

# Genetic determinism – How psychiatric thinking influences parents' approaches to their children's development

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**B**ased on fieldwork in families and a mainstream kindergarten in Denmark, this article discusses how children who are viewed as special and at risk are subjected in new ways to “concerted cultivation” between childhood professionals and parents. The article identifies two forms of parental determinism that are associated with two different views of the good parent: On the one hand, psychologically inspired parental determinism focusing on what parents do; on the other, genetic determinism focusing on who parents are biologically. Genetic determinism dominates the empirical material, suggesting an increasing influence from psychiatry in how parents understand children’s development. This implies that the natural and the cultural interact in new ways and transforms the collaboration between parents and professionals, creating new expectations on both sides. As a result, parenting at-risk children is characterized by less trust in intuition and a greater need for guidance in order to accommodate the child’s special nature.

*Keywords:* parental determinism, concerted cultivation, kinship, risk management, diagnostic culture

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## Introduction

When it comes to understanding children’s development, the 20th century is often described as the century of psychology. One consequence of the dominance of psychological thinking has been the prevalence of an “infantile deterministic” mind-set (Furedi, 2001), which views human beings as products of early childhood. Although young children spend much of their time in ECEC<sup>1</sup> institutions, parenting culture studies

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<sup>1</sup> Early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions in Denmark provide fulltime public day care, with both a nursery and a kindergarten department, catering for children aged 0–6. 96% of

(Lee et al. 2014) emphasize that infantile determinism is linked to "parental determinism". Parents are seen as having the primary responsibility for providing the good childhood that will ensure successful future citizens. Childrearing has become "parenting".

In contrast to schoolteachers and pedagogues<sup>2</sup>, parents share body with the children twice over, as Faircloth (2014) points out with reference to Strathern: "First is the body of genetic inheritance ... Second is the body that is a sign of the parent's devotion or neglect" (Strathern, 2005, p.5). Once the egg is fertilized, parents cannot do much to alter the child's genetic body but, apparently, they can do a lot to shape their child through childrearing. Parenting has therefore become intensive, at least among middle-class families. Lareau (2003) argues that unlike poor and working-class families, the middle class dares not leave the child's body to "natural growth"; it must be cultivated, preferably in concert with educational institutions (Lareau, 2003). This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in families and a mainstream ECEC institution in Denmark. It discusses some examples from this fieldwork that point to a movement from psychology to psychiatry and the genetic body in the understanding of children's development (cf. Brinkmann, 2011). This is not a return to "natural growth". Rather, it implies new forms of interplay between the natural and cultural and transforms the collaboration between parents and childhood professionals, resulting in new expectations on both sides (cf. Bach & Christensen, 2021).

As indicated, "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003) and intensive parenting is based on a psychologically inspired principle of parental determinism (Lee et al., 2014). I also saw examples of this in my fieldwork. However, several of the parents were primarily concerned with identifying their child's biological nature so they could focus on cultivating the child's inherent potentials. The idea is that if the child's special nature is identified and approached correctly, something exceptional may happen. If not, things can go terribly wrong. Thus, the expectations placed on good parents have not decreased, just changed. Parents feel obliged to identify their child's special nature and, to some

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children aged 3–6 attend kindergarten for an average of 7.5 hours a day, 5 days a week.

<sup>2</sup> In Denmark, professionals working in ECEC institutions are social educators rather than teachers. They are called pedagogues, not teachers.

extent, to adapt accordingly. At the same time, parents expect professionals to take the special nature of their child into account.

I refer to the ECEC institution where I conducted fieldwork as Westtown kindergarten. It is located in a rural part of Denmark that has been struggling with relative poverty. I had therefore expected to find poverty-related issues among the families. However, the parents were more preoccupied with psychiatric diagnoses when it came to understanding their children's needs. I have since become aware that there is an inversely proportional correspondence between diagnoses and resources. For instance, far more ADHD medication is prescribed to children in poorer rural districts than to children in urban parts of Denmark, where the population is wealthier and better educated (Fisker, 2013). Several studies (e.g., Skeggs, 1997) have also pointed out that the use of class and poverty as explanations for deviant behaviour has declined relative to pathologization and individualization. My study therefore also explores "diagnostic culture"; i.e., "a culture in which diagnoses circulate and are used... to understand more and more forms of suffering, deviation and discomfort" (Brinkmann, 2010, p.7). More specifically, I look at how parents from Westtown kindergarten understand children's development. Westtown kindergarten is a mainstream ECEC institution, but staff and parents saw many of the children as having special needs.

