



**DO YOU
SEE THOSE
PARENTS?**

A GUIDE FOR
PROFESSIONAL WORK
WITH PARENTS

Pieter Remmerswaal & Ad de Gouw

'Do you see those parents?'

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About the title and content

This book is a translation of the Dutch version which was edited in 2017 (and reprinted in 2019 and 2020) with the title: "Snap jij die ouders? Basisboek professioneel werken met ouders."

This study book is used in a number of universities in Belgium, Holland and on Dutch Caribbean islands. In the course of an international parenting program of different universities in Europe, participants inquired repeatedly about an English version of our book. This edition answers to that question.

But how to translate the different meanings of the first part of the Dutch title into proper English? And also in such a way it can be well understood in other European countries as the special focus of this book? Let us take you shortly along our process of decision making, how to translate the above title.

The second part of the title is the easiest to translate: A guide for professional work with parents. Let us be clear from the start: This book is not about helping parents raising their children. About the content later more, but now shortly about the first part of the Dutch title which seems to have much more possibilities for translation. "Do you understand those parents?", would be a first option. This can be read as an invitation to try and understand parents, parenthood or parenting of a person, a couple or a group. The first title part in the Dutch version often has an association of difficulty how to understand parents. Or even stronger: the underlying connotation of this question of quickly criticizing their actions and even the tendency to blame them. This question we often heard from students, social workers and from members of different professions in multidisciplinary consulting teams. Our question in reaction : "What is your view of these parents?", was very often followed by a rather negative view on their parenting, based on the assumption: "Why don't they see the needs of their child?" Apparently for a professional it is more common to keep in mind the vulnerability of a child than that of a parent. The

challenge for a great number of care workers who meet children and their parents seems obviously: how to be open minded towards parents?

Professionally and parent focussed working with parents is, to our opinion, a question of perspective of the professional. We all tend to look at parents firstly from our professional view on the needs of a child, we call that the child-perspective. But parenthood is more than bringing up a child or knowing how to help them in their growth, also called parenting. Although parents themselves also see as their core business: raising and educating their own child, they are also individuals, partners, family members and a number of other social roles as a member of the society. For that reason we did choose as the main title: "Do you see those parents?" For trying to take their perspective is primarily seeing their normal daily struggle, with their specific circumstances, their personalities, their histories, their beliefs, their doubts and weaknesses and, last but not least, their possibilities. So, this book does not consider the question: "How to help parents to become better educators?" We try to avoid the word parenting and if we do so in this book, we use it in the meaning of educating their child. But once again, that is not the main focus of this book. Trying to help professionals to support parents in their improving of strength in their parenthood is our first goal.

Every family has its own culture, and every person is part of more cultures, local, regional, national and even international. Cultural aspects always count, also in parenthood, but discussing them all would result in a very different content of this book. We try to give general support to students and workers of very different professions and in very different countries and cultures. We do not mention those separately, but we focus in this book on aspects of parenthood which are more or less universal, without generalising parenthood in all different countries and cultures. Our experiences in working with parents was mainly in Holland and Western Europe, so our examples are mostly from this cultural background. We use them not as the example for others how to work, of how to treat parents, but to explain our use in practice of the theory on parenthood which inspired us for so many years. We hope that reading about the use of this theory and our experiences with it will offer support and inspiration to a great number of care workers and professionals in very different disciplines in their daily work. And especially for lecturers, teachers

and trainers of students and coaches of professionals who work with children and subsequently with parents to help them to improve their professional attitude toward parents.

About the authors

Pieter Remmerswaal was for a long period parent counsellor, family therapist, training coordinator and senior supervisor in ambulatory and residential child and adolescent psychiatry and trainer/supervisor/coach in his own practice. He was co-founder and deputy editor-in-chief of 'Ouderschapskennis' (Professional Magazine 'Knowledge of parenthood'), formerly 'Ouderschap & Ouderbegeleiding' (Parenthood & Parental Guidance).

