

# Managing Grandparental Involvement in Child-Rearing in the Context of Intensive Parenting

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## Abstract

Intensive parenting ideology is on the rise in expert discourses, social policy, and popular culture. A growing body of research focuses on how mothers try to satisfy the requirements of intensive parenting in their child-rearing practices. However, little is known about the broader effects of this culture, including the implications for intergenerational relationships. In this article, we investigate how mothers manage the pressures of intensive parenting and at the same time maintain relationships with the child's grandparents. We use data from 50 interviews with mothers of preschoolers, living in Russia. We show that in the context of parental determinism and the expert-oriented parenting culture, mothers may construe grandparents' practices and beliefs as wrong and harmful for the child, and they experience grandparents' involvement as a source of anxiety. We also unpack the strategies that mothers use to micro-manage grandparental involvement and cope with anxiety, which are as follows: (a) restrictions of grandparental involvement, (b) negotiations over child-rearing practices and ideas, and (c) constructions of therapeutic narratives to re-describe involvement to render it acceptable. This study contributes to the debates on intensive parenting by demonstrating its isolating potential and showing how mothers try to overcome it.

## Keywords

grandparents, intensive parenting, intergenerational relationships, parental anxiety, parenting culture

## Introduction

Scholars argue that since the 1970s, intensive parenting has become the dominant ideology (Hays, 1998). This ideology implies that raising a child should be guided by experts

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and that parents are crucial for the development of a child. There have also been shifts in the perception of children towards risk-consciousness. Children are now seen as being increasingly vulnerable to risks, which affect their development (Faircloth, 2014). All of these issues lead to the increasing anxiety of parents that they cannot guarantee the proper conditions for the well-being of their children (Furedi, 2001).

There is a growing body of research that shows how intensive parenting shapes child-rearing practices and how parents (mostly mothers) negotiate its requirements (Caputo, 2007; Lareau, 2002; Layne, 2015). However, surprisingly little is known about familial relationships in this shifting context. Child-rearing remains a collective task, and it is important to study how intensive parenting extends into the mother's relationships with other family members, in particular with the grandparents.

The general question that guided this research was the following: what does intensive parenting mean for family life, not only for parents' child-rearing practices? This study contributes to the debates over the new parenting culture in two respects. First, we explore how mothers perceive grandparental authority and experience their involvement in child-rearing. We argue that, in the context of intensive parenting and risk-consciousness, mothers may not only face conflicts and temporary tensions with the child's grandparents – but the very idea of grandparental involvement may become an additional source of anxiety for them. Second, the study sheds light on how familial relationships are changing: how differences in child-rearing beliefs are negotiated and how mothers micro-manage intergenerational interactions.

## Background

### *Intensive parenting and risk-consciousness*

Many researchers argue that child-rearing beliefs and experiences have significantly changed over the past half-century (Lee, 2014b). The term 'intensive parenting' is used (Hays, 1998) to capture these changes. According to the ideology of intensive parenting, 'the methods of appropriate child-rearing are construed as child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1998). Intensive parenting is based on a widely held idea of 'parental determinism' (Furedi, 2001) – that parents are responsible for all of their children's outcomes. There is a general belief about the critical importance of early childhood (Macvarish et al., 2014). Parents feel that all their decisions made during this period will have long-lasting effects on a child's life. The perception of children has also shifted; they are now seen as being more vulnerable to risks which can affect their physical and emotional development (Faircloth, 2014).

All of this leads to the parents' growing anxiety that they cannot provide the proper conditions for the development of the child, which is captured by the term 'paranoid parenting' (Furedi, 2001). The media and popular science, especially popular neuroscience, fuel this anxiety (Macvarish et al., 2014). Wolf (2007) used the term 'total motherhood' to highlight that mothers are expected to become experts on and to optimize all aspects of a child's life, for instance, safety, education, and development.

'Proper' child-rearing today should be based on science and expert advice. Benjamin Spock informed mothers that 'you know more than you think you do' (Spock, 1947). On

the contrary, in the current expert discourse it is assumed that common sense is not enough, and parents must learn that they might harm the baby, not only if they are ‘bad’ parents, but also if they are ‘not informed’ parents (Faircloth, 2014: 45). The relationship between a parent and a child is presented as a set of skills that must be learnt and acquired (Lee, 2014a: 53). This is another distinct feature of today’s expert-oriented parenting culture.

