Doing family right

The impact of childhood institutions on family practices, parental norms, and social distinctions

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1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the impact of childhood institutions (especially day-care centres and schools) on contemporary forms of family. Although there have been very different traditions for care and schooling outside the family in the various western European countries, these institutions have come to play an increasingly important role in society and in the organisation of family life. In recent decades, we have seen a strong international focus on how institutional programmes can help overcome social, cultural and economic differences in children's backgrounds through teaching and pedagogy, and a much greater interest in children's development of competences, especially during early childhood. Although the actual organisation and funding varies, the trend across Western European countries is that governments are making considerable efforts to ensure that all children not only attend school, but also are well prepared for school by their parents and various pre-primary programmes.

Tatjana Thelen and Haldis Haukanes (2010: 1) describe this development as a shift towards a "deprivatisation of childhood and parenthood", where children's development and upbringing are seen as a public rather than a purely private concern. Today, schools and increasingly also facilities for preschool children are seen as an indispensable part of children's path into society. If children are to develop the necessary skills and insights, professional guidance and organised environments are needed, as is systematic collaboration between parents and childhood professionals.

Consequently, parenthood has also become an area of societal interest. Authorities and childhood professionals expect parents to organise family life in ways that support the work of childhood institutions and to raise their children to be 'educationable' and prepared for institutional life. As I will show in this chapter, childhood institutions thus have the impact of standardising parental practices and priorities.

However, I will also argue that they influence perceptions of differences among families. Since children are grouped according to age, it is possible to compare their actions and skills – indeed, every aspect of their development from their first years of life. Whenever specific children's behaviour gives cause for concern or parents' lifestyle, values or upbringing practices conflict with institutional norms, professionals will emphasise what constitutes normal and desirable behaviour. In a sense, childhood institutions function as a public stage where children and parents face an audience of professionals, other parents, and children who take note of their actions and react with either approval or condemnation. In this way, these institutions not only define and authorise behaviour within the institutional realm; they also exert control over every-day routines and practices in family homes, as well as impact interactions, assessments, and distinctions among parents.

I find it important to reflect on these standardising and differentiating dynamics that occur around childhood institutions in order to understand their implications for family life and norms of child-rearing. I ground my argument in the Danish context, where I have conducted a range of ethnographic studies in childhood institutions over the last 30 years. Compared to other European countries, Denmark – like the other Scandinavian countries – is characterised by high levels of employment among both mothers and fathers, and correspondingly high rates of public childcare in the form of pre-school and after-school facilities despite the fact that attendance is neither mandatory nor fully subsidised (but with reduced tariffs for low-income families). Thus, the latest statistics indicate that 89.7 per cent of all children aged one to three years attend out-of-family care, while 97.5 per cent of all three- to six-year-olds are enrolled in kindergartens[1] (Statistics Denmark 2015). The attendance rate in after-school programmes is approx. 92 per cent for the youngest schoolchildren (age 5–7) (KL 2020). While Denmark might be extraordinary in the number of children who attend these pedagogical services and in the degree to which authorities are involved in the upbringing of especially the youngest children, similar tendencies are seen elsewhere. I therefore find the Danish case a suitable jumping-off point for a more general discussion on the influence of childhood institutions on family practices.

To understand the influence of childhood institutions on family life, one must consider how the status of the child has changed over the past century. I will there-

1 The contemporary early childcare system in Denmark is a voluntary state-subsidised system consisting of dagpleje (care provided in a private home), and vuggestuer (nurseries), both serving children aged from six months to three years. Three-year-old children attend børnehaver (kindergartens) until starting primary school at the age of six. Many of those working in these institutions are certified pædagoger (preschool teachers), who have bachelor level qualifications from a university college. Public funding covers approximately 75 per cent of costs, with the remainder paid by parents.

fore begin by briefly outlining various transformations in generational relations including the impact that the rise of education systems has had on ideals of childhood and parenthood. In the sections that follow, I will argue that the growing influence of childhood institutions is partly a result of the increased interest of authorities, and partly of the institutional form itself, where the coordination of many individuals requires a standardisation of both children's and parents' behaviour. However, as I will return to at the end of the chapter, this standardisation also creates a distinction between those who are able and willing to conform to institutional norms and those who are not. This normative dimension has implications for parenting priorities as well as for everyday routines and practices in homes.