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Ad de Gouw worked as a child care worker, parent- and family-counsellor, senior coach and supervisor in ambulatory and residential youth care and was the editorial secretary of the Professional Magazine Knowledge of parenthood (see above) He has also been a foster parent for many years.

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Both authors published a number of articles on parenthood in the Dutch spoken regions. They were guest lecturers at various universities in Holland and Europe. They offered, among other courses, the family counselling training in the Post Master Study for health care psychologists of the Central RINO group in Utrecht/ University of Leiden (Holland).

Thanking for support, feedback and inspiration

We especially wish to thank a few people for their contribution to this translation.

Pieter de Gouw is a coach and instructor, specialised in aiding horses and their riders in finding relaxation and cooperation. Pieter has a background in Animal

Sciences, HR management and systemic coaching. But most of all, Pieter is a husband and a father to his 2 year old son and expecting another child early 2022.

Hanneke Miley, obtained her Master's degree in Social Work in the United States and worked for many years as a parent counsellor in a Medical Children's Day Care Centre in the Netherlands. Since 2005, she has been an editor of the international issues of the Dutch professional Magazine Knowledge of parenthood.

We especially wish to remember and thank *Alice van der Pas*, PhD, MSW (1934-2017) for pioneering the development of her theory of parenthood and methodology for professional work with parents. With her many publications, she has been our main source of inspiration in various phases of our work as professionals, supervisors, lecturers, trainers, authors and editors.

February 2022,

Pieter Remmerswaal & Ad de Gouw

Introduction

Dealing professionally with parents

A columnist, Ibithal Jadib (2021), writes in a Dutch newspaper about parents and school in these Covid-19 years: 'I think school doors will be closed for parents for a longer period, as it is much more quiet for teachers. They will never give it words, but every teacher knows: "parents are awful creatures"'. Of course a columnist can write a bit provokingly, generalising and teacher-blaming about her experience as a mother. But with this expression she also touches to the experience of a number of parents about the tendency of parent blaming by some child focussed professionals.

We all tend to judge the behaviour of others. Especially when there are 'children involved' and even more so when we fear that a child's development is at risk. Then the question arises: 'Who is responsible?' We often (and unfortunately sometimes rightly) harshly judge parents and the upbringing of their children. Parental behaviour often evokes strong emotions in ourselves. No matter how old we are, the fact that we were and remain children of our parents makes it easy for us to empathise with the child. This makes it understandable that we can experience these emotions so strongly towards both, parents and children.

In training courses, students and trainees learn from their experiences in talking to parents that they must be careful that these strong emotions do not become the main motive for professional action. Both novice and experienced social workers and service providers also recognise this danger. For every professional who works with children and therefore has to cooperate with parents, it remains difficult, but also necessary, to release or free oneself from these emotions. By 'releasing', we mean recognising those emotions in time and learning to handle them in such a way that they do not guide the professional attitude towards parents and children.

This book advocates alternating between child-oriented and parent-oriented thinking and acting. Many students and colleagues consider themselves sufficiently educated and trained in child-oriented and/or family-oriented work, but feel inadequate in parent-oriented work. There are many books on dealing

professionally with children for parents and professionals. There are considerably fewer books available on dealing professionally with parents and if so, they are often written from a specific (and often child- or family-focused) theoretical framework. This book claims to be parent-oriented, i.e. focused on what motivates parents trying to be a good parent, even if they sometimes fail to do so adequately in their daily parenting practice. In this case, parent-oriented does not mean that we want to offer professionals or parents pedagogical support. There are already many books focussing on that for both parents and professionals.

Parent-oriented is not opposed to child-oriented. Child-centred thinking is assumed to be sufficiently known and practised by the readers of this book. The child perspective, however important from a professional point of view, will therefore be left aside. Being professionally parent-oriented means constantly asking oneself: what does parents move? This book cannot offer a one-size-fits-all answer to that question; parenthood is too complex for that. Parents are a heterogeneous group of adults who only have in common that they have one or more children. Do not expect us to answer all questions about professional communication and cooperation with parents. What this book does offer, with numerous practical examples, are suggestions on how to communicate and cooperate professionally with parents.

