

Scientific Parenting?

What Parents Worry about and What Sources of Information They Use

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Abstract. Scientists note that the dominant ideology for raising children today is intensive parenting. One of the key prerequisites underlying this ideology is that in child-rearing a parent should be guided by expert knowledge. In this context, educational programs for parents and parental self-education are being actively developed. However, the informational inquiries of parents have not been suf-

ficiently studied. What sources do parents use? At which points is information about the upbringing of children most needed? In this paper we look at what sources of information related to children (education, health, etc.) parents use and what questions they are concerned about. The paper is based on an online survey of mothers and fathers of children aged from one to 12 years. We show that the intensity of use of different sources of information is related to the age of a child: one can single out peaks of “confusion” associated with certain stages in a child’s life: the first six months of her or his life and the 6–7 year old age (preparation for school), with a relatively calm period (when a child is 4–5 years old) between them.

Keywords: scientific parenting, intensive parenting, informational inquiries of parents, educational programs for parents.

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Recently, the number of various educational resources for parents has been growing: educational programs and courses for parents, including those financed by the state [Polivanova et al. 2015]. The amount of experts in the child rearing and development process is also actively increasing [Strelnik 2015; Mayofis, Kukulin 2010], in particular in new areas of expertise (for example, babywearing, breastfeeding techniques etc.).

Researchers consider the orientation toward expert knowledge regarding the child rearing process as one of the imperatives of intensive motherhood—today’s dominant ideology of child rearing [Hays 1998;

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Furedi 2001; Lee 2008, Lee et al. 2014, Macvarish 2014]. According to this ideology, “methods of appropriate child-rearing are construed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive” [Hays, 1998]. The term “intensive parenting” is intensively used in the literature: the influential ideology also begins to spread across fathers [Shirani, Henwood, Coltart 2012; Craig, Powell, Smyth 2014].

According to the intensive parenting model, parents are responsible for everything that happens to the child. Within this ideology framework it is assumed that parents’ actions have a decisive influence on the child’s development (*parental determinism*) [Bruer 1999; Furedi 2001; Macvarish, Lee, Lowe 2014], and “improper” parenting breeds grounds for many social problems [Faircloth 2014].

It is not the only one, but one of the key requirements of the intensive parenting ideology is the expert knowledge orientation assuming that parents must develop various complex skills and knowledge in the field of child rearing with the help of expert councils [Chernova, Shpakovskaya 2013; Lee et al. 2014] and base their further decisions on scientifically verified facts. This is so called “*scientific parenting*” [Apple 1995; Faircloth 2010; Lee 2014]. The term is already represented in popular scientific literature for parents. For example, the popular pediatrician Eugene Komarovskiy draws a line between the “outdated” knowledge of relatives about child care, and the “new”, “correct” knowledge of modern doctors: according to his model, the first type of knowledge should be abandoned, while he encourages using the second type as the guideline [Komarovskiy 2017].

The intensive parenting ideology has not been studied in Russia yet but some concepts are becoming more widespread [Polivanova et al. 2015; Strel'nik 2015; Chernova, Shpakovskaya 2013; Godovannaya, Temkina 2017]. In the media and state discourse, child rearing is designed as a mission parents are fully responsible for and they must develop special competencies for its successful implementation [Chernova, Shpakovskaya 2013]; irresponsible parenting is presented as a source of various social problems [Strel'nik 2015].

We conducted a survey among parents to assess to what extent the new parent culture—in particular, its focus on expert knowledge and self-learning programs—has become a part of parental behavior and child rearing practices. How intensively do parents use various educational resources and require expert opinion on the child rearing process? Do they attend special educational programs for parents? Is it possible to talk about scientific parenting while replacing more traditional sources of information such as the advice of relatives or friends with expert opinion? How does the intensity of using different sources of information change depending on the age of the child? What peaks of interest can be distinguished?

1. Survey Methods & Sampling Techniques

Parents' requests for information vary considerably depending on the amount of children in the family and their ages. The sample of the study is parents who have one child between the ages of 1 and 12. Taking into account the limited resources, it was decided to focus on this group of parents.