2 Altered views of the child

Over the last century, there have been considerable changes in perceptions of children's needs, development, and status worldwide, including most western European countries (Cunningham 1994; Elias 1998; Wyness 2006). These changes reflect a number of processes that have radically altered social ties (e.g., increased influence of state bodies, new forms of production, changing demographics, urbanisation, democratisation, gender relations), leading to new models and functions for the family as institution, including the place and role of children. The expansion of educational, legal, and child-welfare systems has influenced ideas of what constitute appropriate places and practices for children and parents. The spread of schooling has been particularly important in this regard (Haukanes/Thelen 2010: chapter 1); not only did it result in a physical separation of children and parents, it also institutionalised a mental distinction between the generations (Faircloth 2014: 40). As noted by historian Harry Hendrick, the removal of children from the workforce reduced their economic value and changed their social significance in broader society. They became regarded as dependent, ignorant, and innocent and therefore in need of special treatment and instruction to acquire necessary and approved knowledge (Hendrick 1990: 46). Gradually, schools became a common feature of childhood, or in David Lancy's (2008) words: "Fast-forward to the twenty-first century and we find a world where childhood without schooling is unthinkable" (ibid.: 305).

The expansion of formal schooling and changed notions of childhood and children are closely intertwined. Their removal from adult life promoted a view of children as fundamentally different from adults, at the same time creating a new awareness of children's needs, particularities, and vulnerabilities. Thus, throughout the 20th century, a shift occurred from more authoritarian forms of interaction with children to a more 'child-sensitive' form based on knowledge and systematic reflection regarding means and methods of upbringing (Elias 1998: 208; Gilliam/Gulløv 2017: chapter 2). Describing a similar process in the USA, sociologist Vi-

vianne Zelizer (1994: 209) argues that the "twentieth-century economically useless but emotionally priceless child displaced the nineteenth-century useful child". She continues: "the sentimentalization of childhood intensified regardless of social class. The new sacred child occupied a special and separate world, regulated by affection and education, not work or profit". Thus, the same process that removed children from adult workplaces and required them to spend their days in institutions specifically designed to support their development and education increased their symbolic worth.

Just as parents are not generally reliant on their children's work, children are no longer dependent on their parents' knowledge to be able to function in society. Teaching relevant knowledge has become a matter for specialists. However, as argued by sociologist Norbert Elias, this does not mean that children and parents are no longer intimately interlinked (Elias 1998; Gilliam/Gulløv forthcoming). Rather, the more children's status has increased, the greater the social importance attached to parents' treatment of their offspring. And the more children's upbringing has become a matter of public concern, the greater society's scrutiny of parental practices. As a consequence of these processes, the social recognition and status of parents have increasingly been linked to the behaviour of their child.

It is tempting to assume that the increased role of professionals in children's upbringing would make parenting easier, but, in fact, it has led to higher expectations concerning parents' involvement in their children's lives. This relates to what Haukanes and Thelen describe as a paradox inherent in the modern understanding of childhood: "Whereas the children and family life were privatised, the public influence on children was intensified. As child/ state relations changed, parent/state relations followed suit, leading to new forms of family policy and state intervention" (2010: 14). Thus, rather than two opposing tendencies, the institutionalisation of childhood and the increased focus on family life and parenting practices must be seen as two aspects of the same process. As childhood is regarded, more than ever, as foundational for later life – what sociologist Frank Furedi (2002) terms "childhood determinism" – and children are therefore seen as vulnerable and at risk, but also precious and unique, there is a stronger need to ensure their safety and wellbeing, as well as to nurture their potential. The awareness of this need has led to the continuing expansion of formal education and to a general awareness of the significance of a secure family environment, caring and emotionally sensitive parents, and strong family bonds. Scholars in a wide range of countries have identified the spread of what has been termed "intensive parenting" (Lee et al. 2013); that is, an enhanced effort to treat and teach children in the right way, but also to ensure that parents are capable of providing the necessary support (see also Faircloth et al. 2013; Sparrman et al. 2016; Akselvoll 2022). This rationale emphasises the need for parents to dedicate time and effort to the wellbeing, stimulation, and education of their children, yet it also calls for professional care and education that stimulates and is sensitive to

the needs of the individual child, and for a strong and well-functioning partnership between the two (Dannesboe et al. 2018).

3 Increasing state involvement

As stated above, the changed view of children is also linked to the growing interest of the state in the upbringing and education of the next generation. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, the sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that for a modern state to maintain social order, it must be involved in the education of the next generation (Durkheim 1956 [orig. 1922]). Their development is too important to be left to parents' arbitrary practices and has therefore increasingly become a matter for professionals in special institutions designed for this purpose.