About the parental perspective and parent-focussed work

As primarily pedagogically trained workers, many of us are trained to take the child's perspective. 'Perspective (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022) : the way of drawing solid objects, natural scenes etc. on a flat surface, so that they appear to have the correct shape, distance from each other etc.' When we talk about a child's perspective, we are referring to our vision of the child and all the developmental dimensions associated with it. When writing from this perspective, we assume that we, as professionals, also put ourselves in the child's position. As adults, we show empathy with a child and we are trained as experts to know what children need in order to develop undisturbed. In this respect, the child perspective does not only mean the primary needs of children, but also the whole range of facilities and circumstances that guarantee their growing up. And this usually includes the parents. But parents are more than just a circumstance of a child and parents are more than just educators. To look at things from the parents' perspective and thinking from that perspective is trying to think parent-focussed.

How do you train professionals in the parental perspective and parent-focused thinking and acting? You can focus on parents by learning to take their perspective and alternate it with the child-centred perspective. The possibilities of this perspective switch, mentioned below as the repeating challenge of this book, supports working with 'difficult parents'. Or rather, supports us as facilitators of many parents to find working with them less difficult. Without being trained and remaining in the parent-focussed perspective, we were also inclined to ignore or neglect the parental expertise about their child. Or unknowingly inclined to get into conflict with parents. Despite our good intentions and from our child expertise, we tend to blame them for certain behaviour, as if we would be a better parent for their child. Professionals are quick to claim that parents know their child best, but do we actually use that parental knowledge?

Some may now ask what the difference is between child-perspective and child-interest. The word 'interest' suggests that there is a normative, all-encompassing and objective description of what is 'good' for a person or a group of people, independently of individual predispositions, qualities, history and circumstances. For this reason and because the word 'best interests of the child' also suggests an all-encompassing, objective and always valid educational standard, we prefer to avoid using it. After all, in whose eyes do we talk about what is 'good' for whom, in what time and under what circumstances?

The word 'best interests of the child' immediately raises the question of whether there may be an impending violation of what is considered to be 'good'. With the immediately related question of who is responsible for this and who should be held accountable. The terms 'best interests of the child' and 'best interests of the parent' threaten to evoke a conflict of interests, because 'what is good for the child' would be diametrically opposed to 'what is good for the parents'. Another factor is that the term 'parent's interests' often refers to what the parent considers to be 'good' for himself. This is contradicting to the term 'best interest of the child', which is often taken to mean what someone else considers to be 'good for the child'. The many diverse interests of children and parents, and especially how these are related to each other from a parent's perspective, are extensively discussed in this book.

Doesn't taking the parent's perspective lead to the danger of forgetting the child's perspective? As much as working from the latter perspective alone, experiences have taught us. Training yourself in the parental perspective means being able to put yourself in the parents' shoes, without 'walking with them' as it were. And isn't there a danger of over-identification with the child when one only works from their perspective? Repeated training in changing perspectives is recommended for everyone who works with children and therefore also with

parents. It helps to assess the parent-child relationship and your professional working relationship with parents and children with more distance.

In the Preface we especially remembered and thanked Alice van der Pas, Phd, MSW (1934-2017) for developing her theory on parenthood and her method of working professionally with parents. Although her thesis was in English (2003) and there are some English articles and book chapters (1999, 2005, 2011) of her hand, she published her Handbook only in Dutch. One can download an abstract in English of this series of 10 books (2022). To understand this book in front of you well, we refer to her basic theory published in 'The theory of Alice van der Pas, Phd – the "mother" of the parent-centred approach in Holland' (Remmerswaal, 2022).

Basic Theory

To understand her work well we have got to quote some of the basic assumptions of Dr. Van der Pas.