It is important to note that intensive parenting ideology has been received differently in different settings. For instance, there is evidence that in France child-centeredness is not considered a norm (Faircloth, 2013: 197–200; Warner, 2006). Cases from Spain (Sedano, 2013) and the United States (Dow, 2016) also presented examples of the points of resistance to this ideology. Moreover, the general tenets of intensive parenting are differently manifested in mothers’ child-rearing practices and their images of ‘good parenting’. Símonardóttir (2016) showed that in Iceland the ideas of attachment and importance of bonding between a mother and the child have been recycled to be more inclusive of fathers and to the promotion of shared parental responsibilities. Drawing on the analysis of practices of infant feeding, Cheresheva (2015) presented two different constructions of a ‘good mother’: a ‘choosing mother manager’ in Bulgaria and a ‘mother-domestic-angel’ in Hungary.

These studies suggest that intensive parenting ideology interacts with the local culture of raising children and can vary depending on parenting support policies (Faircloth et al., 2013). However, there is growing evidence about the endorsement of different features of intensive parenting from around the world (Godovannaya and Temkina, 2017; Göknaar, 2013; Grunow et al., 2018; Murray, 2013). Other researchers argue that a trend of intensive parenting now crosses class lines and national boundaries (Ennis, 2014; Faircloth, 2013).

In the context of expert-led parenting and concerns over the optimal environment for a child, the question arises of how an enterprise of collective child raising might look today. Although the involvement of grandparents in child-rearing remains significant (Timonen and Arber, 2012), evidence about what the shifts in parenting culture have done to familial relationships, especially between the generations, still remain scarce. There are studies of intergenerational conflicts (Clarke et al., 1999) and intergenerational ambivalence, which demonstrate that a mix of positive and negative feelings characterize intergenerational relationships (Connidis, 2015). There is also some evidence on grandparents’ ‘normative talk’ about grandparenting and a norm of ‘not interfering’ (Dunning, 2006; May et al., 2012). However, parents’ perspectives on grandparental involvement in child-rearing are understudied.

Against the background of the new parenting culture, this study aims to explore familial relationships between mothers and grandparents about childcare and how the discourse of intensive parenting and risks is transmitted and enacted in the familial relationships around raising a child.

### *The Russian context: intensive parenting and grandparenting*

This study is based on empirical data that were gathered in Russia. There is evidence that the priorities and ideology of intensive mothering are becoming dominant in Russia

(Godovannaya and Temkina, 2017). In media and state discourses, childrearing is constructed as primarily the parents' responsibility, for which they must be competent; irresponsible parenting is presented as a cause of various social problems (Strelnik, 2015). Parenting education programmes are emerging, including programmes that are funded by the state (Polivanova et al., 2015).

There is a vast industry of childcare advice – books and articles from psychologists, doctors, and 'successful' moms, stories from celebrities in glossy magazines, and parenting training. Often this advice is based on criticisms of Soviet childcare practices, which clearly appeal to the audience. Thus, the Internet-page of one of the most famous medical entrepreneurs in the post-Soviet countries, who has become known for attacking traditional ways of treating children's illnesses by construing them as being old-school and Soviet, is visited by four million people each month (Strelnik, 2015). There is a salient demand for expertise in new theories of parenting such as natural parenting or attachment parenting. Routine child-rearing matters such as feeding a baby form the basis for passionate debates, which can be seen as a form of tribalization to use Bristow's (2014) term, in the online communities of parents.

Thus, the 'pool of ideas' about parenting, or a reservoir of knowledge, practices, and values, on which people draw in developing ideas about child-rearing (Kojima, 1996) have changed significantly over the past 20–30 years. This change could lead to discrepancies in child-rearing ideas within the same extended family as parents and grandparents obtain their ideas from at least partly different pools.

At the same time, grandparental involvement in Russia is traditionally high: only several decades ago, raising a child was almost exclusively the grandparents' (mostly grandmothers') responsibility, as maternity leaves were only 3–6 months long, and the quality of childcare that was provided by the state was low (Semenova, 1996).