Like 91 other countries, Denmark signed the Salamanca Declaration in 1994 and committed itself to working with inclusion in mainstream educational institutions, especially schools (Ministry of Education, 2014). The focus on inclusion became part of the day-care act that was first introduced in 2007. At the same time, Denmark's local municipalities took over the financial and educational responsibility of children with special needs from the regional counties. In 2018, the day-care act was revised with greater focus on early intervention and children in vulnerable positions. The legislation stresses that mainstream ECEC institutions must promote learning and provide support and care for all children, including children with physical or mental impairments. Only severely disabled children should be segregated in specialized centres or trained at home (<https://sm.dk>). Although these steps towards inclusion seem progressive, inclusion is often criticized as a way for financially strapped municipalities to save money. In Denmark, there is comprehensive legislation intended to ensure specialized support for children with special needs and their families. In a narrow perspective, however, it is

cheaper for the municipalities to downplay children's special needs and keep them in mainstream institutions – even with the costs of providing extra support from municipal psychologists, speech therapists etc. The formal purpose of such support in mainstream ECEC is to “create nuanced knowledge from various disciplines about the children and contribute with concrete proposals for actions” (Munck & Kirkeby, 2023, p.14). Despite these good intentions, in practice, context-sensitive knowledge about the children is often set aside in favor of tools measuring their biological maturation. Such tools encourage professionals to scrutinize the child in isolation, without considering the broader context

As mentioned, most parents in this study were similarly preoccupied with their children's nature. Hence, one might expect them to think that they can do nothing about their child's behavior, because “that's just the way they are”. However, this is not what happens. Instead, the ideals around concerted cultivation and intensive parenting endure, even though the families can be placed at the lower end of the social space (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the social space is multidimensional and all smaller fields contain relatively higher, middle and lower positions (Ortner, 1991), which is also the case in Westtown.

While staff and parents saw many of the children in this study as having special needs with various professionals working together to support these needs, none of the children were considered severely disabled. Moreover, as staff in Danish ECEC institutions are social educators – pedagogues – rather than teachers, working with inclusion is considered a natural part of their job. This adds to the significance of the transition from ECEC to primary school. The article therefore examines parents' considerations regarding this transition and the associated thoughts about their children's development.

### **Methodology and theory**

The article is based on fieldwork in the spring of 2019 at Westtown kindergarten and in families attending this kindergarten. I followed the big kids group who were expected<sup>3</sup> to

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<sup>3</sup> In Denmark, children enter primary school the year they turn six. It is difficult to obtain postponement, requiring a clear justification in terms of the child's developmental challenges (Ministry of Education, 2022).

start primary school after the summer holidays. I also participated in events for parents and conducted home visits and informal conversations, as well as individual semi-structured interviews with one father and four mothers. These parents are the focus of this article. The interviews were conducted at the end of the fieldwork, at which point I had got to know the parents a little and had in-depth knowledge of their children. Two of the interviews took place in the family home, while the rest were conducted in the kindergarten. These interviews ranged from forty minutes to three hours in length.

Revisiting Westtown kindergarten in 2021, the pedagogues described the families as ordinary people [*jævne folk*] – a term used when referring to lower-middle or working-class people. However, the families held different positions in the field due to different amounts and compositions of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In one of the families, the parents have a master's degree and a professional bachelor's degree, respectively. In two of the families, one parent has a professional bachelor's degree, while the other is a skilled labourer. In the last two families, both parents have few or no formal post-secondary qualifications. There are also differences in terms of economic capital with one family having sufficient financial resources that only one parent needs to work, while another family cannot afford to send their children to the after-school club<sup>4</sup>. Several of the parents are dependent on public welfare benefits and it is only in one of the families that both parents are in work. In terms of social capital, all families in the study are newcomers to the area, where housing is relatively cheap. Some have almost no social network; others' network mostly comprises extended family, while others have a network that includes some local relations.