The online questionnaire survey¹ was conducted in July 2016. More than 2000 people (urban population) were interviewed in total. A specific feature of the survey is the participation both of mothers (1 thousand people) and fathers (1 thousand people), who are generally much less likely than mothers to be surveyed.

There were quotas for the age of the child in the final sample to ensure a representation of parents with children of different ages: a roughly 50–50 split between the proportion of parents of 1 to 6-year-old children and parents of 7 to 12-year-olds. .

The sample was designed in such a way that the distribution of respondents by type of urban settlement (Moscow, other cities with more than 1 million inhabitants, cities with less than 1 million inhabitants) was proportional to the distribution of the urban population of the Russian Federation, since the sources of information on the child rearing and development available for parents may vary according to the size of the city.

The final distribution of respondents by type of locality practically coincides with the target data (Table 1). Figures 1–3 show the final sample characteristics in comparison with the total population of the Russian Federation: age, level of income and education. The average age mothers have their first child coincides within our sample with the average age for Russia—25 years old [Zakharov 2016: 122]. Unfortunately, due to the lack of relevant open data on the Russian Population Census, we cannot compare our sample in terms of income and education level with one-child families across the Russian Federation to estimate the bias more accurately.

2. Survey results

2.1. Questions parents have about their child: when, and what kind

Parents were asked an open-ended question requiring them to formulate their own questions and to code the answers afterwards. Respondents were asked to specify several issues related to child rear-

¹ In 2016, 70% of households in Russia had Internet access (using materials of the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM): http://wciom.ru/news/ratings/polzovanie_internetom/), so we assumed that it is available to the majority of parents. To conduct the online questionnaire survey, an online panel developed by *OMI (Online Market Research)* company was used (the database of potential respondents of different sex, age, living in different regions of Russia). The online panel quality was confirmed by independent audit, which proved the highest standards of participants' integrity: the database represents the lowest percentage rate in Russia of those respondents who fill out questionnaires too quickly or fall for the trick questions: http://www.omirussia.ru/ru/online_panels/panel_quality/

Table 1. Study participant distribution by cities with different population sizes (%)

	Urbanization rate in Russian Federation	Response rate
Moscow	12	10
Other cities with more than 1 million inhabitants	19	15
Cities with less than 1 million inhabitants	68	75
Total (person)	2047	

Fig. 1. Study participant distribution by age

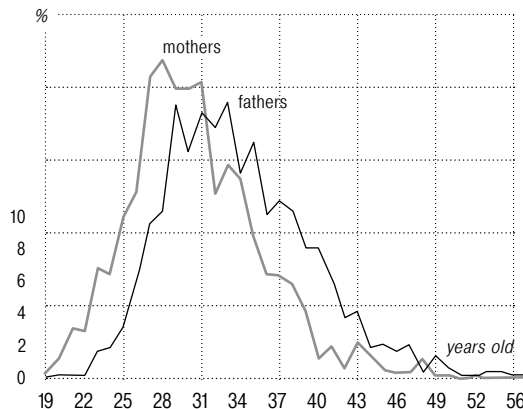


Fig. 2. Study participant distribution by income level (average monthly income per person during the last six months) in comparison with the total population of the Russian Federation, according to Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) data for 2016 (% of respondents, thousand rubles)

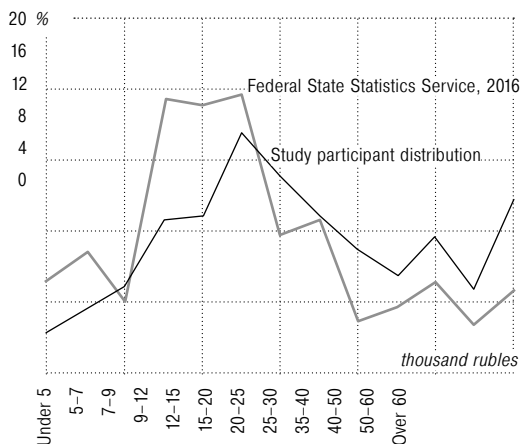
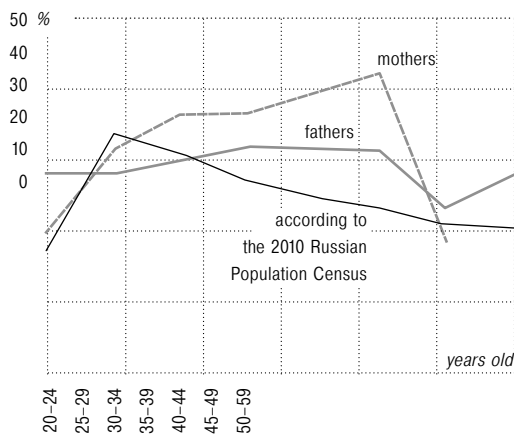