Today, the state provides significant childcare, which includes a year and a half of paid maternity leave followed by an unpaid leave of the same length, and institutional childcare for all children from the age of three years<sup>1</sup>. However, mothers often still rely on grandparental support. Not all mothers are satisfied with the quality of services that the state provides. Some mothers do not consider using institutional support for the child's early years. The working hours of childcare institutions may cover only part of the working day, and grandparents are needed to accompany the child to different children's centres (Prokofieva, 2007). The level of co-residence is also relatively high: 30% of households in Russia are multigenerational in comparison with 5% in France (Prokofieva, 2007). In 37% of families with children under 14 years old, a grandmother or a great-grandmother is involved in child-rearing, in 9%, it is the grandfather or a great-grandfather (Ibragimova, 2007). Grandmothers' involvement is comparable to that of Southern Europe, where 40% of grandparents provide childcare on an everyday basis (Herlofson and Hagestad, 2012).

Last, but not least, grandparents have traditionally been viewed not only as babysitters but also as the translators of the family history and cultural values (Semenova, 1996). It is important to understand how mothers perceive their authority in an era of expert-driven parenting culture.

## Methods

### *Sample*

The study draws on a base of 50 interviews with women who have at least one child under school age (from one to seven years old). The interviews were held in the period from 2014 to 2015 in Russia. Each interview lasted at least one hour, with an average length of one and a half hours.

A call for participation in the study was posted in two online parenting communities: one was dedicated to attachment theory, and the other was not focused on any specific child-rearing theory. Some participants were also recruited through snowballing.

The participants were mainly middle class, and all of them live in large Russian cities and have a high level of education (41 participants have a degree, 4 completed at least three years at a higher education institution). Almost all are currently employed. The average age is 33 years (ranging from 25 to 46 years). Almost all of the participants (43) are married. On average, they have one or two children. In general, the sample covers only a group of comparatively high well-being with a relatively high level of social support.

All of the mothers shared the ideology of intensive parenting. Everyone expressed worries about whether they were doing all that they could for their child's development. All of them are highly involved with their children at home, read many experts' advice, and formulate acceptable and unacceptable methods of child-rearing.

The sample in general is therefore a group of people who are very involved in mothering and engaged with expert knowledge. However, it is likely that much of what is described below can to a greater or lesser degree be extended to other middle-class mothers, as intensive parenting is the dominant parenting ideology. This group may also be considered to be a barometer, as Faircloth (2010) called it, of extensive social trends.

Only in five cases were the grandparents highly involved in child-rearing – they spend at least a few hours per week with the child on a regular basis, which allows the mother to work at least part-time. Approximately one-third of the participants were on maternity leave. In 10 cases, the mothers often, but not on a regular basis, ask the grandparents for help. Almost all of the grandparents see their grandchildren on weekends, holidays, or in the summer, or they occasionally substitute for the mother.

### *Analysis*

All interviews were transcribed. The analysis was based on Russian versions of the transcripts. Only the passages that were used as quotes were translated into English verbatim. There were almost no cases in which the mothers used any special language that cannot be translated into English without significant distortions of meaning. Cases of the mothers' perceptions of grandparental involvement as 'interference' were then identified. Half of the sample mentioned that they have disagreements with family members over child-rearing ideas and practices and that those family members interfere in some way with the mother's child-rearing practices. This article is largely based on these interviews.

The interviews were analysed thematically following the general guidelines of interpretive research (Silverman, 2006), moving back and forth between the data and the literature on intensive parenting. Using Holstein and Gubrium (2004)'s approach, we interpret the mothers' interviews as narratives, which were constructed by them to describe their world and presented as retrospective accounts of their parenting experiences and grandparents' involvement. The analysis was focused on mothers' perspectives on this involvement and their frames of explanation. We use the concept of 'boundary work', which was first introduced by Gieryn (1983) as a sensitizing concept to show how mothers employ the discourse of intensive parenting in the demarcation of their knowledge and practices from those of grandparents. Our analysis of the interviews using thematic coding began shortly after the first interview was conducted, and it continued throughout the study.

## Results

### *'When I was an experienced mother of a three-month-old baby': expert knowledge and grandparents' authority*

In one online-community for parents, we observed a discussion on grandparental involvement that was initiated by one mother who wondered whether there are actually any supportive grandparents who do not judge or criticize or interfere with child-rearing. One woman replied that now her relationship with her mother is good, but there used to be many conflicts when she was, as she said with irony, 'an experienced mother of a three-month-old baby'.