In the Scandinavian countries, the state is particularly involved in children's lives and upbringing. Children and their welfare are now part of a range of political and economic priorities and labour market initiatives, and childhood institutions constitute a fundamental part of the fabric of society (Ellingsæter 2006; Gilliam/Gulløv 2017). Over the past 100 years, the state's involvement has come to entail a range of different institutions, and ways of certifying professionals in the fields of childcare and education and regulating their work, resources, and time. Starting with the establishment of schools and asylums for young, impoverished children during the nineteenth century, in all three Scandinavian countries, the state has gradually expanded the time children spend in institutions. The number of years of compulsory schooling has increased, the education system has expanded, and nurseries, kindergartens, after-school care, youth programmes, music classes, and sports activities have been established, all with the aim of ensuring that children are cared for and stimulated, regardless of their social background. In this process, the perception and handling of children's needs have been professionalised, gradually shifting from the private concern of families to a matter of general interest that is best managed in specialised educational institutions regulated by the state. In the case of Denmark, the result of this process is that, today, almost all children spend a large chunk of their waking hours in various education and care institutions from infancy until reaching adulthood. Thus, the legitimate formative process for the individual involves a sequence of standardised educational programmes, each authorised to define what serves children best and intervene whenever parental dispositions do not appear to be conducive to the wellbeing or development of the child.

While it is not a new development that adult society and politicians have a strong interest in children's upbringing or that children spend a lot of time in schools and other educational institutions, the scale of the investment and effort and the degree of coherence between the different stages of the educational process are unprecedented. In the Danish context this is seen, for instance, in mandatory testing of all

children's language skills at the age of three and again at five to make sure they are sufficiently proficient to cope with the demands of school (Holm 2017). Or in the extensive efforts to smooth the transitions between kindergarten, school, and after-school care. Through various inter-professional activities and detailed descriptions of each child's strengths and weaknesses, professionals in kindergartens seek to provide schoolteachers with knowledge allowing them to work with the individual child in the best way possible (Christensen 2020). The comprehensive assessment of educational readiness is also indicative in this regard. Since 2010, municipal educational counsellors have been legally obliged to assess every child in grade 8 and again in grade 9 in order to identify and counsel those pupils who do not "have the professional, personal and social prerequisites necessary to complete upper secondary education" (BUM 2010). This systematic registration of pupils' competences is intended to ensure coherence between primary and secondary education. Because education has become the established and legitimate path to status, and because formal certification is a prerequisite for almost all well-paid jobs, a whole industry has developed around the transitions between different stages. From nursery to kindergarten, from kindergarten to school, and from school to youth education, professionals strive to guide children's way to the next educational level and to ensure that all children know what is expected of them, regardless of their family background. In this way, the education system has gained in prevalence, influence, and scope.

It is also relatively new that this endeavour includes the youngest children, at least in the Scandinavian context[2]. Thus, recent decades have seen an increased political focus on enrolling as many children as possible in nurseries and kindergartens – especially in cases where there is a fear that the child's parents are unable to carry out the task adequately, such as parents who are outside the labour market, who are mentally or physically ill, or who have recently arrived in Denmark as immigrants. In Denmark, this has resulted in outreach activities informing target groups about the benefits of nurseries, but also in the demand that parents receiving public benefits must be available for work – a demand that implies that they must be willing to place their young children in the care of someone else. These efforts seem to have the intended effect, with a comparatively high percentage of preschool children attending nurseries and kindergartens (OECD, Family database 2021). Besides teaching the children basic skills, such as how to dress themselves and use the toilet, and elementary knowledge of, for instance, numbers, colours and traffic rules, the focus is on training behavioural skills such as proper ways to solve a conflict, how to be considerate towards others, and to respect institutional rhythms and schedules and

2 According to the OECD, Denmark is the country that spends most public funds annually on ECEC settings per child and ranks fourth when expenditure is compared to total GDP – after Sweden, Norway and Iceland (OECD, Starting Strong 2017).

follow adult instructions. In short, there is a notable effort to familiarise young children with institutional norms from as early an age as possible, with particular focus on social interactions in groups and self-control.

