to the experience of strain itself. *Jouissance* helps explain how attachment persists even when practices feel unsustainable. Parents remain invested not despite the burden but through the symbolic value the burden acquires.

This structure closely echoes the broader logics of capitalist rationality. Under capitalism, accumulation operates not only as an economic process but as a moral orientation that links worth to activity, optimisation and continual self-investment (Fraser, 2016). Intensive parenting reproduces this logic by framing care through effort, enhancement and anticipated return. More involvement, stimulation and vigilance are imagined to generate better futures, reflecting commitments to productivity and ongoing improvement rather than adequacy or sufficiency (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Faircloth, 2014; Gillies, 2011; Jensen, 2010).

Expert knowledge plays a central role in stabilising this alignment between care and accumulation. Developmental psychology, educational assessment and parenting guidance present themselves as neutral accounts of children's needs while simultaneously defining the standards through which parenting is judged. In Lacanian terms, this resembles the discourse of the University, where knowledge circulates as authoritative and technical while disavowing its political and ethical stakes (Lacan, 2007; Miller, 2007). Parenting is thereby organised as a problem to be managed through expertise. Care is translated into competencies, benchmarks and outcomes, narrowing space for ambivalence, uncertainty and ethical judgment. This does not imply that these fields are inherently reductive but that within contemporary parenting culture their authority can be mobilised in ways that reinforce normative expectations and moral regulation.

This configuration is also sustained by neoliberal forms of governance. As Brown (2015) argues, neoliberal rationality extends the figure of human capital into intimate life, requiring subjects to maximise future value across ever more domains. Parenting increasingly appears as one such domain. Children's outcomes become proxies for parental responsibility, foresight and competence, while care itself is made legible through measurable results. Parents are encouraged to invest time, affect and resources in order to manage future risk privately rather than through collective provision.

The privatisation of parenting intensifies these pressures. Feminist scholars have long insisted that care is a public good that depends on collective support rather than private virtue alone (Boyd, 2013). Under neoliberal conditions, however, social infrastructures of care are weakened while parents are subjected to rising demands for vigilance, optimisation and self-monitoring (Furedi, 2002; Parton, 2005). Normative parenting is demanded even as the material and temporal conditions that might sustain it are eroded. This contradiction helps explain why parenting has become such a powerful site of anxiety and self-scrutiny.

The figure of the good parent, and especially the good mother, condenses these pressures. It functions as a master signifier that offers symbolic coherence while remaining structurally unattainable. Rather than stabilising parental identity, it sustains comparison, self-monitoring and renewed effort (Lacan, 2006; Žižek, 1997). What results is not a settled standard of adequacy but an ongoing compulsion to strive. Intensive parenting can therefore be understood not only as a social expectation but as a phantasmatic formation that binds desire, anxiety and enjoyment to the management of the future under contemporary capitalism.

Figure 1 summarizes the article's conceptual argument regarding how neoliberal parenting culture becomes psychically and affectively sustained through fantasy, desire, and jouissance.

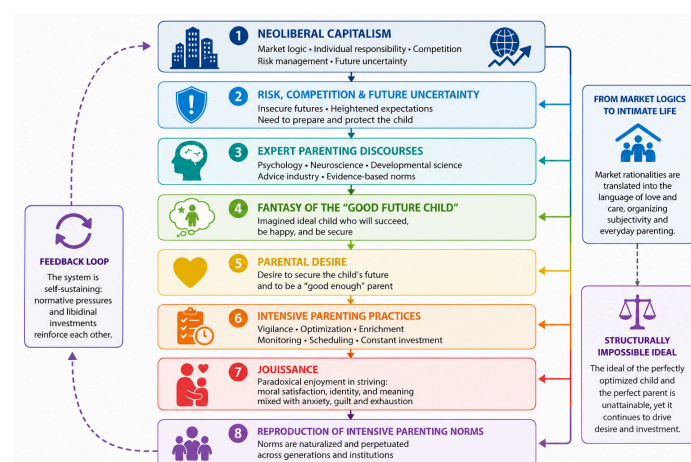


Figure 1. Conceptual model of intensive parenting as a libidinal formation under neoliberal capitalism. The figure illustrates how neoliberal uncertainty, expert parenting discourse, fantasy, desire, and jouissance interact to sustain intensive parenting norms.

As illustrated in Figure 1, intensive parenting operates through a recursive relation between neoliberal uncertainty, parental desire, fantasy, and the pursuit of moral adequacy through effort.