Most of the mothers' descriptions in our interviews fall under a similar pattern. The mothers noted that they had almost no childcare experience before the birth of their first child and were overwhelmed by questions concerning childcare. However, they felt like they were more competent than their parents, because they keep up with the latest expert advice. Child-rearing beliefs of grandparents were viewed with suspicion or rejected, either partially or completely. This suspicion corresponds to the fact that, in the context of intensive parenting, expert advice is most highly valued.

The mothers construct a strong boundary between the 'scientific' knowledge and the grandparents' knowledge (labelled as traditional, Soviet, and/or outdated). However, the mothers' choice of a source of expert knowledge or a parenting theory (such as attachment parenting or French parenting) does not seem to be a result of a thorough analysis of evidence of the pros and cons of these theories. Similar to what Faircloth (2010) noted, mothers do not treat expert knowledge like scientific facts, but rather they simply believe in some of it. The choice appears to be more like cherry picking and 'imprinting' – the mothers stick to the first child-rearing advice that seems convincing and is close to their experience, as is illustrated by the following: 'In relation to attachment theory, it matches my own childhood experience, both negative and positive. All that I've read on attachment theory corresponds to [*childhood experience*] very well'. Thus, although expert advice is actually far from science, and the choice of theories to be trusted is mostly uncritical, mothers rely heavily on references to 'scientific' facts in the process of their boundary work.

The interviews provide evidence that once mothers have decided on a parenting theory or certain expert advice, it becomes their 'island of consistency' (Minsky, 1994), which they try to defend. Grandparents' advice is perceived by mothers as an obstacle to the construction of their own parental strategy, as 'extra distractions', and not as an additional source of information about child-rearing that might be taken into account:

Sometimes we don't understand what to do with the child, how to behave. We are trying all the time to grasp the right way to do no harm. We are all wounded too, crippled with all sorts of life situations, and we are afraid to hurt the child. It is a day-in-day-out kind of work – to behave properly as a parent, like an adult, not like a child with temper tantrums. **And when other people intervene and tell you what to do, we just want them not to interfere. We want to remove all these extra distractions** [*emphasis added*]. (Marina<sup>2</sup>, 29 years, one child, 4.5 years; Moscow)

In their reasoning, the mothers mostly focus on high contrasts in the methods and aims of child-rearing, rather than on the things they have in common with the child's grandparents, drawing clear boundaries between their child-rearing ideas and methods and those of the grandparents. The difference is striking in comparison with the expert knowledge, which mothers take uncritically.

A constructed child-rearing strategy does not mean that the mothers always behave in the way they consider to be 'right' because cultural norms do not force people to do something, but they are rather symbolic means for the organization of action and reasoning (Valsiner and Litvinovic, 1996). Their child-rearing ideas are what allow them to identify the 'wrong' actions of the grandparents with a child.

The mothers reject grandparents' knowledge and practices not only on the basis that they are not 'scientific' enough but also by empirical arguments. The mothers note that they missed something from their parents as a child (for instance, attention, support, and/or protection) and that they suffered from overly strict methods of education, continuous assessment by parents and other problems with their upbringing. Relying on deterministic thinking, the mothers draw a strong causal connection: they emphasize that their parents' 'wrong' child-rearing practices affected them and caused some of the problems with which mothers struggle in their adult life. Examples of these problems are a lack of confidence or other 'negative' features of their character. Thus, the mothers were initially critical of the practices of their parents and wanted to act differently:

I have my own experience and my humble opinion – having encountered such behaviour [*manipulative methods of education, used by respondent's mother*], **this has had a negative effect on my self-esteem and my ability to cope with different situations**, including traumatic experiences. I believe that **if my parents could have helped me out and shown an ability to deal effectively with such situations** without humiliation, intimidation, shaming, disgust, and self-pity, **then I might have more effectively have used the many years of my life** which I spent on the analysis of this pile of problems. So I want to save my child from this unnecessary strain [*emphasis added*]. (Alevtina, 35 years, one child, 3 years; Moscow)