A third new trend is the introduction of policies attempting to identify social problems at an early stage. Partly inspired by economist James Heckman's argument about the greater profitability of investing in early childhood education (Heckman 2008), and partly by the conviction that early experiences are foundational for later life, a strong political interest in identifying and preventing potential problems during early childhood has emerged. This entails the systematic assessment of every child's development, as well as an intensified focus on monitoring how children are treated at home. When something is identified as potentially harmful or as hindering the child's continued development, interventions encourage parents to recognise the problem and their own responsibility, and to comply with the proposed remedy. Thus, the 'early intervention' paradigm is not only preventive, safeguarding the child's development; it also regulates parents' practices and way of life. Moreover, as childhood professionals are required to react to any suspicion of deficiencies in the care provided in the home (and in extreme cases, to remove the child from the parents), there is real power behind their assessments and the actions they propose. Although professional educators always have been in a position of power in relation to parents, the increased institutionalisation of children has given them – and the apparatus of social authorities – far more effective instruments for identifying potential developmental deviations at a much earlier stage. The balance of authority and power thereby shifts towards the system of childhood institutions, making parents more aware of the need to do their best – not only for the sake of their child, but also for their own sake. This entails adjusting their parenting practices to fit the norms and advice they meet in their daily encounters with childhood professionals in order to ensure their child develops in the right way and to protect the family's status and respectability.

However, it must be stressed that this regulatory function could not be exercised without the general acceptance and trust of parents. Nor can the widespread enrolment in preschool education and care be seen purely as a result of pressure from the authorities. Although parents are a diverse population and have different experiences with their childhood institutions, and despite growing concerns over the quality of the day-care facilities in Denmark over the last decade, surveys continue to show a generally high level of satisfaction among parents (Ministry of the Interior and Housing 2012; Statistics Denmark 2022). Thus, it seems that most parents send their children to kindergarten and school because they trust that it will benefit their child and they comply with the requirements because they agree with the educational principles and objectives. Institutional effectiveness is not just a matter of external regulation or organisational design; it depends on parental support, which

in turn is linked to psychosocial mechanisms such as shame and trust, a sense of (in)adequacy, and a fear of social disapproval (cf. van Krieken 1986).

4 A need for strong cooperation

Coining the term 'politicisation of parenthood', sociologists Anne Lise Ellingsæter and Arnlaug Leira (2006) point to the range of policy measures in Scandinavia intended to help parents to balance work and family and take proper care of their children (e.g., subsidised parental leave, days off when children are sick, child benefit, and state subsidised day-care). As they state: "The Scandinavian welfare states pioneered the transformation of parenthood into political issues" (2006: 2). Elaborating, Leira describes this as a simultaneous process of 'de-familisation', where much of the upbringing and care of children is done by professionals, and 're-familisation', where parents receive support in caring for their children. Both processes reflect the significance attributed to parenthood by authorities. Yet they also show the extent to which child-rearing today is based on collaboration between parents and childhood professionals (see also Göbel/Bollig in this volume); a collaboration that requires mutual responsiveness, and especially a willingness by parents to align their parenting practices with professional guidelines.

In their study of Danish kindergartens, educational anthropologists Karen Ida Dannesboe, Dil Bach, Bjørg Kjær, and Charlotte Palludan describe how parents are required to support the work done at the institutions their child attends and adapt their own lives accordingly:

> "Parents are prompted to submit to institutional routines and take care of practicalities. Furthermore, they are expected to align family life and activities at home to institutional values and norms. This is considered crucial in enabling pedagogues to perform their job of cultivating children at the institution. […] As such, the cultivational work is also directed at parents; they are not only partners but also targets for pedagogical intervention" (2018: 470).

Again, it is important to stress that parents do not just passively accept the demands they face. They do what they think is best for their children and the generally high attendance at parents' meetings reflects their eagerness to not only stay informed but also to discuss pedagogy and practical matters concerning their children's lives (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut 2017). The many and varied questions parents pose pedagogues and teachers in their everyday encounters and on digital platforms reveal a huge interest among parents in doing the right thing in relation to their children, demonstrating how professional advice and guidelines are generally recognised by parents as important and relevant (Akselvoll 2016; Dannesboe et al. 2018).

In this way, children's upbringing has become a joint venture between parents and professionals, with the role of professionals extended to teach parents how best to take care of their children, but also how best to support the work of these professionals. Today, 'proper' parenthood involves extensive and time-consuming familiarisation with the activities that take place in nurseries, kindergartens and schools, and a willingness to provide the necessary support enabling professionals to carry out their work with the children. In a sense, the balance between families and childhood institutions has tipped: from institutions providing support to help and relieve working parents, to a central and defining part of children's upbringing demanding parental support. Thus, being a 'good parent' requires an effort to adapt family life to fit the institutional rhythm, which is an accepted aspect of parental responsibility.