3. Instrumentalisation and Overstructuration

One of the defining features of intensive parenting is the reorientation of the parent–child relationship toward an instrumental logic. Contemporary parenting norms increasingly frame childrearing as a skilled and purposive activity directed toward measurable outcomes. Parents are expected to cultivate the right competencies in order to secure developmental milestones presumed to culminate in future social and economic success. Within this developmental framework, childhood is understood through a linear narrative in which parental action is judged according to how effectively it advances the child from one stage to the next (Kehily, 2015; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012).

Parenting therefore appears less as a shared and open-ended relation and more as a practice organised around anticipated outcomes and optimised processes. Everyday practices become evaluative sites through which parental adequacy is judged. Family leisure, diet, emotional life and domestic routines are increasingly interpreted as indicators of competence and moral worth (Gillies, 2011). In this context, parental action becomes saturated with an implicit ‘in order to’ orientation. Feeding, scheduling, comforting and monitoring are assessed not only as present practices of care but in terms of what they are expected to produce in the child.

This instrumental orientation is intensified by the expansion of expert knowledge into intimate family life. Developmental psychology, parenting advice, educational assessment and health guidance now structure almost every aspect of childrearing, from sleep and discipline to play and emotional attunement. Parenting is increasingly recast as a technical and learnable skill whose success can be measured through recognised outcomes (Furedi, 2002; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). Care is therefore framed less as a relational practice shaped by presence and dependency and more as a set of techniques directed toward developmental optimisation (Clarke, 2006; Smeyers, 2010). This formulation does not imply that these fields are internally uniform or solely regulatory but highlights how, within contemporary parenting culture, their authority is mobilised to define standards of adequacy and responsibility.

This shift also transforms the meaning of care. Practices such as touching, talking, feeding and soothing are increasingly interpreted as interventions designed to produce optimal developmental effects (Faircloth, 2014). Even maternal love is represented as a developmental technology valued for its capacity to produce confidence, resilience and emotional regulation (Rose, 1999). The desired outcome is a self-managing and adaptable subject capable of navigating competitive social orders. Autonomy and self-regulation are elevated as moral ideals, while dependency and vulnerability are recoded as problems to be corrected rather than ordinary conditions of relational life.

I describe this transformation as overstructuration. By this I refer not only to the intensification of expectations but to the temporal reorganisation of parent–child relations through the constant deferral of meaning into anticipated futures. By this I mean the saturation of ordinary parent–child relations with evaluative, corrective and anticipatory demands. Spaces that might otherwise remain playful, indeterminate or affectively open are reorganised through scripts of optimisation, monitoring and improvement. Being with a child rarely remains just that. Ordinary moments are reinterpreted as opportunities for stimulation, correction or advancement, and the present is continually subordinated to projected futures. Unlike adjacent concepts such as responsabilisation or surveillance,

overstructuration captures how present interactions are reorganised through an anticipatory logic that persistently orients care toward what has not yet occurred.

While overstructuration overlaps with concepts such as responsabilisation, surveillance, governmentality, and overparenting, it refers to a distinct analytic process. Responsibilisation emphasises the transfer of social risk and accountability onto individuals under neoliberal governance, while surveillance highlights practices of monitoring and self-monitoring (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999). Governmentality focuses more broadly on the political rationalities through which subjects are governed through freedom and expertise. Overparenting, by contrast, generally describes heightened parental involvement at the behavioural level. Overstructuration differs from these concepts by focusing specifically on the temporal and relational saturation of ordinary parent–child interactions through anticipatory logics oriented toward imagined futures. The concept therefore captures how everyday relational life becomes reorganised around optimisation, developmental projection, and the continuous deferral of meaning into what has not yet occurred. Its emphasis is not only on control or responsibility, but on the restructuring of relational temporality itself.

Figure 2 illustrates the process through which ordinary parent–child interactions become reorganised through anticipatory logics of optimisation and developmental monitoring.