At the start of her series of books she defined parenthood as follows:

“A parent is a person who has an awareness of being responsible for a child, and can never again be indifferent to the child. This kind of 'being responsible' is timeless and unconditional and forms the ethical core of the experience of being a parent, with profound emotional implications.”

It is important to state here that the awareness of being responsible of (nearly) every parent unfortunately does not prevent a parent of acting in an irresponsible way. But even a parent who may have acted irresponsible needs to be approached in a respectful way including the above assumption of having an awareness of being responsible at the moment of meeting the professional.

To help the professional in working with parents to keep this assumption in mind she developed and described what she called “the parent guiding position” (Remmerswaal, 2015). This position includes starting from and constantly checking several assumptions in the attitude towards parents:

Assumption 1: The parent has an awareness of being responsible for a child (timeless and unconditional)

The awareness of being responsible is an assumption, not a proof of conduct or morality. Those proofs the parent does not have to give to a professional

worker, only in the case when he or she works in a sector connected to a Court of justice. It is a belief system (instead of the most used beliefs in general about parents) which helps the professional to base his attitude. And the 'awareness of being responsible' is not the same as 'acting responsible'. This first assumption is the basic attitude of the theory to keep in mind when talking about the existential relationship between parent and child.

Assumption 2: Parenthood makes vulnerable

We all know that children are vulnerable in their development but it is difficult for most of us to realise that parents in their development are vulnerable as well. The first assumption about the awareness of being responsible already makes them vulnerable, because the rest of their life parents and their children depend strongly on what others do with them, emotionally and in practice. And this while parents are legally responsible until the adulthood of the child. And of course parents are also vulnerable because of their own human restrictions and circumstances.

Assumption 3: The parent you are talking with is a consult seeker and (mostly) legally responsible for the child

That parents are legally responsible (unless there is a court-decision which took this responsibility away from them) does not need further discussion. But this fact has as a consequence that all professionals who work with children have to be responsible and are accountable to parents. (And not the other way around like we easily tend to do.) To help us to realise that, Dr. Van der Pas reminded us to view parents as consult seekers. Which, by the way, also makes them vulnerable towards experts, professionals in media and policy. For their seeking of help is primarily for their child, not for themselves, but as a parent.

Starting from those 3 assumptions includes that one meets a parent in a non-hierarchical relationship, but one that is based on partnership in which the professional stimulates the parent as the conductor of the different processes.

Apart from the above essential 3 assumptions we add two other assumptions Dr. Van der Pas published about.

Assumption 4: There is a difference between parenthood, child rearing and partnership

A parent, if not single, is also a partner. Being a good partner does not include being a good parent. Nearly everyone understands that quite well. It is more difficult to differentiate being a parent from being the educator of a child. Especially in (English) literature and/or research, the word 'parenting' mostly covers both these relationships. But being the educator of a child is a role and only temporary in life, and being a parent is an existential relationship that will

last until death (and according to some also afterwards). We think it is especially important to differentiate the use of the word ‘parenting’ in this way in every field of writing about, and research about or working with parents.

Assumption 5: To be able to communicate professionally with parents one should be trained in taking this parent guiding position and using repeated supervision and/or InterVision

Some critics may remark here the above explanation of her theoretical framework is only parent-centred and explicitly not child focussed. The answer is that Dr. Van der Pas developed the schedule of parenthood as a communication tool (not a diagnostic instrument) for professionals. This schedule helps us to differentiate between the two perspectives.