Looking more carefully at what is required and demanded of parents, it becomes clear that much relates to the everyday functionality of the institution. To be partners in the joint venture of upbringing, parents need to: ensure that their children come prepared and do their homework; ensure that their children go to bed at a decent time so they are fresh and well-rested; provide healthy meals and sufficient exercise; organise stimulating activities outside school or day care that supplement and support their child's learning within the institution; stay informed about activities and plans through daily updates on digital platforms; attend meetings; and speak to their children about topics brought up in school or day care. In short, they must organise life at home in ways that support institutional frameworks (Sparrman et al. 2016; Bach et al. 2020; Gulløv/Kampmann 2021). The expectations for children likewise reflect the conditions of everyday institutional life. Children must learn to get along with others and exhibit well-balanced behaviour; avoid conflicts; align with the institutional rhythm; and do as their teachers ask – not only to learn in preparation for future demands, but equally to ensure the smooth running of institutional life (Gilliam/Gulløv 2014).

In this way, the institutional form itself has an impact on the norms that children and parents alike must learn and the expectations they face. However, the influence on upbringing norms of this functional dimension of institutional life appears rather unnoticed. Or rather, the functional aspect makes the norms appear self-evident – as the way things have to be done without the need for further reasoning. The combination of a widespread and comprehensive education system supported by various authorities and everyday institutional routinisation in the form of specific schedules and patterns of interaction means that almost all children and families in Denmark are exposed to a quite powerful structure of similar institutional routines, demands, priorities, and norms. This also means that the standards upheld by the various institutional regimes not only define routines for children's education and care at day-care centres and schools and influence everyday practices and priorities in family homes; they also have a moral impact, shaping what is perceived as good or bad behaviour for children and for parents.

5 Standards and distinctions

As the status of the child has changed, the role as parent has become both more extensive and more socially demanding. Parents' commitment to their children is assessed by other parents and authorities alike. They are expected to support their children's motor, linguistic, moral, cognitive, and social development, which requires the child's participation in both institutional and extracurricular activities, as well as close monitoring of their children's emotional wellbeing at kindergarten and school. The disapproval shown to parents who are seen as irresponsible, neglectful, or unengaged indicates the social and cultural importance attached to parenthood today. It also explains why parents in Denmark, as elsewhere, have become increasingly dependent on specialists, advisers, teachers, and pedagogues to ensure their children's ongoing age-appropriate development – their own honour and social respectability are at stake.

Since the vast majority of all children attend childcare institutions, there is ample opportunity to compare and assess not only the individual child's abilities and development, but also parents' efforts and care. In this sense, childcare institutions have become a stage where parents face an audience of professionals and other parents who notice, acknowledge, or distance themselves from the practices and interactions with the child that they observe. Several Scandinavian family studies have shown how parents are aware of the signalling effects of their parental practices for professionals and other parents, suggesting that they try to comply with professional recommendations and institutional norms (e.g., Akselvoll 2016; Bach 2014, 2017; Bach et al. 2020; Gilliam 2022; Palludan 2012; Sparrman et al. 2016; Stefansen/Skogen 2010; Stefansen et al. 2016; Aarseth 2014).[3] Despite variations in parents' backgrounds and lifestyles, the general picture painted by these studies is that children's behaviour and parental practices are seen as reflecting the family's social standing. A social and moral hierarchy is used to rank humans and their behaviour as more or less acceptable and civilised (Gilliam/Gulløv 2017). This is seen, for example, in Dil Bach's study of the upbringing practices of affluent families in a privileged neighbourhood in Denmark (Bach 2014, 2017). Here, interviews with mothers and their diary entries reveal a strong focus on their children's behaviour and reflections on their own upbringing practices – not least with regard to who they want their children to be friends with and which homes they want them to visit. As Bach shows, childrearing sets boundaries between 'the civilised' and 'the uncivilised', where those who do not practise an 'appropriate' and well-balanced style of parenting risk being seen in a negative light by other parents, as well as by professionals. As Bach (2017:232) states: "Because children's behaviour, wellbeing

3 Similar observations have been made in studies in other European countries, see e.g., Ellmer 2020, Jaeger 2021.

and future opportunities are seen as determined by parental input, and because parents thereby are held accountable for their childrearing strategy and made interdependent with their children, childrearing becomes a distinctive practice".