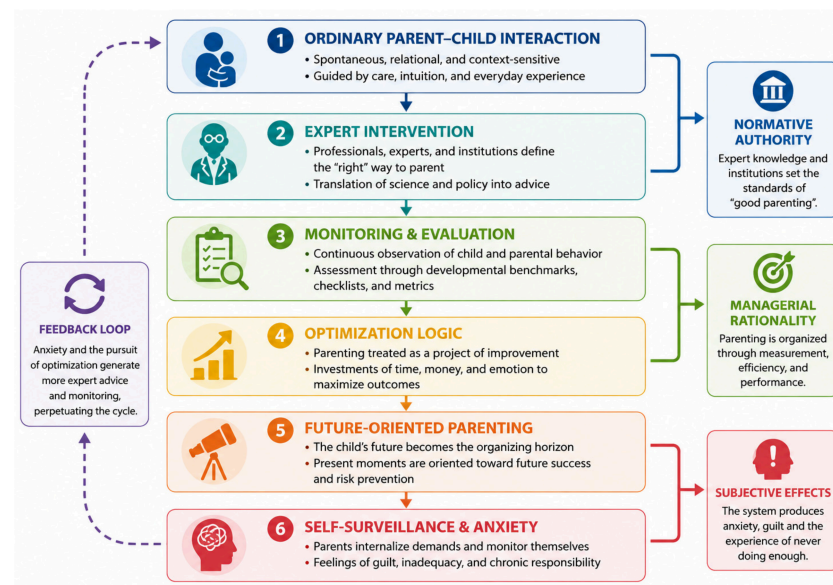


Figure 2. Overstructuration and the anticipatory organisation of parenting. The figure illustrates how ordinary parent–child relations become reorganised through expert discourse, optimisation, and future-oriented developmental expectations.

Figure 2 highlights how ordinary parent–child interactions become reorganised through anticipatory and evaluative logics that orient care toward future optimisation.

This logic closely reflects the rationalities of capitalist production, where value is generated through optimisation, measurement and continuous assessment (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1999). Parents are tacitly positioned as providers of inputs such as time, affect, supervision and emotional labour, while children are increasingly apprehended as sites of investment and anticipated return (Gillies, 2011; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003). Developmental milestones, educational achievement and behavioural indicators become benchmarks through which both parental adequacy and child flourishing are rendered legible within professional and public domains (Lee et al., 2014; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012).

The consequences are both cultural and political. The parameters of a good childhood narrow, while forms of experience that resist instrumentalisation, including unstructured play, idleness, ambivalence and open-ended relationality, are devalued or reframed as risks

requiring intervention. Childhood becomes less a space of unfolding and more a site of preparation. Parenting becomes the management of that preparation. Intensive parenting thus participates in the broader production of neoliberal subjectivity by reproducing forms of life organised around optimisation, self-regulation and anticipation.

From a feminist perspective, this instrumentalisation has significant ethical consequences. It aligns caregiving with logics of efficiency, productivity and control while displacing ethical vocabularies rooted in interdependence, relationality and mutual transformation. Feminist care theorists have long warned that when care is absorbed into technocratic and managerial frameworks, it loses moral and political depth (Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). Intensive parenting can therefore be understood as one expression of this shift, translating care into sequences of tasks and measurable achievements rather than sustaining it as an open-ended ethical relation.

The authority of expert discourse is central to this process. Developmental psychology, neuroscience and educational science claim epistemic authority over children's needs and best interests, presenting historically situated judgments as neutral, evidence-based necessities. As Ramaekers and Suissa (2012) argue, this reflects an 'imperialism of psychology' in which psychological expertise extends its reach deep into family life. Parenting becomes increasingly legible through psychological categories while other ways of understanding care are marginalised. At the same time, this does not suggest that all forms of expertise operate uniformly but that their authority can become consolidated within normative frameworks that privilege certain models of parenting over others.

From a Lacanian perspective, this is one way fantasy sustains itself. The ideological dimensions of intensive parenting are concealed beneath claims of objectivity and expertise. Parents are interpellated as responsible subjects who must align their practices with expert prescriptions in order to secure the child's future. Fantasy does not operate as simple deception. It offers coherence in the face of uncertainty by promising that the right techniques can manage contingency and produce predictable outcomes. Yet that promise can never be fulfilled. The future remains uncertain, structural inequalities persist and children remain subjects rather than projects. Fantasy therefore operates not by resolving uncertainty but by organising action in relation to its persistence.

One consequence is intensified self-surveillance. Parents are encouraged to monitor themselves continuously for signs of inadequacy or failure. Parenting becomes organised around vigilance rather than trust and anticipation rather than responsiveness. Simons and Masschelein (2008) describe this condition as one of 'continuous alertness', a mode of subjectivity that resonates strongly with neoliberal governance.