I'm trying to minimize the grandparents' involvement in child-rearing. Me and my husband have already experienced it ourselves, and we agree that, to be honest, it was not the best

parenting. It had some results, but it was far from perfect. And we don't want a repetition of that for our children. (Maria, 29 years, one child, 4 years; Moscow)

Moreover, the mothers feel that because of their parents, they have the baggage of negative child-rearing practices, which they need to get rid of to become good mothers (and blame their parents for that). Apart from expert advice being of higher priority in the expert-oriented climate of intensive parenting, this idea about negative effects of their parents' practices also contributes to the devaluing of the grandparent's advice and sticking with the expert advice:

**For many years I was afraid to have children. I was afraid that I would behave like my mother**, because I had rage attacks on my cat (*laughs*). **I myself as a child was deprived of a coherent parent model**. Yes, I think I love my child as much as my grandmother loved me, but, nevertheless, I needed some everyday child-rearing methods. I began to read [*literature for parents*], because I didn't know what to do, what to base my behaviour on. I knew only what I did not want and how not to do it. **My confidence in myself as a mother was undermined, and attachment theory helped me to restore it**. [*emphasis added*]. (Alina, 34 years, one child, 3 years; Moscow)

However, mothers believe they can overcome this negative influence of their parents' child-rearing practices on them as mothers and on their life in general. They want to reassemble their parenting practices, drawing not on 'traditional' and 'outdated' knowledge, but on 'science' and expert knowledge. Similar to choosing the proper toys, books, and cartoons, mothers believe they can (and must) revise parenting practices, subject to choice and reconstruction, like a toolbox:

Nowadays, it seems to me, people are more likely to achieve psychological maturity in spite of some traumatic childhood experience, because there are tools that you can use to help yourself, and grow yourself up. But at that time, my mother did not have a chance to somehow comprehend what is happening. (Alina, 34 years, one child, 3 years; Moscow)

Grandmothers still use the arsenal of techniques that were used by their parents. **I think we are the first generation that is trying to approach parenting consciously**, because before that, everything was done according to traditions. Everyone listened to the elders, and everything was done according to grandmothers' opinions [*emphasis added*]. (Anna, 32 years, one child, 1 year; Moscow)

### *The big impact of small actions*

The mothers' accounts of their routine actions with a child reflect ideas of parental determinism. The mothers claim that they pay attention to even small events such as occasional words or mundane activities. They see the big impact of small actions and believe that even the most routine actions or a casual phrase can have a strong impact on the child ( 'a thoroughly built system of small details and relationships – it gives results. Everything here is important'; 'a thoughtlessly said casual word can deeply affect the child'; 'small things are small, but they repeat time after time'). The mothers state that



they pay a great deal of attention to what they say to the child and critically analyse all verbal stimuli. One mother stated that ‘we [*her friends*] now think over every word that we are saying to our children. How should the child be praised correctly?’

Now, since I became involved in psychotherapy, I’ve let it go. But before that I thought that any adult, who said something to my child in a wrong way, could ruin everything, could instil wrong thoughts. (Valentina, 30 years, one child, 4 years; Moscow)

In this context, the mothers express worries about grandparental involvement in child-rearing: their beliefs and practices (even small and casual behaviours) seem not only wrong but also harmful.

As an example, let us consider the mothers’ beliefs about the harm of ‘structured learning’. The mothers claim that they prefer education by play, and they put a lot of effort in selecting the right stimuli to organize a proper environment for the ‘natural’ development of the child: carefully selected books, music, open-ended materials instead of toys with a limited set of functions. Mothers also invest a lot of emotional work and time in organizing learning through play, as they consider didactics to be an ineffective method:

I’m against early development classes, that’s something artificial. <...> Sometimes, by chance, we would start talking about wind instruments, and then I would show him a trumpet, a brass band on YouTube, and I would become interested myself to find the perfect video. That’s all an improvisation. Dancing to Sinatra in the kitchen – you are welcome. Drawing something with Dad, because he is an artist and a creative person – again you are welcome. What I’m talking about is that I cannot apply the term ‘structured activity’ to our family. (Olga, 40 years, one child, 4 years; Moscow)

In contrast to this, the mothers state that the grandparents, instead of constructing more natural learning settings, overuse structural activities: ‘she [*grandmother*] is a kind of person who does not view free play as something important. She is a Soviet-type person, she wants structure’. The mothers believe that this can negatively affect creative thinking and a desire to explore the world, which leads to growing anxiety about grandparental involvement.