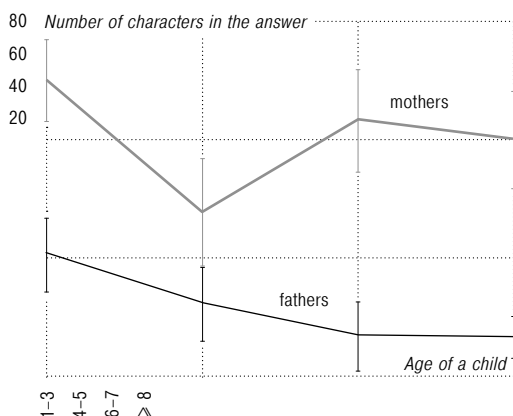
Fig. 3. Study participant distribution by level of education (higher education, % of respondents) in comparison with the total population of the Russian Federation, according to the 2010 Russian Population Census



ing that they had worried about in the past year. Mothers formulated on average more questions than fathers (2.6 and 2 questions, respectively, the differences are statistically significant, $p < 0,05$).

The range of topics parents are concerned about is very wide. Firstly, there are a lot of questions about a child's body and how to care for it: health care, bad habits, hygiene, disease prevention strategies,

Fig. 4. Question length correlation depending on the age of a child



physiology developmental milestones, first aid, and how to search for qualified medical care. Secondly, there are questions about the child development stages, deviations from mental health, addictions (for example, of computer), and supporting physical and psychological development (search for a speech therapist, a defectologist). Thirdly, parents want to learn how to build relationships within the family (between parents after divorce, with grandparents) and at school (conflicts with peers). In more than half of the cases, parents are interested in techniques to shape the child's behavior: how to rouse a love for learning, how to deal with laziness, how to discipline children, etc. Another group of questions is devoted to the organization of education—access to the system of general and supplementary education, the choice of kindergarten, school, hobby groups and sports groups, and the general academic success of the child.

The number of questions asked by the parent is related to his or her involvement in the child rearing process: the more often the mother or father does some activities together with the child (read out loud, tell stories, do sports, sing songs, and discuss something), the more questions they came up with (correlation coefficient 0.1, $p < 0,01$).

The request for further information clearly changes depending on the age of the child (Figure 4). The older the child is, the less questions the parent formulates (correlation coefficient -0.1 , $p < 0,001$). There is also a negative correlation between the number of questions and the age of the parent indicated in the questionnaire (correlation coefficient is also -0.1 , $p < 0,001$).

Since the parents' issues can be either very general (how to play with the child) or, conversely, narrow (how to stop a runny nose), we used as an indicator of parent interest not only the number of ques-

tions they have, but also the text length when answering the question (the total number of signs), assuming that the more interested the parent is, the more detailed answers he or she will write.

On average, fathers give less detailed information than mothers in terms of the length of the text. The dynamics of this indicator also differs among mothers and fathers. While the length of the text gradually decreases among fathers, it increases among mothers, depending on the age of the child. Thus, concerns about child rearing issues are not as universal as is represented in several key papers on intensive parenting (for example, F. Furedi uses the term *paranoid parenting* to describe parents who are constantly concerned about child rearing issues [Furedi 2001]). The degree and content of this concern varies among mothers and fathers, as well as among parents of children of different ages.