This mode of governance is also unevenly distributed. The demand for constant alertness presumes access to time, emotional capacity and material stability and disproportionately exposes some parents to scrutiny and sanction. Feminist and critical scholars have shown that these norms are deeply classed, gendered and racialised (Gillies, 2011; O'Reilly, 2019). Instrumentalisation therefore does more than reorganise parental practice. It reshapes parental subjectivity, producing parents who are persistently anxious, self-critical and morally exposed.

Seen in this light, overstructuration is not a secondary effect of intensive parenting but one of its central mechanisms. It is a way capitalist rationality enters intimate life, reorganising parenting around efficiency, optimisation and accountability even when those imperatives erode the relational and ethical dimensions of care. What is diminished is not only relief from pressure but the possibility of inhabiting parenting as a practice grounded in openness, mutual vulnerability and shared uncertainty.

While these institutional and cultural dynamics help explain how intensive parenting becomes normalised, they do not fully account for why parents remain affectively at-

tached to such demanding practices. The following section therefore returns to the psychic economy of desire in order to explain how these structures are sustained at the level of subjective investment.

4. Desire, Fantasy, and Jouissance in Parenting

What demands attention in contemporary Western parenting is not only the intensity of parental practices but the way this intensity has come to signify normativity. The questions are why intensive effort is so readily equated with good or adequate parenting and what sustains commitment to practices that many parents experience as exhausting and difficult to maintain. Maintaining parental legitimacy increasingly requires effort across emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social domains (Faircloth, 2014; Gillies, 2011; Hays, 1996). Parents labour not only to care for children but to remain recognisable as responsible and morally adequate subjects.

Rather than attributing this persistence to misinformation, anxiety, or external coercion alone, it can be approached as a problem of motivation. What is secured affectively and symbolically through striving itself? Within contemporary parenting culture, intensity functions as a way of living with uncertainty. The fantasy of eventual satisfaction operates less as a conscious aim than as a background promise that renders labour meaningful. This dynamic resonates with a broader capitalist ethos in which hard work and accumulation are linked to fulfilment, even as fulfilment remains deferred (McGowan, 2016).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, parental practices are not reducible to observable behaviour. They are structured by emotional and libidinal investments that attach to action. Parenting becomes an ethical project organised around a future imagined as fragile, competitive, and consequential. In this sense, the birth of a child also generates an imagined child, a figure through which hopes, fears, and anticipations about a life yet to unfold take shape (Mitchell & Rose, 1982). This imagined future of the child gives ordinary decisions expanded significance because they appear to shape what the child might become.

The distinctive feature of this configuration is the dominance of the future as a moral reference point. Parenting practices derive legitimacy less from their immediate relational meaning than from their anticipated contribution to what has not yet occurred (Lee et al., 2014). Importantly, this orientation persists even when parents recognise the limits of control and the role of broader social conditions in shaping outcomes. Knowledge of uncertainty does not dissolve the demand for intensity, suggesting that attachment to intensive parenting cannot be explained by information or belief alone.

Psychoanalytic theory approaches this persistence through the concept of lack. In Lacanian thought, lack is not a particular absence that can be overcome through effort but a constitutive feature of subjectivity (Evans, 1996; Lacan, 2006). Because desire is structured around this lack, satisfaction cannot provide final closure (Lacan, 1998; Žižek, 1997). The imagined future of the child therefore functions as a privileged object-cause of desire: a horizon toward which action is directed without ever being fully attainable. Its power lies precisely in remaining open and incomplete.

Fantasy is crucial here because it links psychic life with social norms. It provides the “as if” structure through which subjects can act in the absence of guarantees (Lacan, 2006; Žižek, 1997). Intensive parenting can therefore be understood as a form of capitalist realism within family life, presenting exhaustive care as both necessary and morally required (Glynos, 2001). Where collective responses to insecurity appear unavailable, parental intensification comes to appear as practical necessity.

Capitalism is not simply an external backdrop to this dynamic. Its temporal logic resonates with the psychic structure of desire. Capitalist culture repeatedly promises that labour, sacrifice, and accumulation will ultimately produce fulfilment while simultaneously

deferring fulfilment indefinitely (McGowan, 2016). Intensive parenting mirrors this structure. Effort remains meaningful because it carries the promise that something important may eventually be secured. Satisfaction becomes located in pursuit rather than completion.

