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CHILD REARING, RISK, AND STRIVING FOR  
HUMAN FLOURISHING

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ABSTRACT. Parenthood can be characterized as a leap of faith; it is inevitably “risky.” Here, Lynne Wolbert, Doret J. de Ruyter, and Anders Schinkel argue that this characterization of parenthood seems opposite to the current use of the concept of “risk” in contemporary educational theory and policy, which emphasizes that risk is something that is best prevented or avoided. Otto Friedrich Bollnow distinguishes between avoidable risks, on the one hand, and existential risks (*Wagnis*), on the other. The authors contend that Bollnow’s description of education as a *Wagnis* (1) reinforces the understanding of child rearing and striving for flourishing as inherently uncertain, (2) contributes to a clarification of the ways in which the concept of risk is being used in educational theory and policymaking, and (3) leads us to recognize “trust” as a key concept in discussing risk taking and child rearing.

Out on the ocean sailing away  
I can hardly wait  
To see you come of age  
But I guess we’ll both just have to be patient  
Cause it’s a long way to go  
A hard row to hoe  
Yes, it’s a long way to go  
But in the meantime  
Before you cross the street  
Take my hand  
Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans  
— John Lennon, “Beautiful Boy”<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In this song written for his son Sean, John Lennon gives a beautiful description of the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of parenthood. He opens with the image of sailing out on the ocean — it is unclear to where he is heading, and whether a destination will be reached. This is a strong image of the leap of faith parents have to take when they begin the complex task of raising their child. Lennon and his son both have to be patient, because “coming of age” is not something that can be

1. Lyrics retrieved from <http://www.songteksten.nl/songteksten/328071/john-lennon/beautiful-boy&mdash,darling-boy-.htm>

enforced or controlled. Some things will happen because of how parents raise their child, some because of what they do not do, and some things happen to the child that are beyond the control of the parents.

Most parents hope that their children will come to lead flourishing lives (“I can hardly wait to see you come of age”). Also, most parents will try to contribute to their child’s present and future flourishing (“before you cross the street, take my hand”). If parents strive for their children to lead a flourishing life, they will see their child rearing as a contribution to their child’s chances of doing so. They may raise their child in various ways, but we can assume that they would not do so in a way that, to their mind, would counteract the child’s chances of a flourishing life.

There is no guarantee that parents will succeed in raising a human being that will flourish; first, because parents cannot control all the things that can happen to their child, but also because child rearing itself (the things that parents do) is a “leap of faith.” Child rearing is inherently “risky” because children are free to *not* do what their parents have intended by raising them. In other words, apart from a general influence of luck on what life might bring — whether it will be a flourishing one or not — we discuss here a particular form of risk, namely that when parents raise a child, there is no guarantee of knowing whether their parenting will succeed.

Thus, in this article we concentrate on the inherent risk of child rearing and parenthood as one specific way in which parents’ striving for a flourishing life for their children is uncertain. We will start with some remarks on parenthood, child rearing, and the parent–child relationship to give our argument context. Then, we will elaborate on how we can understand this inherent risk of parenthood as taking an “existential risk” (*Wagnis*) by using the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow.<sup>2</sup> We will argue that Bollnow’s description of education as a *Wagnis* (1) reinforces the understanding of child rearing that strives for flourishing as inherently uncertain; (2) contributes to a clarification of the ways in which the concept of risk is being

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2. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik* [Existential Philosophy and Education] (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kolhammer, 1959). This work will be cited in the text as *EP* for all subsequent references.

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used in educational theory and policymaking; and (3) leads us to recognize trust as a key concept in discussing risk taking and child rearing. We will argue that it is characteristic for parents to have an a priori trusting belief in their children and that this is good and valuable.

#### PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Judith Suissa argues that philosophy of education is in need of “a philosophical understanding of the parent–child relationship which will enable us to address broader questions about education.”<sup>3</sup> When parents are discussed in philosophy of education, she says, it is often in a very narrow context, or the focus is on legalistic aspects of parenthood, such as rights and conflicts.<sup>4</sup> A philosophical understanding of the parent–child relationship should pay more attention to the uniqueness of this relationship.<sup>5</sup> We will make a few remarks on the parent–child relationship in order to provide a rough conceptual framework, which will enable us to address the broad question of parenthood and risk.

In a minimal sense, “parent–child relationship” refers only to the biological (genetic) connection between parent and child. Usually, however, we think of it in thicker terms, as a relationship that involves care and education (child rearing), and as an *intimate* relationship. Martha Nussbaum distinguishes four characteristics of intimate relationships. First, they are very important to people’s flourishing, both in a subjective and objective sense. Second, such relationships render us vulnerable. Third, when such a relationship breaks up, the damage goes “to the heart of who one is”; and fourth, we usually like the people with whom we have an intimate relationship.<sup>6</sup> Specific to the intimacy of the parent–child relationship, it seems to us, is that parents have a relationship with *their* child.

Furthermore, when people speak of the parent–child relationship, they generally refer to a culturally informed conception of the parent–child relationship, which includes diverse evaluative and normative ideas about how parents and children should relate to each other, and ideas about what it means for a parent to raise a child.<sup>7</sup> We can think of psychological concepts such as “attachment” that shape

3. Judith Suissa, “Untangling the Mother Knot: Some Thoughts on Parents, Children, and Philosophers of Education,” *Ethics and Education* 1, no. 1 (2006): 75.

4. *Ibid.*, 67.

5. “Uniqueness” in two senses: (1) as a relationship *sui generis*; the pedagogical relationship is a unique kind of relationship (see Ben Spiecker, “The Pedagogical Relationship,” *Oxford Review of Education* 10, no. 2 [1984]: 203–209); and (2) every *particular* parent–child relationship is unique (see Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa, *The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility, and Society* [New York: Springer, 2012]).

6. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 93–95.

7. See, for example, Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Noddings shows how parental care and the parent–child relationship are inherently connected to conceptions of the good life.

ideas about child rearing,<sup>8</sup> or of dominant sets of cultural repertoires as described by sociologist Annette Lareau, for example.<sup>9</sup> The parent–child relationship includes several facets, or different types of relationships: members of the same household, a relationship as family members, and maybe, to a certain extent, a relationship as friends.<sup>10</sup> But a distinctive and important facet of their intimate relationship is that parents raise their children.

In 1984 Ben Spiecker introduced what he calls “the pedagogical relationship” as the “foundation of the theory of education” in the English-speaking world.<sup>11</sup> “Pedagogical” as it is used in this essay has a far broader meaning than its common English definition. In Dutch and German, *pedagogical* refers to the (guiding) role that adults play, and should play, in the development of children toward adulthood.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa explain that “although appropriately applied to teachers, the original Dutch term [*pedagogische relatie* (pedagogical relationship)] also refers to parents and, importantly, it denotes something like the development of the child, in a sense that goes beyond the narrow notion of teaching.”<sup>13</sup>

Any relationship between an adult and a child can have a pedagogical dimension, which refers to the dimension of child rearing within this relationship (thus, although it is typical for the parent–child relationship, it is not confined to it). In other words, we speak of a pedagogical relationship when the adult occupies the role of “child raiser” (parent/teacher/otherwise) and the child the role of she-who-is-being-raised. It is informed by *pedagogical* concepts. This is a *normative* matter. Spiecker cites Herman Nohl in describing the pedagogical relationship as “the loving relationship of a mature person with a ‘developing’

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8. “Attachment theory” is a psychological theory that argues for the importance of secure attachment to children’s later development; this theory has had a tremendous influence on our current ideas about the importance of a good parent–child relationship. See, for example, John Bowlby, “The Nature of the Child’s Tie to His Mother,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 39, no. 5 (1958): 350–373; and John Bowlby, *Attachment*, vol. 1 of *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1969). Attachment theory has roots both in the classical psychoanalytic idea of the importance of early childhood and the relationship of dependence between mother and infant (see Donald Winnicott, *The Maturational Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* [London: Hogarth Press, 1965]) and in the ethological idea of “imprinting” (see Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon’s Ring* [New York: Crowell, 1952]).

9. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Lareau describes two prominent cultural repertoires in America: (1) *concerted cultivation*, which refers to good parenting as developing one’s children’s talents in a concerted fashion (mostly observed in middle-class families); and (2) *accomplishment of natural growth*, which sees it as important to support children in developing themselves (mostly observed in working-class and poor families).

10. Kristján Kristjánsson, “Parents and Children as Friends,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (2006): 250–265.

11. Spiecker, “The Pedagogical Relationship,” 203.

12. *Ibid.*, 203.

13. Ramaekers and Suissa, *The Claims of Parenting*, xiv.

person, entered into for the sake of the child so that he can discover his own life and form."<sup>14</sup>

We think that the combination of this pedagogical understanding of the parent–child relationship with the particular intimacy of the parent–child relationship, which is always embedded in a cultural repertoire of what child rearing is and should be, offers a good starting point for a philosophical understanding of the (uniqueness of the) parent–child relationship.

#### PARENTHOOD AND THE NECESSITY OF *DAS WAGNIS*

Many philosophers of education have discussed the use of the word “risk” in an educational context.<sup>15</sup> A commonsense description of risk is “an unwanted event which may or may not occur,” which is the meaning implied in statements such as “There is always the risk of an accident when driving in traffic.”<sup>16</sup> When people take a risk, they are uncertain about which possibility out of a multiplicity of possibilities will be realized. They are not sure that the “unwanted event” will (not) occur: they are not in control. Uncertainty is a necessary characteristic of risk taking. In child rearing, there is always the possibility that one’s efforts will fail in some way. In other words, child rearing is uncertain because parents run the risk that their child rearing fails to succeed.

The German philosopher and teacher Bollnow argues that taking such a “leap of faith” is a type of *existential risk taking* that inevitably belongs to the nature of *Erziehung*. *Erziehung* is usually translated as “education,” but in his work Bollnow refers to the pedagogical dimension that, as previously discussed, is not confined to teaching, nor to child rearing. Bollnow’s line of argument applies to all *Erzieher*s, that is, all those in a pedagogical relationship with children. For this reason, we have left the word *Erziehung* untranslated in the following elaboration of his work. Also, because our main focus in this essay is parents, we have chosen to translate *Erzieher* (child rearer[s]) as “parent(s).”

The theme of his book *Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik* is to see existential crises as crucial chances for *Erziehung*. One form of existential crisis is what

14. Ibid.

15. See, for example, Allen T. Pearson, “Teaching, Reason, and Risk,” in *Reason and Education: Essays in Honor of Israel Scheffler*, ed. Harvey Siegel (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 1997), 103–111; Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish, *Education in an Age of Nihilism* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2000); Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder, Co: Paradigm, 2013); Stefan Ramaekers, “Educational Support, Empowerment, and Its Risks: The Correct Voice of Support?,” *Educational Theory* 55, no. 2 (2005): 150–163; Richard Smith, “Dancing on the Feet of Chance: The Uncertain University,” *Educational Theory* 55, no. 2 (2005): 138–150; Richard Smith, “Abstraction and Finitude: Education, Chance, and Democracy,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 25, no. 1–2 (2006): 1–35; Paul Smeyers, “The Inherent Risks of Human Learning,” *Educational Theory* 55, no. 2 (2005): 115–121; Paul Smeyers, “Child Rearing in the ‘Risk’ Society: On the Discourse of Rights and the ‘Best Interest of a Child’,” *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2010): 271–284; and Marianna Papastephanou, “Education, Risk, and Ethics,” *Ethics and Education* 1, no. 1 (2006): 47–63.