### *Expert knowledge and maternal confidence*

To acquire positive models of child-rearing, the mothers progressively engage with expert advice (‘I started to read all about parenting because I felt a vacuum concerning good parenting practices’). Our results suggest that expert advice does not just give instructions as to what to do in particular situations. It also provides confidence in one’s ability to be a good mother: ‘My confidence in myself as a mother was undermined, and attachment theory helped me restore it’ (Alina, 34 years, one child, 3 years; Moscow).

Intensive parenting ideology implies that being competent in child-rearing is one of the core characteristics of a ‘good’ mother. Thus, the mothers are anxious about the grandparents’ involvement, not only because they see their parenting practices as being

harmful to the child but also because they see their advice (regarded by the mothers as interference) as a threat to their confidence in their ability to be a good mother. The mothers consider the 'interference' of grandparents to be a signal of the mothers' inability to cope with the child by themselves, which is an obstacle to the assertion of themselves as mothers:

I remember when we came from the hospital, she [*her mother*] met me at the door, wearing a white coat – she is a doctor – the only things missing were her shoe covers, thinking something like 'that stupid woman, she will ruin everything, and I should take all responsibility'.

And when I said 'Mom, I don't need any help, I will have some rest, and then come visit us', she was shocked and considered that as insanely insulting. But what was insanely insulting for me was that she thinks that I'm an idiot. And several times in my life, I've tried to explain my actions to her. Now, of course [*with the fourth child*], I'm not trying to explain anything. I don't have any problems with her. (Oksana, 41 years, four children, from 1 to 17 years old; Moscow)

The more unconventional the mother's parenting ideas are (such as the decision to breastfeed for more than two years), the more pressure the mothers feel – the more efforts they must make to protect and legitimize their parenting style to protect their confidence in their own ability to be a good mother. The pressure becomes an additional source of anxiety that they connect with grandparental involvement.

### *Strategies for coping with grandparents' involvement*

All of this makes grandparental involvement problematic for the mothers and presents a challenging task. The mothers feel that they must cope with this involvement because it threatens their confidence and ability to become a good mother and may be harmful to a child. At the same time, only in extreme cases would the mothers consider a complete blocking of the child's contact with their grandparents or breaking off family ties. Thus, most of the reactions to 'interference' may be defined as the micro-management of grandparental involvement, or of the child's and mothers' own perceptions of this involvement.

The first type of reaction is that of negotiation. This takes the form of the mothers trying to educate grandparents and to persuade them as to the benefits of the mothers' child-rearing ideas. Most often the mothers mobilize science (Faircloth, 2010) to explain to grandparents why the grandparents' methods can be harmful. Some of the mothers suggested that the grandparents read certain literature on child-rearing. However, with only a few exceptions, neither grandparents, nor the mothers reconsidered their child-rearing ideas.

The second type is a 'reformatting' of grandparental involvement in child-rearing and relationships with them in general: limiting their regular help and just visiting them with the children or occasionally leaving the children with them on holidays:

We have four grandparents, but decided to find a nanny because we cannot use the grandparents' help. Because there are so many conflicts concerning child-rearing beliefs. <...> We can ask a nanny to act in accordance with our policy on child-rearing. And I came up with a story that we

know that grandparents have a lot of things to do, and I don't want to bother them, so we communicate in a framework of just 'showing up to visit them'. (Svetlana, 37 years, three children, from 5 to 11 years old; Saint-Petersburg)

The third type of reaction can be defined as a re-description of the whole situation of interference or constructing a narrative to render it acceptable and to reduce anxiety over it. There are three typical types of narratives about grandparental involvement in child-reading, or counterstories.

First, there is a counterstory about the benefits and importance of a child's experience of different parenting practices and rules, and the experience of managing different people: 'let the child get used to the idea that there are different rules and different people'.