2.2. Sources of information used by parents

There were some questions in the questionnaire designed to specify the sources of information on child rearing and the frequency of use: with whom do parents discuss the issues related to the child?; do they read popular scientific literature or/and watch TV programs, etc? Parents were also asked to evaluate the listed sources of information on the degree of trust. There were also questions on psychologist visiting practices and on participation in online forums and communities in the questionnaire designed only for mothers.

The intensity of using the certain sources of information by parents depends on many factors (Table 1 in the appendices). Parents living together, as well as parents demonstrating involvement at home by reading the bedtime stories, hugging, etc., on average, use more various sources of information on child development. It is relevant both for parents of preschoolers and of school students. The higher the cultural capital level² is, the greater is the probability the mother has used the psychological counselling services on issues related to the child rearing. At the same time, parents living outside of Moscow, as well as fathers who do not have steady work and are characterized by a relatively low cultural capital level, demonstrate the activity decline in using sources of information on child rearing, which significantly reduces as the child grows older.

The vast majority of the respondents have discussed issues related to their child during the last month with the child's mother or father, with acquaintances or friends, with their own parents (Table 2). About half of the parents have not consulted any professionals during the last month—doctors, early years teachers, school teachers. Forums or Internet communities are less popular among parents to discuss child-related issues. It is also worth mentioning that this source

² The cultural capital level was assessed using several questions: reading literature in foreign languages and theaters, museums, concerts visit frequency.

Table 2. Child-related issues discussed by parents last month
(% of respondents, bold indicates the most popular answers)

	Mothers		Fathers	
	1-6-year-old child	7-12-year-old child	1-6-year-old child	7-12-year-old child
With friends and acquaintances	94%	94%	78%	77%
With own parents	92%	85%	87%	84%
With child's mother/father	85%	71%	96%	94%
With doctors	65%	45%	62%	45%
With parents of child's mother/father	53%	37%	59%	53%
With early years teachers and school teachers	45%	42%	49%	50%
Within Internet communities or with forum participants	42%	33%	19%	19%
Average number of selected options	5	4	4	4
Total (person)	519	514	500	498

of information is used more often by parents who live in cities with more than 1 million inhabitants (9.6% of parents are from Moscow, 8.2% of parents are from other cities with more than 1 million inhabitants, 7.6% are from other cities, the differences are statistically significant, $p < 0,05$).

At the same time, the older the child is, the less mothers seek advice from relatives or experts (teachers, doctors) (the differences are statistically significant, $p < 0,05$). The average number of sources mothers refer to also decreases as the child grows older: mothers who have a 1 to 6-year-old child, chose five options on average, while mothers of school students chose four. The discussion of child-related issues with friends and acquaintances is most popular option among mothers (more than 90%) and its popularity doesn't depend on the age of the child. As for the fathers, the child's mother is the TOP-interlocutor (more than 90%).

As well as discussions with professionals and people parents trust, there are other sources of information on child rearing that parents refer to: 83% of mothers and 60% of fathers have read printed or online articles about child rearing, development and care at least once in the last month, 67% of mothers and 60% of fathers have watched TV programs on related issues, and 87% of mothers of children under the age of 6 have read at least three times in the last month (the differences are statistically significant, $p < 0,05$), which is the highest result among the respondents.

As for online forums and communities for parents, the majority of the interviewed mothers (75%) spend at least 10 minutes per day on them (for example, social networks, LiveJournal, *babyblog.ru* Internet-community). However, only 8% of parents (11% of mothers and 4% of fathers) actively participate in online communities: they have consulted community members or have commented on posts of other participants 3 times or more in the last month. The older the child is, the lower the likelihood of its mother following parental Internet communities or forums: on the one hand, 87% of mothers who have a 1-year-old child follow such sites, while on the other hand only 57% of mothers who have children between the ages 11 and 12 are followers.

The inner circle was assessed (primarily by fathers) as the most reliable source of information on child rearing and development. Even in the case of medical treatment, disease prevention and vaccination, a large number of parents trust non-professionals—their parents, friends and acquaintances, and their spouse. As for the treatment decisions, 70% of mothers trust doctors and 41% trust their parents, while 66% of the fathers trust doctors and 61% trust the child's mother (Table 2–5 in the appendices). The amount of mothers who trust early years teachers, school teachers, psychologists, and popular science literature for parents regarding child rearing and development issues is only half that of those who trust the child's father or their own parents (the difference is even greater among the fathers).