My study is partly situated within newer anthropological research on kinship, from which I draw inspiration from the idea of children sharing bodies with their parents twice over (Strathern, 2005). It is also placed within the field of anthropological and sociological parenting studies, from which I draw inspiration from key concepts such as "intensive parenting" (Lee et al., 2014), "infantile and parental determinism" (Furedi, 2001), "concerted cultivation" and "natural growth" (Lareau, 2003), and "passion for learning" and "fit for fight learning cultures" (Aarseth, 2014). In a Danish context, these

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<sup>4</sup> Most Danish children attend an after-school club, some already in the transition to primary school. It costs around 1800 Danish crowns a month.

concepts have shown their usefulness, also in relation to non-middle-class parents (Dannesboe et al., 2018). However, it seems more appropriate to talk about “childhood determinism” than “infantile determinism”, since many Danish parents see the whole of childhood as determining a person’s life .

Finally, I draw on research on “diagnostic culture” (Brinkmann, 2011; Goodley, 2016; Kjær et al., 2020; Rose, 1989/1999). I am inspired by Brinkmann's point (2011) that psychiatric thinking permeates everyday life to an ever-greater extent. Thus, genetics and biology are in focus, and an increasing part of human behaviour is understood as the mechanical effect of chemical processes in the brain. In this way, more and more aspects of human existence and the problems that arise as part of this existence have become the subject of diagnosis, intervention, prevention etc. Other researchers call this process medicalization, with some pointing out that the media play a major role in the spread of this way of thinking (Isaksen & Tjora, 2016). Kjær et al. (2020) has similarly shown how the dominant psychiatric diagnoses, ADHD and autism, appear as “shadow categories” that characterize everyday understandings of children. I also see this tendency in my data. Several of the parents talk about their children in ways that associate their behaviour and development with autism (social and communicative challenges, special interests etc.).

Macvarish’s parenting study also explores neuro-oriented approaches to children. She introduces the concept of “neuroscientism”, which is an “ideological attempt to discover the essence of humanity in the brain” (Macvarish, 2014: p.166). Whereas actual neuroscience sees the brain as robust and characterized by lifelong plasticity, neuroscientism has a deterministic mind-set and sees the brain as extremely vulnerable. Any damage in the first years of a child’s life seems irreparable. In this way, neuroscientism goes hand in hand with infantile determinism. It is also connected to classic parental determinism, where parents are seen as responsible for correctly stimulating the young brain. Macvarish (2014: p.181) concludes that “neuroscientism” reinforces intensive parenting, adding an extra layer that strengthens the “individualization of social problems” and “writes children off” . Similarly, I discuss how deterministic thinking seems to ignore children’s agency that has otherwise been central to child research since the 1990s (James & Prout, 1997).

I divide the families in my study into three types: Families where the children have no issues; families where the children have a psychiatric diagnosis; and families where

the children have some special needs and the parents understand them in light of diagnostic shadow categories.

## **Findings**

### **Psychologically inspired parental determinism**

Mathias's family represents an example of classic parental determinism. The parents are relatively financially well off and only need one income. One of them therefore stays at home and focuses on the children. Unlike the rest of the parents, Mathias's parents are not worried about the transition to primary school: "he has learned from home that school is a good thing". They also tell him that you can become neither a racing driver nor a police officer without some academic knowledge. Therefore, they help him complete worksheets on numbers and letters. When I asked about his motivation, they answered: "Our children have been raised well".

Mathias's parents believe that having a good life is to some extent determined by the quality of childhood. Therefore, they focus on giving their children a better childhood than they themselves have had. Although this can be characterized as childhood determinism, it is not exclusively linked to parental determinism.