The second argument is about the strength of different influences on a child. Some mothers reconsider the grandparents' influence as being less strong than that of the parents, and the 'harm' that can be caused by their 'wrong' actions as being relatively small in comparison with the 'compensation' that parents can provide. The mothers suggest that parents are not only more authoritative for the children, but they usually spend more time with them. This assumption helps the mothers to reduce their anxiety over the interference:

As for what to say to the child, and what not to say – it's really important, and I've read all kinds of psychological advice. For example, if the child is walking on the edge, it's not right to shout to him 'you're going to fall! Watch out, you might fall, hold on tight!' One of our grandmothers always says 'you are going to fall now! Get away!' I understand that it is out of good intentions, and I just can't say to her that it's wrong to say so. **And I just hope that the moments when I am with my daughter by myself will eliminate these things.** [*emphasis added*]. (Margarita, 29 years, one child, 1.5 years; Moscow)

If Mom or Dad, not Grandma, did so [*pushing' the child to learn*], it would be worse, because **she is authoritative for the child, but not as much as the parents. I don't think that she will do any harm**, but she goes against my ideas of the right way [*of child-rearing*], and that irritates me [*emphasis added*]. (Marina, 29 years, one child, 4.5 years; Moscow)

The mothers see their parenting as a base, which will protect a child against all alien influences. Ironically, 'parental determinism' helps them to overcome the anxiety over wrong practices and ideas, after contributing to it. One mother noted, while speaking about bad cartoons, that

... the 'base' should be of high quality. Because she will communicate with different kids. Of course I'm not going to put limits on this. **She may watch some bad cartoons, but the base must be of high quality.** I think that this is why I've been sitting at home for three years with her. Because I would rather show her what is good, and direct her when she makes her own choices, than leave her with a nanny or a grandmother who have their own vision, when the child is actually mine [*emphasis added*]. (Margarita, 29 years, one child, 1.5 years; Moscow)

The third argument is that of acknowledging the special role of grandparents, which is different from the role of parents. This means that the mothers start to evaluate

grandparents' involvement using different criteria. In these narratives, the mothers employ references to an archetypal image of Russian 'babushkas':

At first, I tried to argue with my mother-in-law, but then I agreed with her, that maybe she is right in pampering the child. My husband agrees that there should be such a person in a child's life. I didn't have grandmothers – I did, but they didn't spend time with me. So there was no 'babushka' in my life, a very kind person who would always comfort you and who would always be on your side. But my husband did have that, and he told me that this is very important. **He believes that grandmothers are those who lay the ground of absolute kindness, not the parents** [*emphasis added*]. (Alesya, 30 years, one child, 4 years; Moscow)

However, as in the following quote, acknowledging this special role does not necessarily mean that the mothers refrain from moderating the child's experiences to provide the child with the correct interpretation of that experience:

My job is simply to tell him, against this background [*the grandmother doing what the child himself is supposed to do*] that actually it's not easy for Grandma to do all of these things, and that she has a bad back, and that is not normal that she is crawling here on the floor with him, and that it's only because she loves him very much. (Alesya, 30 years, one child, 4 years; Moscow)

Re-descriptions of the situation of interference according to these narratives diminish the intensity of the mothers' anxiety over grandparental involvement. To describe this, and how it is that they stop worrying so much about the interference, the mothers used the same phrase – that they 'let it go':

Yes, there were very painful conversations [*about the 'wrong' actions of her father*]. I could not explain this to [*my father*]. And now, I realized that explaining is just useless. I've discussed it with my therapist, and [*my father*] has his own truth, and he is sure that he is right. And it's useless to tell him that he isn't. Because he thinks he is right in just the same way that I think I am right. **And then I let it go; I'm not trying to prove anything to him. I think that it's okay, well, that they [*her father and her child*] see each other. He will do no harm. It's good that we have him.** [*emphasis added*] (Valentina, 30 years, one child, 4 years; Moscow)

We therefore assume that mothers do not change their core ideas about child-rearing in reaction to interference. However, new arguments may appear, such as arguments on the strengths of different influences. By introducing these new arguments into their reasoning on interference and the therapeutic use of novel narratives about grandparental involvement, mothers cope with the challenging task of maintaining familial relationships while they manage anxiety over the potentially harmful interference of grandparents.