Within this configuration, the present is continually measured against an anticipated future. From a Lacanian perspective, satisfaction emerges not through possession of the object but through the effort directed toward it (Lacan, 1992). What is affirmed in striving is not only a hoped-for outcome but also a moral identity. The parent appears vigilant, invested, and responsible. The promise of a secured future does not need to be fulfilled to motivate action; it need only remain plausible enough to sustain effort.

Jouissance helps clarify this attachment. In Lacanian theory, jouissance refers to a paradoxical form of satisfaction that coexists with strain, excess, and difficulty (Lacan, 1992). Parenting effort may therefore produce moral affirmation even when experienced as exhausting. Jouissance differs from guilt, anxiety, or moral regulation because it attaches satisfaction to strain itself. Difficulty is not simply endured but becomes part of how care is experienced as meaningful. Intensive parenting thus persists not despite the impossibility of securing the future, but partly because that impossibility continually renews the need for effort.

The absence of the future in the present is therefore both sustaining and constraining. It sustains because it offers a sense of agency under conditions of insecurity and weakened collective support (Brown, 2015). It constrains because it intensifies self-surveillance and redirects attention away from the structural conditions that generate uncertainty. Instead of confronting insecurity as a collective problem, intensive parenting translates it into individual responsibility.

The argument developed here does not reject care or parental devotion. Rather, it questions how contemporary professionalised parenting amplifies phantasmatic investment while obscuring its ideological function. Under the language of acting in the child's best interests, parenting becomes a site where capitalist imperatives of optimisation, accumulation, and sacrifice are reproduced within intimate life. At the same time, parents should not be understood as passive bearers of these norms. Parenting practices are often characterised by negotiation, ambivalence, resistance, and reinterpretation of prevailing expectations. Intensive parenting nevertheless functions as a powerful libidinal formation in which desire, lack, anxiety, and enjoyment become organised around continuous striving in the name of a future that can never be fully secured.

5. Desire, Normativity, and the Limits of Intensive Parenting

The preceding analysis has shown that intensive parenting is sustained through the intersection of social normativity and psychic investment. Rather than focusing on the content of parenting practices themselves, this perspective directs attention to the structures through which those practices acquire their normative and affective force. At the social level, intensive parenting defines what counts as responsible and desirable parenting through expert knowledge, developmental discourse, and institutional expectations (Faircloth, 2014; Gillies, 2011; Hays, 1996). At the psychic level, these norms acquire force because they become attached to fantasies of protection, success, and future security. Parenting is therefore organised not only through obligation but also through desire.

This structure is reinforced by contemporary capitalism. Parenting increasingly appears as a private and competitive project in which parental effort is expected to compensate for broader forms of social insecurity (Fraser, 2016; Gillies, 2011). Responsibility for uncertain futures is situated from collective institutions to individual families, while developmental outcomes become measures of parental competence. In this context, fantasies surrounding the child's future function as a privileged object-cause of desire around which labour, aspiration, and anxiety are organised.

The significance of this analysis lies in what it reveals about the limits of intensive parenting. The promise that sufficient effort can secure desired outcomes remains compelling precisely because it can never be conclusively realised. Children remain subjects rather than products, social conditions remain uneven, and the future cannot be guaranteed. Intensive parenting therefore represents an attempt to manage a structural impossibility: the impossibility of fully securing the future through present action. The more uncertainty is experienced as a private responsibility, the more effort appears necessary.

This dynamic has important social consequences. By linking child outcomes tightly to parental action, intensive parenting obscures the structural conditions that shape family life and reframes social inequalities as matters of individual competence. Professional and public discourses of parenting often reinforce this tendency by presenting developmental optimisation as a technical problem to be solved through appropriate knowledge and intervention (Faircloth, 2014; Lee et al., 2014). Parents with greater access to time, resources, and cultural capital are consequently positioned as better able to fulfil these expectations, while broader inequalities recede from view.

A Lacanian perspective also offers a different understanding of freedom. Freedom does not emerge through the elimination of uncertainty or the achievement of complete control. Rather, it involves recognising the constitutive limits that organise desire and loosening the compulsion to resolve them through endless effort (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Such a perspective does not reject care or parental responsibility. Instead, it challenges the assumption that care must be organised through optimisation, productivity, and future control.