Thus, our research has represented that expert opinion and expert literature are not the most important sources of information for parents. Parents tend to use a wide variety of sources of information and do not always trust experts more than their husband/wife or their own parents. At the same time, the higher the cultural capital level of parents is and the stronger the family ties are (parents live together, interact regularly with the child), the wider the variety of sources of information used by parents is. The increasing frequency of use of these sources also depends on these factors, regardless of the age of the child.

2.3. Attending educational programs for parents

The proportion of parents who wish to attend educational programs for parents does not change, regardless of the age of the child: it is more than 50% among mothers and more than 40% among fathers before the child reaches the age of 12 years. However, they do attend educational programs before the birth of the child, during pregnancy (Figure 5).

There are a large number of women willing to join educational programs among those who have already attended such programs (Figure 6). About a third of the women and about half of the men who participated at the survey have never attended such programs and are not going to. Those parents who would like to attend educational programs, on average, possess more books about child rearing and care. There are 28% of parents willing to attend educational pro-

Fig. 5. Response rate of parents attending educational programs (%)

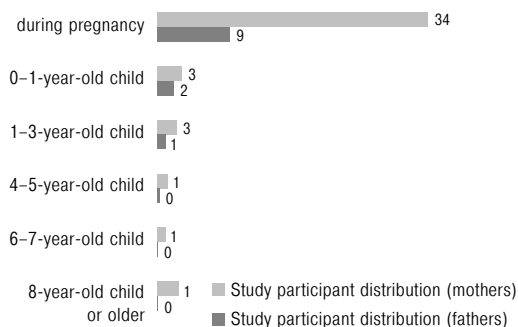
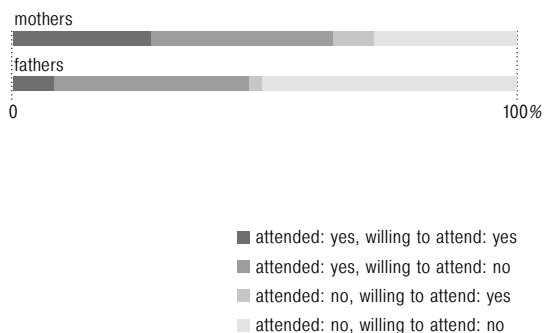


Fig. 6. Response rate of parents attending educational programs and willing to attend them in future (%)



grams among those who are the participants of some Internet forums or communities, while there are 14% of parents among those who do not follow any of them. Parents who would like to attend educational programs discuss issues related to the child more often with the early years teachers and school teachers, with doctors and other parents via forums and online communities, they read books, articles and watch TV programs about child rearing, development and care more often.

Thus, the parents who educate themselves about child rearing are more interested in educational programs for parents.

3. Conclusions

Our research represents how the vast majority of parents are in search of information on child-related issues and can refer to different sources: professionals, relatives, acquaintances, books about child rearing and development, online forums and communities, and TV programs. Most parents use the particular set of sources of information they trust in.

The intensity of using different sources of information as well as the desire to attend educational programs for parents, decreases as the child grows older. The number of child-related issues significant for parents also reduces. But there is the exception when children are going on to enroll at school (6–7 years): during this period parents have many questions and the quest for information is greater. As for educational programs for parents, they are attended mainly before the birth of the child. We assume that the lack of free time and financial resources which may take place after the birth of the child are not the only reason parents quit attending educational programs. It can be assumed that before the birth of a child parents were interested in general information about infants (there are prenatal courses for future

parents to answer such questions), while after the birth of the child parents are more interested in specific issues concerning their own child, their family situation etc. It means that educational programs with general information become less relevant to them.