16. Niklas Möller, “The Concepts of Risk and Safety,” in *Handbook of Risk Theory*, ed. Sabine Roeser, Rafaela Hillerbrand, Per Sandin, and Martin Peterson (New York: Springer, 2012), 58.

he calls a *Wagnis*, which we translate as “taking an existential risk.” In this part of the essay we will first explain what Bollnow’s notion of existential risk entails, and compare it to two works that exemplify current discussions about the discourse of risk. Then we will argue that parenthood, as a part of parent’s striving for a flourishing life for their children, is aptly described in terms of taking an existential risk.

#### DAS WAGNIS (TAKING AN EXISTENTIAL RISK)

Bollnow distinguishes between three manifestations of risk taking in *Erziehung*: a try or an attempt (*der Versuch*); a risk (*das Risiko*); and a type of existential risk, or venture (*das Wagnis*) (*EP*, 135–137). An attempt is when you try something, to see whether or not it works in the way you expect. The professional variant of an attempt is an experiment. In principle, the outcomes of these attempts are ascertainable, that is, they are “knowable.” Bollnow uses the example of a new piece of rope; you can try it out (*der Versuch*), testing to see, for example, what kind of weight it holds, what you can use it for, and so on. But, you can also just take a risk (*das Risiko*) and use the rope to pull up a cabinet to your new apartment on the sixth floor. In choosing the *das Risiko* path, you don’t know whether it will work; you’ll just have to wait and see what happens, risking your cabinet in the process.

With a venture (*das Wagnis*), on the other hand, in the sense that Bollnow is after, the distinctive element is that you risk *yourself*. It is an existential risk in the sense that you put yourself on the line, and the outcome is, in principle, unknowable.<sup>17</sup> A venture is not the same as an *adventure*, because a *Wagnis* is a *necessary* risk, in that *Erziehung* is not possible without engaging in it, and it is undertaken out of “the highest moral responsibility” (*EP*, 139).

Bollnow sketches the analogy of craftsmanship as a comparison commonly used to illustrate *Erziehung*. If a sculptor has failed to create the sculpture she had intended to create, this will often be explained as either a failure of the material, a failure of the skills of the craftsperson, or as a stroke of (external) fate. In educational discourse, there is a tendency (or desire) to think about failures in a similar way (*EP*, 133). The fact that *Erziehung* sometimes fails to do what it had intended to do is explained as something that, unfortunately, happens every now and then, but could have been avoided if only the parent had recognized the faults in “the material” in time, and if only the *Erziehung* had been better or more cleverly conceived by the parent (*EP*, 132). However, in reality *Erziehung* is not analogous to a type of craftsmanship. According to Bollnow, the *inherent* risk of *Erziehung* is due to the fact that it is a process between two “unpredictable” — because

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17. “Wir können den Unterschied vielleicht am besten so bestimmen, dass wir sagen: ich riskiere immer etwas, aber ich wage im letzten mich. Wo ich etwas wage, da setze ich mich zugleich immer mit meiner ganzen Person ein” [The difference might be perceived best when we say: I always risk (*riskiere*) something, but only in the end I risk (*wage*) myself. When I risk something in the latter sense, then at the same time I invest myself completely] (*EP*, 137, own translation).

free — beings (adult and child), and recognizing this reality must lead us to an understanding of *Erziehung* that goes beyond the idea of craftsmanship.<sup>18</sup>