We give the kindergarten a lot of credit for the fact that things have gone well with our eldest and with Mathias, because the pedagogues are the ones who have helped to stimulate them. However, we believe that parents are responsible for raising and caring for their children  
(Mathias's father).

Here we also see elements of a mind-set that I call institutional determinism, where parents see their children's wellbeing as the result of concerted cultivation with the kindergarten. In contrast to many other parents in Denmark (Dannesboe et al., 2018), however, Mathias's parents rarely ask the pedagogues for advice, because they themselves know what is right and wrong. They believe, for instance, that Mathias's school readiness is due to the fact that - unlike other parents - they insisted on postponing his school start:

Two boys were suffering because their parents said, "they have to go to school now, they have the right age". We thought, "Yes, they have the age, but if you say boo to them, they start crying. Give them some hair on their chests before you send them to school."

(Mathias's father).

In short, Mathias's parents believe that being filled up from home by parents who know what they want makes children "fit for fight". The latter is indicative of a goal-oriented learning culture characteristic of Scandinavian families belonging to the financial elite, but also segments of the working class (Aarseth, 2014). Mathias's parents have a relatively large amount of economic capital compared to other local families, but when taking their low level of education and limited social capital into consideration, they could also be seen as working class.

### **Genetic determinism**

In the following, we will see a different type of explanation for children's behaviour and potential insecurity. When I asked Jessica's mother what she thought about her daughter's upcoming school start, instead of talking about childrearing, she began to describe Jessica's nature:

I'm a little worried because she has a diagnosis. It's a kind of anxiety. We have always known that there was something. At kindergarten, she doesn't talk, and that's very normal when you have that diagnosis. You don't speak in unfamiliar and unsafe surroundings. The kindergarten suggested that [diagnosis]. Then we had her examined. According to the medical examination, she is ready to go to primary school. The school just has to consider her special needs

(Jessica's mother).

Here, a child's insecurity is explained through an innate anxiety rather than bad parenting. Moreover, there are elements of institutional determinism, as Jessica's mother



believes, that should the schoolteachers adopt the wrong approach, it could have serious consequences: “The worst thing the teacher can do is push her to say something, because then it will go wrong”. I asked Jessica's mother how she felt about Jessica being given a psychiatric diagnosis:

It didn't come as a surprise. My mother-in-law has four grandchildren; two of them have a bunch of psychiatric diagnoses. There's a lot of that, on both my husband's side and on my side<sup>5</sup>

(Jessica's mother)

In this way, Jessica's special nature is explained by her kinship to a family full of psychiatric diagnoses. However, the narrative contains not only fear but also hope: “she's highly intelligent and very interested in writing letters of the alphabet and doing arithmetic”. Therefore, Jessica's mother has bought some exercise books, but she has to be careful: “Some of the tasks are too difficult, so she loses interest”. The mother refuses to pace her and she thinks the kindergarten focuses too much on academic learning, instead of letting the children be children. Thus, the narrative also contains elements of an understanding of natural growth characteristic of lower-class parents (Lareau, 2003). As for the future, the mother hopes Jessica will get an education, unlike the rest of the family.

Overall, this case demonstrates a way of thinking that can be characterized as genetic determinism but also contains elements of institutional determinism. The child's behaviour and special nature are in focus and should be identified and considered by parents and teachers. We also see this way of thinking among the final group of families, where we meet three mothers who fear that something is wrong with their children. This indicates that risk consciousness has become possibilistic rather than probabilistic, which is characteristic of parenting culture more widely (Lee et al., 2014).

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<sup>5</sup> Jessica's mother herself has a psychiatric diagnosis.