## Conclusion

This article makes a contribution to the literature on the new parenting culture and inter-generational relationships in the age of intensive parenting. We show how the features of the expert-oriented parenting culture and the notion of parental determinism are involved in mothers' boundary work to construct grandparents' advice and practices as being

wrong and harmful. We also describe mothers' strategies of micro-managing grandparental involvement, which helps mothers to cope with anxiety about grandparental involvement.

This study illustrates that grandparents' involvement in raising a child may initially be seen as a possible threat to the child and as an additional source of anxiety for mothers – not one of support. Thus, intensive parenting involves devoting a great deal of time and effort into raising a child, and at the same time, makes it difficult for mothers to accept help. This presents another contradiction of this parenting culture.

Our evidence shows that intensive parenting is not only about one's own parenting practices and beliefs. It is also about tuning out other people's child-rearing practices, the child's interactions with grandparents and interpretations of the grandparents' actions, and the mothers' own perceptions of grandparental involvement. The study shows that intensive parenting involves not only a significant contribution of money, time, and emotional work by parents (mostly mothers) but also constant daily work on the micro-management of the entire environment around a child. Thus, the study contributes to the discussion of so-called extensive parenting (Caputo, 2007) but with a focus on the domain of familial relationships.

The design of this study implies several limitations to the conclusions. First, we studied only mothers who engaged with online communities, and they can reinforce child-rearing beliefs and engagement with a specific type of parenting (Miyata, 2002). This reinforcement can affect the perception of grandparents' involvement as interference.

The second limitation is that the sample includes only well-educated middle-class women who live in urban areas. Middle-class parents have various sources of information on child-rearing and rely less on traditional knowledge and practices (Rothbaum et al., 2008). Moreover, the lives of middle-class mothers may be less 'enmeshed' with the lives of grandparents (Conlon et al., 2014), as higher earning women are better able to afford formal childcare (Timonen and Arber, 2012). In Russia, kindergartens are more available in urban areas (75% of urban children aged 3–5 years go to kindergartens, 45% – in rural areas; Sinyavskaya and Gladnikova, 2007), so urban mothers are less dependent on grandparental support, which can affect their perceptions of grandmothers' involvement. There is also an urban–rural gap in access to information sources about parenting and education level. The proportion of urban residents with higher education is two times higher than that of rural residents (Russian Federal State Statistics Service, 2010). Internet penetration rates are lower in rural areas: 57% of rural residents are online in comparison with 70% of urban residents (Public Opinion Foundation, 2016). Thus, our sample may be taken as one from which an idea of the situation can be obtained for relatively well-off mothers who in general have sufficient social support and better access to expert advice.

The most important issue that emerges from this study is a need to understand better how familial relationships change in the context of intensive parenting. This ideology affects mothers and their relationships to the child's grandparents in different ways. It is important to consider different factors, such as social class, the availability of institutional childcare, or maternal employment, which may influence the problematization of grandparents' involvement. Another question concerns the differences in how mothers react to grandmothers' involvement in comparison with that of grandfathers. Unfortunately, the

sample size of this study does not allow us to zoom in to explore the gendered nature of grandparenting, as grandmothers in Russia are traditionally more involved in childcare, and we do not have enough cases in the sample to capture the differences in mothers' attitudes to grandfathers' involvement.

What this study demonstrates is that the ideology of intensive parenting amplifies tensions between generations regarding child-rearing. As Furedi and Bristow (2008) argued, intensive parenting contains an isolating dynamic as it has a corrosive effect on the solidarity between parents – such as 'mommy wars' or the fear of other people taking care of a child. This study illustrates that this dynamic also manifests itself in familial relationships – in the 'othering' of grandparents and in attempts to protect children from their interference. Resisting this isolating potential takes a lot of emotional work through the construction of different narratives to re-describe the situation of interference or other methods of micro-management, adding to the other challenges of intensive parenting. Thus, the study has important implications beyond intensive parenting and intergenerational relationships. The results contribute to the discussion of how the socialization processes of children change when an idea of childrearing as a generational responsibility begins to be problematized (Bristow, 2014). The study also raises questions if this example of changes of traditional patterns of authority in family life is an evidence of a massive expansion of expert knowledge and a substantial rise of experts' authority in a society.

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### Notes

1. In pre-schools, there are also groups for children below three years old, but there are not many of them yet.
2. The names of all the participants have been changed.

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