Schematic conceptualization of parenthood by Dr. Van der Pas

| Work floor | Buffer mechanisms | Circumstances |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Parental_behaviours: | Solidair/supportive community | Child |
| - Safety | | Mother, father |
| - Caretaking | Social network/respite help | Brothers, sisters |
| - Gauging the child | | Grandparents, other family |
| - Demands/expectations | Meta position | Housing, jobs, income |
| - Limiting | | Neighbours, rural area, city |
| | | Cult. differences, religion |
| <i>Timing & dosage</i> | ‘Good parent’-experiences | Schoolsystem |
| <i>Regulating emotions</i> | | Internet & games |
| | | Soc. media (f.i. mobbing) |
| | | PR for alcohol & brands |
| | | TV nanny’s, etc. |

As we see, the schedule is divided into 3 sections:

Parental work floor

In the left column, called the parental work floor, Dr. Van der Pas describes 5 basic skills of parents. We all know those skills from different theoretical assumptions, so nothing new about it. Important is that she calls them “parental behaviours” instead of “educational skills”, which last words tends to measure parents in their child focussed skills. With ‘gauging the child’ she meant that parents want to keep an eye on what their child motivates. The two later mentioned (general human) skills have a great influence on all human behaviour but especially on parental behaviour.

From the viewpoint of the study and training of most of us we tend to start from this left section in working with parents. That is common sense, not only because this is where mainly our expertise on child-development is built on, but also because parents themselves tend to ask quickly for solutions on problems on their daily work floor.

But aiming to quick on these daily problems and even giving advice about it from the best intentions towards parents and children, one easily can give the impression to parents that the solution is simple. That is often the case when parents react with a statement like: “It is easy for you to think or answer in this way, because you only know the child for a couple of hours in a certain situation, and that is very different from him being at home!” It shows how differently the professional context and the work floor context is experienced by parents. Further disagreement or even a conflict between professional and parent can be a result of this situation. Starting with talking about parental circumstances is advised by Dr. Van der Pas especially because childrearing and family context are interrelated.

Circumstances

Exploring the circumstances of parents provides a lot of information about their possibilities, but is mainly focussed on facts. Besides it gives information about the (positive or negative) meaning of a certain aspect of its parenthood of each parent. Whether it will be seen as a positive or negative aspect of parenthood is defined by how the experience of the parent is with a particular circumstance.

According to our view every parent wants to talk about his or her child (read above) but instead of taking an attitude of child-expert the schedule advises you to be a researcher on the parental situation, circumstances and experience, different from the work floor. Although most of us, mainly trained in child-

focussed work, tend to see parents primarily as a circumstance of a child, this schedule challenges us to see a child as a circumstance of parenthood! It may sound a bit provocative, but it challenges us to get information of the facts of the child. And about the experience of the parent with all its aspects, and the view of the parent of the child-experience on this specific aspect. Is there one child in the family or more? What is the age of the child and what is the number in the row? What gender is the child and how defining it this for the child and for the parents?

The list of those aspects is nearly endless and gives (apart from the pressure on the parental work floor) also information about the meaning of a great number of circumstances for the parents themselves. It gives information about possibilities of parents, but also about which aspects cause stress.

Buffer mechanisms

To prevent that stress on their work floor and/or stress in their circumstances influences their parenthood, Dr. Van der Pas, developed what she first called moderator mechanisms, but in this schedule: 'buffer mechanisms'. In child-oriented schedules those are mostly called determinants, but Van der Pas thought those words cannot be used for parents because you can hardly view one of your own characteristics as a parent being called as a determinant by someone else. The word "buffering" includes a positive way of a mechanism (i.c. more dynamic and open for change than "determinant") from the question, in what way this mechanism in or around one's parenthood is influenced. When circumstances are facts they hardly can be changed, but one can try to help and change mechanisms of parents, in or around them. Those mechanisms always exist and protect parents more or less in child rearing.

Let us try to explain the core of each of these buffer mechanisms.

A solidair/supportive community, also called the village. (It takes a village to raise a child)

Exploring the experience of parental support including the experience of solidarity starts within the parent-parent relationship. Even when the educational tasks of parents are not equal or well divided, like in case of a divorce, it is important to talk with both parents about their need of solidarity. But exploring the parental experience of solidarity goes further, because it also takes into account the wider family, and also neighbours and friends and