### Normality or deviation?

Silas's mother also worries about the transition to primary school, because Silas has had language problems since nursery. However, while delayed language development may be a sign of autism (Ochs et al., 2004), Silas does not exhibit all the symptoms. Nevertheless, diagnostic thinking characterizes how he is understood. Only three minutes into the interview, his mother refers to the category of autism:

We had a meeting with the kindergarten because everybody was concerned. There have been some things with him the whole time. He has had trouble listening and being able to sit still. He runs away from chores and says, "You don't decide over me". If he had to clean up, he wouldn't participate. He was so stubborn. The question is whether he doesn't understand... We have also talked with the psychologist.<sup>6</sup> He reacts extremely negatively to criticism or scolding. If you play hardball, he will go on and on; you cannot get him out of it no matter what you do. Therefore, they have introduced a reward system. He gets something every time he does something good - a bit like dog training. In addition, he has a hard time falling asleep. And my husband is autistic, so we were like, "Is there something?"

(Silas's mother)

Here we see that parents and professionals analyse Silas's behaviour and, on that basis, reflect on his nature. Might he be on the autism spectrum, given his paternal kinship? Throughout the interview, the biological dimensions of kinship are accentuated. The mother also recognizes Silas's character traits in his siblings and, to a lesser extent, in herself. The conclusion, however, is that it is not autism. Yet the behaviour analysis in kindergarten leads to a training regime based on extrinsic motivation, which is characteristic for much autism intervention (Richman, 2001). Moreover, at home, they try to find tricks to tackle Silas.

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<sup>6</sup> A municipal psychologist that collaborates with Westtown kindergarten.

The diagnosis of autism also appears in the narrative about Mira, even though her parents mostly use the category highly sensitive. Like Jessica's and Silas's parents, Mira's parents worry about the transition to primary school. Although Mira is doing well at the kindergarten, she is completely drained when she comes home and her parents don't know whether this is normal behaviour. I asked them if they had done anything to prepare Mira for school. This led to a description of Mira's special nature: "Since she was very young, Mira has been highly sensitive. Therefore, we have had to work on many things". I asked the mother if they had talked to anyone about it:

Yes, her day-care mother. We had signed Mira up for nursery but switched to private day-care<sup>7</sup> because she couldn't tolerate noise or other children. She didn't like it if other children spoke to her and she didn't want them to touch her. She still has a bit of tactile sensitivity. Therefore, we made things predictable. We did nothing at weekends because she had to be able to last a whole week, and she had short weeks. Then, before she started kindergarten, the day-care mother visited the place with her once a week so she got to know the adults and the children. I think that has helped. And we are the kind of people who like peace, regularity and routines. I think that has been good for her  
(Mira's mother)

Here we see how psychiatry influences the mother's way of thinking, even though highly sensitive is not an official diagnosis. The characterization of Mira also has several things in common with symptoms of autism (Ochs et al., 2004), which appears as a shadow diagnosis. Moreover, we see that the parents' increased knowledge about Mira's nature causes them to change their decision to send Mira to public nursery. Furthermore, we see that it causes them to limit the amount of time Mira spends away from home. However, the decision process is reversed in comparison to Mathias's parents, who initially decided to give their children short days with specific goals in mind. In both cases, we see

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<sup>7</sup> In Denmark, private day care is an alternative to public nursery, but is sometimes also an option for kindergarten-aged children. A so-called day-care mother may look after up to five children at a time in her private home (<https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dagpleje>).

elements of institutional determinism, where too much time spent in an ECEC institution is considered damaging.

Mira's mother went on to say that Mira is very observant and that she is good at building with Lego and good at following instruction manuals. It is at this point in the interview that autism explicitly comes to the fore: “She’s very systematic in her approach. At one point, I wondered if she’s a little autistic, because she always lined things up in some kind of order”.

I told Mira's mother that I did not recognize her description of Mira from the girl I saw in the kindergarten. This resulted in the mother describing even more autism-like traits: “I have never met a child with so much self-control. That’s why she’s doing well here [in kindergarten]”. However, the parents experienced the flip side of Mira’s self-control when she came home in the afternoon: “Then she gets upset or cannot cope with being told what to do or she gets sick”. Since self-control and demand avoidance are associated with autism (Ochs et al., 2004), I asked the mother how long she had harboured these concerns.

Did I say autism? If there’s something autistic, then I think it’s something that you can structure yourself out of, for the most part. I actually suspect her father of being high-functioning autistic

(Mira’s mother).