Making the phantasmatic structure of intensive parenting visible opens space for imagining alternative forms of parental normativity. These alternatives would not seek to eliminate uncertainty or guarantee outcomes but would acknowledge contingency, relational vulnerability, and the limits of parental control. Such alternatives do not eliminate responsibility; rather, they situate responsibility within relationships and collective conditions that acknowledge the limits of parental control. Parenting can then be understood less as a project of producing the successful future subject and more as an ethical practice grounded in presence, responsiveness, and shared relational life (Butler, 2004; Tronto, 2013).

6. Repoliticising Parenting

A Lacanian critique allows the central question of contemporary parenting to be framed differently. Rather than asking how parenting can be perfected, optimised or made more effective, such an approach directs attention to the fantasies that organise parental practices and to the forms of subjectivity those practices produce. The dominant model of intensive parenting rests on an implicit assumption that the aim of parenting is the production of an independent, self-sufficient and rational subject capable of navigating neoliberal social and economic orders. This assumption rarely appears as a normative choice. Instead, it is naturalised through expert discourse, policy frameworks and cultural narratives of success (Gillies, 2011; Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2014). A psychoanalytic perspective makes it possible to render this assumption visible and therefore open to political and ethical questioning. In this sense, critique operates not by rejecting existing norms outright but by exposing the phantasmatic structures that sustain their authority.

From a feminist standpoint, the issue is not only how parents are governed but which forms of life are affirmed or marginalised through prevailing norms of care. The fantasy of the self-sufficient child tends to displace alternative understandings of subjectivity grounded in dependency, vulnerability and relationality. Feminist theorists have long argued that these dimensions are not pathological deviations but constitutive features of human life (Butler, 2004; Held, 2006). When parenting is organised primarily around the production of future autonomy, care risks being instrumentalised as preparation for

independence rather than recognised as an ethical relation with value in its own right. What is at stake is not only a set of practices but the narrowing of what counts as a viable or valued form of life.

Breaking the hold of this fantasy requires confronting what Lacan describes as the Real: the dimension of relational life that resists full capture, prediction and control (Lacan, 1998). In parenting, the Real appears in the uncertainty of the child's becoming, the impossibility of guaranteeing outcomes and the limits of parental agency within unequal social conditions. Intensive parenting can be understood as a response to this uncertainty, offering a script that promises security through effort, vigilance and adherence to expert norms. Yet the promise remains unstable because the future it seeks to secure cannot be fully known or managed in advance. The persistence of intensive parenting can therefore be understood as an attempt to organise action in relation to this impossibility rather than to eliminate it.

A Lacanian intervention therefore does not call for abandoning care or responsibility. Rather, it invites a reorientation of parental intentionality away from future-proofing and toward the ethical significance of the present relationship. This reorientation follows from the recognition that lack and uncertainty are structural conditions of subjectivity, not problems that can be resolved through increased effort. This shift resonates strongly with feminist ethics of care, which emphasise attentiveness, responsiveness and relational presence rather than outcome-driven performance (Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). From this perspective, parenting is not primarily a project of producing a particular type of subject. It is a practice of sustaining connection, negotiating vulnerability and responding to the child as a singular other whose trajectory cannot be predetermined.

Decentring what has functioned as an *objet petit a*, the imagined figure of the normative child, also has clear political implications. It allows parenting to be repoliticised by reconnecting intimate care to the collective conditions that make flourishing possible. Feminist scholarship has long emphasised that care work is sustained not by individual virtue alone but by social infrastructures, material resources and political commitment (Boyd, 2013; Fraser, 2016). When parenting is framed as a private project of optimisation, structural supports such as housing stability, income security, healthcare and accessible education tend to recede from view. Responsibility becomes individualised while the social organisation of care is rendered less visible. Repoliticisation therefore involves not only redistributing resources but reconfiguring the terms through which responsibility is understood.

Repoliticising parenting therefore requires resisting the privatisation of responsibility that underpins intensive parenting norms. It involves recognising dependency not as developmental failure but as a shared human condition and care not as a private burden but as a collective obligation. A Lacanian feminist perspective highlights how fantasy, desire and enjoyment bind parents to an ideological formation that promises control while producing anxiety and exhaustion. At the same time, it points toward alternative imaginaries of parenting grounded in relational openness, shared responsibility and an acceptance of uncertainty as an unavoidable condition of ethical life. These alternatives do not eliminate tension or difficulty but re-situate them within a different understanding of care and subjectivity.

