

Let Them Eat Doughnuts: A Defense of Philosophical Parenting

Stephanie Mackler
Ursinus College

Avi Mintz’s “Socrates, Cadmus and the Case for Unphilosophical Parenting” explores with incisive wit the merits of taking an *unphilosophical* approach to parenting. Mintz advocates accepting “one’s cultural ethos” and “adher[ing] to the community’s desires and expectations,” and he calls this unphilosophical approach *Cadmatic*. Importantly, he contrasts this ideal with a contrarian *Socratic* approach and cautions that thinking too much about one’s parenting decisions is not only a threat to one’s “psychological equilibrium,” but it is also likely inconsequential. As one who occasionally feeds my children neon orange cheese curls while they stare mindlessly at the television in egregious violation of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ guidelines for healthy eating and screen time, I appreciate Mintz’s argument. However, I am not yet convinced to relent on the case for philosophical parenting.

First, I have doubts about whether it is possible to adopt a purely *Cadmatic* approach. If we consider other red state parents to be Mintz’s community, then to be *Cadmatic* is to allow pediatric doughnut consumption. But what might it mean to be *Cadmatic* if one’s community itself is *Socratic*? To be *Cadmatic* among his Philosophy of Education Society (PES) friends, Mintz would have to inquire into the virtues (or lack thereof) of doughnuts. Alternatively, we might say that among contrarians, the only way to be contrarian is to be *Cadmatic* relative to some external community. From this it would follow that Mintz is *Socratic* in relation to the PES community by being *Cadmatic* in relation to his red state peers. Indeed, Mintz arrives at his argument in favor of *Cadmatism* through philosophical inquiry. I offer this puzzle not to mock or undermine Mintz’s argument, but rather, to point out a possible tension within it.

This tension exists not only because Mintz is a philosopher, but also

because a kind of doubtful, uncertain parenting is *the* parenting culture today. While Mintz's ruminations about the doughnut were no doubt philosophical, I want to suggest that the kind of fretful mentality that results in angst over a simple decision like whether to allow a "high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar" snack is emblematic of today's *anxious* parenting culture. It is *anxious* parenting rather than any sort of rampant *philosophical* parenting that Mintz is—or should be—worried about. And here is where I think Mintz's argument is right, but the target of his critique might be wrong. Mintz posits his argument as a possible response to arguments in favor of philosophical child-rearing. Yet, I think his argument joins the recent slew of works that document and reject anxious parenting, including *Perfect Madness*, *Overwhelmed*, *All Joy and No Fun*, *Small Animals*, *Do Parents Matter?*, and *Paranoid Parenting*.¹

My most recent favorite book within this genre, Jennifer Traig's, *Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting*, offers a satirical commentary on cultural practices and, in so doing, illuminates the absurdity of the overthinking parenting culture. Following Traig's logic, parents can feed children junk food with peace of mind knowing that within the last several centuries experts (including John Locke!) disapproved of feeding children fruit and approved of giving them alcohol.² Books like Traig's support Mintz's argument that parents should make decisions "with reference to the time and place in which they live," regardless of how absurd those decisions seem from a distance. No matter how many books I read about tiger parents in China, babies left to nap alone in sub-zero temperatures in Denmark, or independence-fostering parents in Germany, I'm still an American parent stuffing my kids' faces at half-time at the pee-wee soccer game—and that's just fine.

I admit that the above caricature of fretful parenting as *the* parenting norm stands in contrast with Mintz's account of the state of existential peace of his red state, doughnut-eating contemporaries. It would be wrong to suggest that *everyone* is anxious. Nonetheless, while there may be some carefree parents out there, there is also clear evidence that many parents today (particularly but not exclusively those in the middle and upper-middle classes) are steeped in a suffocating anxious parenting culture. To be Cadmatic is thus to be consumed

with uncertainty about every decision. Under these conditions, I am not sure it is possible to surrender to some idealized notion of community norms, at least not without a detour through the kind of questioning in which Mintz engages.

Even if we could magically transport ourselves out of anxiety and into Cadmatic parenting, I want to raise concerns about Mintz's rationale that we can relax because parenting decisions rarely affect long-term outcomes anyway. While I find this logic and the evidence Mintz provides for it compelling and relieving, I worry that it frames the parent-child relationship in technical, instrumental terms. As many philosophy of education scholars have convincingly argued, contemporary parenting has been reduced to technique, thus limiting parents' ability to handle the unpredictable and rendering them dependent on experts.³ Whether a doughnut will lower my child's IQ, as some researchers might suggest, is not the point.⁴ Rather, reflecting on what it means to live a good life within the context of a child-rearing relationship is a good in itself, even if we cannot prove causality about outcomes.