My own ethnographic observations in kindergardens and interviews with parents and teachers confirm that children and parents' behaviour affect their social standing. Across specific sites, it is apparent that it is not only staff who register if a child wears clothes that are not well-suited for the season, has poor dental hygiene, or behaves in a rough and disruptive manner; other parents also notice and distance themselves from such families, encouraging their child not to befriend this child (see e.g., Gulløv 2014). Furthermore, as such matters are primarily noticed when dropping off or picking up children at day-care centres and schools, the institutional framework becomes the normative foundation for making judgements. In short, parents seem to be acutely aware that their social reputation is related to the way they interact with and raise their children, just as they are conscious that their child's behaviour in the institution will be interpreted as a reflection of their parenting practices and the general moral habitus of the home (Gilliam/Gulløv 2017: 260 f.).

All of this indicates how childhood institutions influence standards for upbringing and thereby subtly contribute to distinctions between those parents who comply with and thus confirm the institutional standards and those parents who do not. That is, between those who, through their actions, appear to be respectable and responsible parents who know and recognise the established norms and the work of childhood professionals, and those who are unable or unwilling to let institutional norms guide their organisation of daily life and relations to their children. In this sense, the influence of childhood institutions is much greater than just the provision of education to specific children. Implicitly, the childhood institutions have institutionalised complex sets of norms that have implications for the social interactions between children, children and teachers, parents and professionals, as well as in and between families. They influence what and who is deemed appropriate or inappropriate both within and outside the institutional settings, and thus have an impact on the subtle dynamics of social status within society more generally, which, in turn, have an impact on the priorities and practices of individual families.

6 In conclusion

Despite the fact that most families are deeply dependent on day-care centres and schools and that these institutions are an integral part of modern childhood, their implications for contemporary notions of child development, upbringing, and family life are rarely discussed. Instead, it seems that the doings of families and children's lives in institutional settings are generally studied as separate domains, with

the latter often further divided into preschool research and school research. My intention here has been to start a discussion about what the pervasive institutionalisation of childhood means – not just for children and childhood, but for parenthood and family life – in terms of the impact on interactional norms, social dynamics, and societal divisions.

Today, childhood institutions are indispensable elements of children's upbringing and everyday family life. They provide children with a place to be while their parents work and compulsory state-sanctioned education, teaching them the knowledge and social skills required in adult life. While parents may be critical of specific issues in relation to the quality of their children's life in institutions, they generally seem to endorse the fact that much of childhood is spent in various institutions, accepting childhood professionals' ways of stimulating and handling children and respecting the institutional framework. As I have explored in this chapter, there are three key factors that can explain why this shift in power from the domestic sphere to childhood institutions has been so successful. The first factor is the perception of childhood as a vulnerable but fundamental period in life that requires special support and attention. By extension, the second factor concerns the state's interest in making sure that the next generation grows up to become good and competent citizens, which has led to high levels of investment in the development, expansion, and professionalisation of the education system. The third factor has to do with the institutional structure itself. Despite continuous changes in the content, purpose, methods, and administration of such institutions, the very fact that they organise many people in one place necessitates the individual's conformity with institutional structures. This applies not only to individual children but also their families, who must adapt their everyday rhythms, routines, and activities to the binding institutional form. As the importance attributed to the education system has increased, so too has the impact institutions have on what it means to be a child and a parent, and what counts as proper conduct, proper ways of bringing up children, and proper ways to organise one's life. Of course, these are not unambiguous or immutable standards, but norms that change over time, subject to constant negotiations between different social groups in varying positions of power. Nevertheless, the institutional form itself implies a certain degree of stability. The mere fact that the imposition of norms takes place through daily routines over an extended period of time creates a certain inertia.

This standardising effect has social implications, albeit in quite subtle ways. As the childhood institutions have been authorised to set standards for children's lives and upbringing, they also define what and who deviates from these standards, with implications for the ways parents organise their family life, see themselves and others, and choose to comply with or distance themselves from established notions of appropriate conduct. In this way, childhood institutions have become central organs of society; a backbone of social control that not only defines and authorises

behaviour in the institutional setting but also influences everyday routines and practices in homes, as well as parental interactions and how they assess each other's practices. The strong influence of childhood institutions that I have highlighted in this chapter may be a particular feature of Scandinavian societies; however, a tendency towards an increased focus on early childhood institutions and schools can also be observed in other western European societies, with the aim of ensuring the nation's future social and economic stability. However, to fully understand the implications of the increasingly influential role of childhood institutions in different countries, there is a need for cross-cultural studies – not least studies exploring the impact of these institutions on notions of good family life and for how it is actually done.

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