Seen in this way, parenting can be approached as a site of ethical and political possibility rather than a domain of endless self-surveillance and optimisation. Loosening the grip of fantasies that equate good parenting with control over the future opens space for forms of care that acknowledge limitation, affirm interdependence and resist the demand to convert intimate life into a project of neoliberal success. What emerges is not a new normative

model to be followed but a reorientation of how parenting is understood, practiced and politically situated.

7. Beyond Optimisation: Reimagining Care and Relationality

Throughout this article, intensive parenting has been analysed as a historically and culturally specific form of parental normativity rather than a natural or inevitable feature of care. The preceding discussion has shown how contemporary parenting cultures organise responsibility through fantasies of optimisation, developmental success, and future security. These dynamics encourage parents to orient themselves toward what the child might become, often at the expense of the relational significance of the present.

The consequence is not simply that parenting becomes more demanding. It is that care itself increasingly comes to be understood through the language of management, investment, and measurable outcomes (Gillies, 2011; Rose, 1999). Parents are encouraged to view themselves as managers of development and children as projects whose futures depend upon continuous optimisation (Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2014). Within this framework, presence, receptivity, and shared experience risk becoming secondary to monitoring, improvement, and future-oriented planning.

The critique developed here is therefore not simply that intensive parenting is excessive but that it narrows the horizon through which parenting is imagined. When parent–child relations are organised primarily around performance, achievement, and anticipated outcomes, other forms of relational life become more difficult to recognise. Parenting increasingly mirrors the ethos of capitalist productivity, leaving limited space for reflection on dependency, vulnerability, and the ethical significance of being with rather than continually acting upon the child. In Lacanian terms, parenting becomes enclosed within a circuit of fantasy and symbolic evaluation that repeatedly promises resolution while reproducing the very anxieties it seeks to overcome.

Reimagining parenting therefore requires questioning the assumption that care must take the form of intensified action. Parenting might instead be approached as a relational practice grounded less in optimisation and more in shared presence. Such a shift moves attention away from the management of future outcomes and toward the ethical significance of the encounter itself. Parenting becomes less a project of producing a particular subject and more a process through which meaning emerges between parent and child in the present. This does not eliminate uncertainty but repositions it as a condition of relational life rather than a problem to be solved. Figure 3 summarises the article’s central normative argument by contrasting the optimisation-oriented logic of intensive parenting with an alternative relational orientation that emphasises presence, responsiveness, and openness to uncertainty.

This orientation resonates with broader philosophical critiques of instrumental rationality. Rather than extending these traditions, the present analysis situates them within a Lacanian framework in which the tension between control and openness is understood as structurally grounded in the dynamics of desire. Erich Fromm’s distinction between the having and being modes of existence describes being as a way of relating grounded in presence, vitality and relational engagement rather than accumulation and control (Fromm, 1976). Similarly, Martin Heidegger’s contrast between calculative and meditative thinking distinguishes forms of engagement oriented toward control and efficiency from those attentive to meaning and dwelling (Heidegger, 1959/1966). Both perspectives illuminate how modern rationalities privilege calculation while marginalising modes of relational experience that cannot be reduced to productivity.