And this brings me to the question of the merits of philosophical parenting. I worry that in equating philosophical thinking with Socratic questioning, Mintz limits what we mean by *philosophical parenting*. If we only characterize philosophy as Socratic contrariness, we risk forgetting that we engage in philosophy to live well. Mintz does acknowledge that Socratic parents "take responsibility for their children's moral formation" and are concerned with normative questions, but his inquiry heavily emphasizes Socratic rebelliousness. Fully Socratic inquiry about food choices would require asking what we mean by good health, what the ideal community is, what is fair to one's child, etc., and such inquiry differs from a rejection of doughnuts in a snub-your-nose contrarian way. Or, leaving aside Socrates, we might ask what an Aristotelian view of parenting would look like, or consider a hermeneutic approach that frames parenting as world-making, as I have argued elsewhere.⁵ All of which is to say that, rather than argue against philosophical parenting, perhaps we need to inquire further into what philosophical parenting is.

Yet, before we jump on that scholarly bandwagon, there is one more needling argument Mintz makes that I must address. While it is all well and

good to agree that parents ought to philosophize, Mintz makes an important argument that philosophical thinking can leave parents “exhausted.” I agree with him wholeheartedly. Yet, if we say that the philosophical life for a parent is undesirable, then does it follow that the philosophical life for any human being is also undesirable? Is Mintz making an argument against philosophy itself because it is simply too tiring? He is not. Indeed, Mintz acknowledges that a Socratic approach might be acceptable if it is “done well,” and he wishes for the “courage to parent Socratically when the situation calls for it.” So it seems to me that the real question is what it means to parent philosophically and when and how—not whether—one should do so. Ultimately, Mintz recommends a qualified Socratic approach to answer this question: *be Socratic but in reasonable relation to one’s community*. In so doing, Mintz seems to land on a kind of Rortyan position in which we question the situation, roll our eyes at the absurdity of our culture, and ironically adopt some kind of middle position that does not make us miserably tired or get us ostracized from our community. In the end, then, I think Mintz and I would agree that we can be philosophical *and* allow children to eat doughnuts, too.

1 Judith Warner, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books: 2006); Brigid Schulte, *Overwhelmed: How to Work, Love and Play When No One has Time* (New York, NY: Picador, 2014); Jennifer Senior, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood* (Ecco, HarperCollins, 2015); Kim Brooks, *Small Animals: Parenthood in the Age of Fear* (New York, NY: Flatiron, 2018); Robert LeVine and Sarah LeVine, *Do Parents Matter: Why Japanese Babies Sleep Soundly, Mexican Siblings don’t Fight, and American Families Should Just Relax* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2017); Frank Furedi, *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May Be Best for Your Child* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Peview Press, 2008).

2 Jennifer Traig, *Act Natural: A Cultural History of Misadventures in Parenting* (Ecco, HarperCollins, 2019), 132-155.

3 Mintz cites several of these authors in his article. Of note for my purposes are the following: Richard Smith, “On Dogs and Children: Judgements in the Realm of Meaning,” *Ethics and Education* 6, no. 2 (2011), 175; Nancy Vansieleghem, “The Residual Parent to Come: On the Need for Parental Expertise and Advice,” *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2010): 341-355; Geertrui Smedts, “Parenting in a Technological Age,” *Ethics and Education* 3, no. 2 (2008): 122; Judith Suissa, “Untangling the Mother Knot: Some Thoughts on Parents, Children and Philosophers of Education,” *Ethics*

and Education (Taylor and Francis) 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 71, 75; Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa, "The Question of 'Parenting,'" *Ethics and Education* 6, no. 2 (2011): 198; Naomi Hodgson and Stefan Ramaekers, *Philosophical Presentations of Raising Children: The Grammar of Upbringing* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019).

4 See, for example: "Will Junk Food Lower Your Child's IQ?" *The Week*, February 1, 2011, <https://theweek.com/articles/487369/junk-food-lower-childs-iq>.

5 Stephanie Mackler, "Raising a Human: An Arendtian Inquiry into Child-rearing in a Technological Era," *Philosophy of Education Society 2017*, ed. Ann Chinnery (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).