Here we see a combination of classic parental determinism – by parenting with a focus on structure, you can eliminate autistic traits – and genetic determinism – the father has these traits too. Overall, the mother wondered a lot about what Mira had inherited from whom:

I’m like Mira when it comes to feeling uncomfortable when I’m around a lot of people. My husband is also a bit antisocial. Moreover, he’s observant and good at reading instruction manuals. He also has a good memory. In addition, he has a visual way of thinking. I think Mira has inherited her sensitivity, her visual way of thinking and good memory

from him. It's going to be exciting to see whether she gets double up on weird!

(Mira's mother)

In short, speculations on the genetic source of Mira's character traits run through the interview. In combination with an analysis of Mira's behaviour, the parents see this as the key to understanding their child's special nature, to which they must then adapt.

Jacob's mother also had ambivalent feelings about the transition to primary school, because "his language proficiency fluctuates depending on how much the brain can absorb". In this way, she sees Jacob's challenges as something to do with his brain. Like the other parents in this section, she is preoccupied with identifying her child's distinctive nature using diagnostic shadow categories.

What may worry me, or maybe worry isn't the right word, but I'm concerned about how he'll adjust socially in a school class. Right now, he's in small groups, and I think he works well like that. He's also very good at playing, but how will he cope when they are given tasks to solve in groups? I'm worried about how the teachers will approach it. Will he be able to understand the messages? He's, not in his own world, but he has his own rules. He's very stubborn; if he believes in something, then that's the way it is.

(Jacob's mother)

Like Jessica's mother, Jacob's mother is concerned that the approach that might be adopted by her child's teachers following the transition to primary school will have severe consequences. In addition, autism appears as a shadow category, with being in one's own world a feature of autism (Ochs et al., 2004), even though the mother does not explicitly mention the diagnosis. However, the mother withdraws this claim in the same sentence. She goes on to say that Jacob writes letters from the alphabet and reads what is written on things like a packet of cornflakes. She also emphasizes that they have not paced him:

They started in the kindergarten with the letters and rhymes by Halfdan Rasmussen<sup>8</sup>. He never let up with the rhymes; he just went on and on forever. We almost had to hide that book, because he just gets stuck in the same groove once he gets started.

(Jacob's mother)

Again, the category of autism seems to lurk in the background. Having so-called special interests, such as constantly reading the same rhymes, is characteristic of autism (Ochs et al., 2004). We also talked about Jacob being able to count: "Sometimes you can see that he is calculating in his head... He has such a visual-like memory". Good memory is another feature of autism (Ochs et al., 2004.) that the mother highlights in her characterization of Jacob.

Finally, Jacob's mother returned to the fact that the social is a challenge. Strikingly without the sense of shame that characterizes classic parental determinism (Bach, 2014), she told me that Jacob had bitten another child one day and had run away another day. She added that it is important to find the right tools to deal with him. That is why she had not arranged play dates for him.

Because I think he can be a handful to bring home to someone. I know he likes to lead people up the garden path. He has his own way of understanding things. Even grandma has a hard time picking him up from kindergarten, because it's not certain that he'll want to go with her

(Jacob's mother)

Overall, Jacob's mother spends much of the interview describing her son's special nature. Contrary to classic parental determinism, she does not seem to blame herself for his misbehaviour. Moreover, at first glance she does not consider whether Jacob has inherited his challenges. Seemingly, this is just the way his brain is.

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<sup>8</sup> Halfdan Rasmussen is known for his literary nonsense verse for children (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HalfdanRasmussen>).

### **Passion-based learning**

Neither Jacob's, Silas's nor Mira's parents are particularly worried about the academic aspects of the transition to primary school. On the contrary, their children's autism-like challenges also encourage hope in this regard. Goodley (2016) points out that autism is associated with both special needs and potential. The parents all describe their children's great ability to concentrate on things that interest them. If their children's passions are nurtured, the parents believe that something exceptional can happen. However, they also think things can go wrong if parents or professionals take an inappropriate approach. Thus, we see both classic parental determinism, genetic determinism and institutional determinism. Moreover, these parents' attitudes resemble a passion-driven approach to learning that is characteristic of cultural elites in Scandinavia (Aarseth, 2014). Although Jacob's, Silas's and Mira's parents can be described as ordinary people, they have a relatively large amount of cultural capital compared to other parents locally. In one of the families, the father has a university degree, and all three mothers have professional bachelor's degrees.