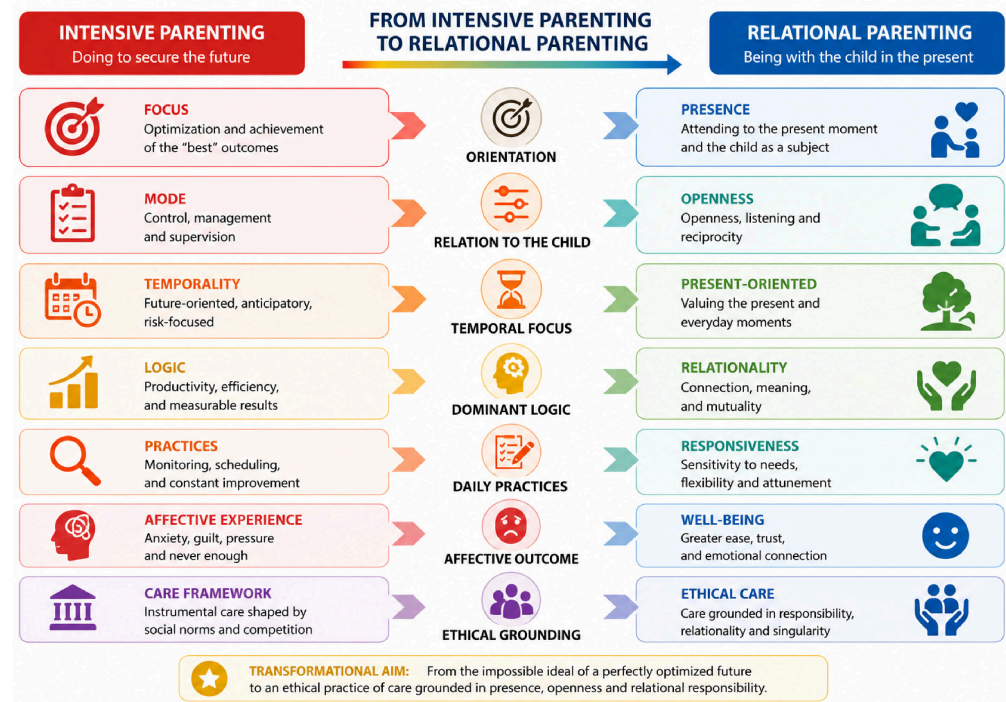


Figure 3. Reorienting parenting from optimisation toward relational presence. The figure contrasts neoliberal intensive parenting with relational forms of care grounded in openness, interdependence, and ethical responsiveness.

Contemporary social theory echoes these concerns. Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance describes the good life not as mastery over the world but as a dynamic relation of being affected by and responding to others and to one's surroundings (Rosa, 2017). Parenting understood in these terms becomes less a project of shaping outcomes and more a site of encounter in which parent and child respond to one another within conditions that remain partially unpredictable. Within the present framework, such perspectives can be understood as attempts to articulate forms of relation less governed by the imperative to resolve lack through action.

Reorienting parenting from doing toward being does not imply passivity or indifference. Rather, it involves recognising that care unfolds through relational processes that cannot be fully planned or controlled. Normativity, from this perspective, is not a fixed attribute of the parent but an intersubjective dynamic that emerges within the relationship itself. Parenting therefore becomes a practice grounded in openness, responsiveness and mutual vulnerability rather than in the pursuit of predetermined developmental outcomes.

Such a shift also carries political implications. Intensive parenting thrives within a broader context in which care is privatised and responsibility individualised. Feminist scholarship has long emphasised that care depends on collective infrastructures and shared commitments rather than on private effort alone (Fraser, 2016; Tronto, 2013). Repoliticising parenting therefore requires recognising dependency as a shared human condition and situating care within social arrangements that support caregivers rather than leaving them to manage uncertainty individually.

Seen in this light, the critique of intensive parenting is not only a critique of demanding parental norms. It is a critique of the social order that sustains them. Intensive parenting narrows the field of what parenting can be by binding care to productivity, optimisation and future control. Psychically, it ties parents to cycles of anxiety and overinvestment sustained by fantasies of mastery over a future that cannot be secured. Socially, it rein-

forces inequalities by framing care as an individual achievement dependent on unevenly distributed resources.

Recognising intensive parenting as a structure of desire helps explain why it persists even in the face of critique. The figure of the good parent functions as a position within the symbolic order sustained through the pursuit of an unattainable object. For this reason, sociological critique and policy reform alone often struggle to loosen its hold. Addressing its persistence requires attention to the unconscious investments that bind desire to intensive parenting. Change therefore cannot rely only on new norms but must also involve a reconfiguration of the symbolic and affective conditions through which parenting is lived.

The present analysis also has important contextual limitations. Intensive parenting norms do not emerge identically across all national, cultural, or class contexts, and the argument developed here is directed primarily toward Anglo-American and related neoliberal parenting cultures shaped by developmental expertise, market rationalities, and middle-class norms. Future research could examine how psychic investments in parenting are differently organised across non-Western, collectivist, postcolonial, or economically marginalised contexts.

Opening alternatives therefore requires social and symbolic spaces in which lack can be acknowledged rather than denied and care is not equated with productivity. Such a shift involves both psychic and political transformation and calls for collective arrangements that sustain care and resist its privatisation. Under these conditions, parenting may be reoriented away from the compulsion to secure the future and toward forms of relational life that remain open to uncertainty, contingency and mutual transformation. Such alternatives do not eliminate responsibility; rather, they situate responsibility within relationships and collective conditions that acknowledge the limits of parental control. Intensive parenting persists not because it resolves uncertainty, but because it transforms uncertainty into an endless ethical demand for parental action.

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