When designing some educational activities for parents, as well as when developing information content for them, it is necessary to take into account some important features of their requests for information on child rearing and development. Firstly, the most common sources of information for most parents, especially for fathers, are people from their inner circle: their own parents, a spouse, friends and acquaintances. Even in case of medical treatment, a large number of parents trust their closest relatives, which is comparable to the percentage rate of those parents who trust professionals. Other sources (psychologists, popular science literature, online forums or communities for parents, TV programs about child rearing, development and care) are used more often by parents with higher education and those who live in large cities. Secondly, there are more parents willing to attend educational programs among those one who have already used some sources of information about child-related issues. A third of all parents would like to attend educational programs have already attended such programs previously. So, the parents educating themselves about child rearing are more interested in educational programs. Thirdly, parents who live together, interact regularly with the child and who have a steady work, use information sources on child-related issues more actively than others. In particular, the percentage rate of those parents who have attended educational programs or willing to attend them is higher among this group of parents.

The collected data do not allow us to draw conclusions concerning the use of knowledge from different sources: for example, do parents put into practice the advice of relatives in the same way as recommendations from popular science literature? In addition, we do not know the content of the advice of relatives? It is likely that they share the information received from popular science literature, medical articles, etc.

Thus, the conducted study allowed us to assume that such fundamental requirements of the intensive parenting ideology as the expert knowledge orientation and professional support in raising children are underrepresented among child rearing practices among different groups of parents in Russia.

There is also a challenge for educational programs' design and curriculum for those parents who actively educate themselves: what kind of information are they interested in apart from the information they can find by themselves? Another challenge is to draw less active and less "advantaged" parents' attention (assuming that each modern parent is required to have a high level of parental competence) and to remove barriers (economic, geographical, etc.) to educational programs. One of the possible solutions to this is the focus shift from

“translating” information to being more diversified in terms of format and content solutions, allowing interaction with such a heterogeneous group as parents (see, for example, [Polivanova et al. 2015]).

Appendices Table 1. **Books or articles about child’s development and education read by parents per last month (%)**

	Mothers, response rate		Fathers, response rate	
	1-6-year-old child	7-12-year-old child	1-6-year-old child	7-12-year-old child
3 times or more	41	24	17	10
1-2 times	46	56	48	44
Never	14	21	35	46

Table 2. **Trust in different sources of information on treatment decisions regarding children (%)**

	Mothers, response rate	Fathers, response rate
Child’s mother or father	21	61
Parents of the child’s mother or father	17	19
Own parents	42	28
Doctors	70	66
Acquaintances or friends	23	12
Psychologists	5	5
Internet communities or forum participants	7	4
Early years teachers and school teachers	2	4
Popular science literature for parents (books, articles on the Internet, magazines and newspapers)	14	10
TV programs about the child rearing, care and education	8	6

Table 3. Trust in different sources of information on child rearing and development (%)

	Mothers, response rate	Fathers, response rate
Child's mother or father	47	70
Parents of the child's mother or father	19	27
Own parents	49	42
Doctors	17	11
Acquaintances or friends	10	7
Psychologists	14	8
Internet communities or forum participants	18	17
Early years teachers and school teachers	23	25
Popular science literature for parents (books, articles on the Internet, magazines and newspapers)	21	14
TV programs about the child rearing, care and education	10	8
Other	1	0
I do not trust any sources	4	3

Table 4. Trust in different sources of information on peer relationships (%)

	Mothers, response rate	Fathers, response rate
Child's mother or father	42	56
Parents of the child's mother or father	18	22
Own parents	39	29
Doctors	27	18
Acquaintances or friends	5	5
Psychologists	13	8
Internet communities or forum participants	22	19
Early years teachers and school teachers	26	27
Popular science literature for parents (books, articles on the Internet, magazines and newspapers)	17	9
TV programs about the child rearing, care and education	8	6
Other	1	0
I do not trust any sources	4	6

Table 5. Trust in different sources of information on learning and education (%)

	Mothers, response rate	Fathers, response rate
Child's mother or father	42	56
Parents of the child's mother or father	16	17
Own parents	39	29
Doctors	27	18
Acquaintances or friends	5	4
Psychologists	11	8
Internet communities or forum participants	12	11
Early years teachers and school teachers	39	37
Popular science literature for parents (books, articles on the Internet, magazines and newspapers)	20	16
TV programs about the child rearing, care and education	10	10
Other	1	1
I do not trust any sources	5	6

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