Mira's mother considers her daughter fairly intelligent and with a thirst for knowledge. Therefore, she expects her to get a degree one day. Nevertheless, she also stresses the importance of Mira's teenage years and what Mira herself decides to do. In this way, the example testifies to the importance of talking about childhood determinism rather than infantile determinism:

If she's a bit like her mother, then her teenage years won't be much fun. I could see her going in the same direction as me; i.e., [getting a] professional bachelor's degree. She could probably also go to university if she found something that caught her interest, because then she becomes absorbed. She can construct Lego at the level of children much older than her and for a long time. I can't keep up with her.

(Mira's mother)

This narrative begins with an emphasis on kinship that includes both fear and faith, and it ends with hopeful disidentification. Mira's mother hopes that Mira can go further than she was able to, because she is better than the mother is at something. Moreover, the

mother sees potential in Mira's passion-driven ability to concentrate. When describing Mira's almost autistic penchant for systems, the mother said:

If she wants to, I think she can become someone who does research or writes articles. It depends; if she's not motivated, she won't. If something happens at school that destroys her motivation and passion, then it will be difficult. However, if she maintains her curiosity and her passion for knowledge, I think she can become whatever she wants.

(Mira's mother)

Again, we see that what happens at school is considered crucial. The mother identifies a researcher potential in Mira's curiosity, but this could be destroyed by the school. Rose (1989/1999) points out that most parents expect their children to develop normally; they fear abnormality and hope that their children will become exceptional. Here, the category of autism gives rise to both fear and hope.

Like Mira's mother, Jacob's mother does not worry much about academic matters. As we have seen, she describes how Jacob reads and writes on his own initiative. She also sees potential in his passions and way of playing with Lego:

As long as he's motivated, he's doing well. It's not as if he sits still all day, but he can sit for a while and just concentrate on something. He also sits down with a book; I don't know if he reads it, but he sits quietly and looks or he plays with Lego. He's good at building and inventing. I don't think there're any problems with him in terms of learning.

(Jacob's mother)

In this way, Jacob's mother also identifies a passion-driven ability to concentrate and a potential to become an inventor. According to her, whether this is realized or not also depends on the school. She trusts that the school will focus on learning styles so that they can catch his attention and he can learn. I asked her where she expected Jacob to be in 20 years. The answer expresses hope:



I think he's a craftsman or doing an engineering degree. He's very interested in both. Something practical and something he can get his hands on and build. Entrepreneur perhaps rather than engineer. I also think he could sit with thick books and study.

(Jacob's mother)

Again, we see a mother who believes that her child can be more successful than she is if his passions and special interests are nurtured – not only at home but also in school. Moreover, the mother indirectly emphasizes Jacob's paternal kinship, as his father holds a master's degree and was building a house for the family at the time of the fieldwork.

Silas's mother is also not too concerned about her son's academic development. She believes Silas is smart, because he knows the numbers, he knows the songs, and he can explain things. Like several of the other parents, however, Silas's mother is afraid of destroying his motivation by focusing too much on academic preparations for school: "If he wants to learn, I'll let him. He can't write his name, but he knows the numbers because he finds them exciting". Here too, we see that the child's passion is perceived as a guiding star. The starting point for learning must be what Silas finds exciting rather than predefined, external goals.

One day, the big kids group, two pedagogues and I visited Silas and his mother at home. At one point, the adults talked about Silas's future. His mother said that Silas dreamt of living in a multi-storey house. "Now we understand his comment as we passed Mathias's house on the way here", said one of the pedagogues. "Yes, he must become an architect; he goes into such detail", said the other. "Yes", the mother responded happily. "Alternatively, a landscape architect", continued the first pedagogue. "That would be nice too", said the mother, "and a craftsman or carpenter - something practical - would also be good".

Here, a potential in Silas's autism-like penchant for detail (cf. Ochs et al., 2004) is brought to the fore. During a later interview, I inquired further about the mother's thoughts on Silas's future. This time, she replied that she could imagine him wanting to work with animals because he is very fond of animals. I asked if that was her dream scenario for him:

I just want him to get some kind of education. I almost don't care what it is, as long as it's something he thinks is good. Anything with crafts would be great, but I rather doubt it. He doesn't have what it takes. Right now, I'm thinking it must be something to do with animals.

(Silas's mother)

Once again, we see that a child's interests give rise to a degree of hope. The idea is that, if children's interests are nurtured at home and in school, they can make something of themselves. In all three cases, we see that academic motivation is perceived as something internal, related to the child's special nature. In addition, there is a belief that parents as well as teachers must approach the child correctly if the child is to reach its full potential.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have explored the concept of parental determinism and identified two forms that correspond to the two bodies that parents and children share. On the one hand, classic psychologically inspired parental determinism focuses on what parents do and how they can influence their children's development. On the other hand, genetic determinism focuses on what children have inherited biologically from their parents and cannot be changed. The first is based on the pursuit of predefined childrearing goals and principles, while the second identifies the child's nature and passions – based on behavioural and kinship analysis – and then outlines childrearing strategies that can support the child in realizing its potential.

Genetic determinism and a psychiatric way of thinking dominate the empirical material analysed here. The biological dimensions of kinship are accentuated when a child raises concern and is considered at risk. Among the families in the study, risk consciousness is possibilistic rather than probabilistic, as is characteristic of parenting culture more widely (Lee et al., 2014). Possible risks are identified before they even emerge as actual problems. At the same time, vulnerabilities are stratified by class even though they are not explained by class. Thus, it is hardly coincidental that we find a strong risk consciousness among the families analysed here, defined by the pedagogues as ordinary people.

A lower-class position combined with a genetic condition might have been expected to lead the parents to succumb to fatalism, powerless in the face of natural growth – an understanding that Lareau identifies as characteristic of lower-class parents. Nevertheless, that is not what happens. The ideals around concerted cultivation and intensive parenting endure or are even strengthened. However, class is a relative phenomenon, with every field containing higher, middle and lower positions. In this study, one family has a relatively strong position in terms of economic capital and three of the families in terms of education, while the final family has neither of these advantages.

The possibilistic risk consciousness found among most parents in this study nurtures a kind of intensive parenting resembling that of cultural elites in Scandinavia, namely a passion-based approach. As we have seen, deviation is not only associated with fear but also with hope. This implies a parental responsibility that would otherwise seem to have been relieved by diagnostic thinking. Although parents cannot change their child's genetic makeup, they can adapt their childrearing accordingly. The belief is that if the child's special nature and passions are identified and approached correctly, then something exceptional may happen. If not, things can go terribly wrong. Thus, the expectations placed on good parents have not decreased, but simply changed. While classic parental determinism is characterized by a shift in focus from impossible children to impossible parents, the focus here is on special children. Moreover, childhood determinism is not only linked to parental determinism but also institutional determinism, at least in the Danish welfare state context. Not only do parents feel obliged to consider their child's special nature, they expect ECEC institutions and schools to do the same.

Discussing different forms of determinism, one may ask what happened to the focus on children's agency and perspectives that was so central to the sociological child research paradigm of the 1990s, as well as, for instance, to the revised Danish day-care act. Determinism is an analytical concept used to capture how adults think about children's behaviour and development. However, it is important not to "write children off", as Macvarish (2014) puts it. We need to consider what children are trying to express when they behave in ways that adults consider inappropriate. This applies to parents and childhood professionals' when they increasingly use understandings drawn from the field of psychiatry as well as to researchers using the concept of determinism. In all cases, there

is a risk of overlooking children's perspectives and reducing them to objects for scientific categorization and scientism.

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