The risk that is inherent in *Erziehung* is not the same as the risk of failure in the forms mentioned above (material, skills, or fate) (*EP*, 133). Rather, this type of risk is grounded in a *Wagnis*. The existential nature of *das Wagnis* lies in the fact that the parent is personally committed to (has risked herself) raising a child who is always free *not* to do what the parent had intended with her *Erziehung*. So, in a different sense than with craftsmanship, *Erziehung* can fail too. According to Bollnow, existential risk always comes with the possibility of existential failure (*das Scheitern*). Not failure itself, but rather the *possibility* of failure is what should be incorporated in *Erziehung*. “Failure (fortunately) is the exception, but it is an exception which is not a stroke of (external) fate but — as an ever-present possibility — an internal part of what *Erziehung* is.”<sup>19</sup> Bollnow argues that if the parent were to deny this fact of life, that would necessarily degrade the other human being (the child) to mere material to work with. Moreover, by doing so, the parent would infringe upon the dignity of this other human being and at the same time of *Erziehung* itself.<sup>20</sup>

Bollnow’s text does not make altogether clear what falls under the category of existential failure and what does not. Conceptually, his definition allows for all cases in which the child does not do what the parent intended (because the child is free) to be counted as failures. Yet, when we look at his examples, existential failure seems only to refer to situations in which things really go wrong, that is, when the child does not flourish according to any reasonable conception of the term (which “fortunately” is the exception).

However, a child’s failure to flourish does not necessarily follow from the child not doing what the parent intended. “Failure” defined as becoming a happy, single

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18. “In Wirklichkeit gehört aber der Wagnischarakter zum innersten Wesen der Erziehung selbst, sofern diese als Umgang mit freien und in ihrer Freiheit grundsätzlich unberechenbaren Wesen über ein bloß handwerkliches Tun hinausgeht” [In reality, existential risk belongs to the deepest core of what child rearing/education is, insofar as relating to free — and in their freedom inherently unpredictable — beings goes beyond a merely craftsmanship-like doing] (*EP*, 133, own translation).

19. “Nicht das Scheitern, sondern nur die Möglichkeit des Scheiterns ist es, was in jeden Augenblick waghenden Vertrauens in das Erziehend Verhalten einbezogen werden muss. Das Scheitern bleibt (glücklicherweise) die Ausnahme, die nicht durch einen äußeren Zufall gelegentlich hereinbricht, sondern schon im Wesen der Erziehung von vorn herein angelegt ist” [Not failure, but only the possibility of failure is what should be taken into account in pedagogical/educational behavior. Failure (fortunately) is the exception, which is not inflicted by fate, but is part of the core of child rearing/education] (*EP*, 150, own translation).

20. “Der Versuch aber, den dadurch bedingten Wagnischarakter zu beseitigen und so die Gefahr des Scheiterns zu vermeiden, degradiert notwendig den andern Menschen zum blossen Material meiner Bearbeitung, verletzt also die Würde dieses andern Menschen und damit zugleich die Würde der Erziehung selbst” [The attempt, however, to avoid the danger of failure by eliminating/denying the existential character of risk necessarily degrades the other human being to sheer material to work with, and infringes upon the dignity of this other human being, which at the same time harms the dignity of child rearing/education] (*EP*, 134, own translation).

accountant who lives in the city instead of the farmer with a traditional family life that her parents had intended to raise is very different from failure defined as becoming a drug addict and dying young. Whereas the latter case is clearly a failure in that the person is not flourishing in any reasonable sense of the term, the former case leaves open the question whether someone whose education has “failed” — in the sense that it has not yielded the result the parents intended — leads a flourishing life. In other words, while the child in the first scenario has done something different than the parents had aimed for, this does not necessarily mean the child is not flourishing. It is easy to imagine that some parents might perceive that their child, in living as a happy, single accountant, is not flourishing, and that these parents might therefore be harmed by their experience of this situation as a “parental failure.” At the same time, it is equally possible to imagine other parents whose child does not flourish according to the parents’ conception of flourishing, but who are able to see and understand that the child is happy and thus do not experience their “parental failure” as harmful.

Or consider the following example. Say that Hannah has liberal parents whose intention it is to raise their daughter to become a free-spirited, autonomous adult who pursues her own happiness. Hannah, however, starts going to church and becomes a member of an orthodox religious commune that requires its members to renounce their autonomy. This is not what her parents had in mind raising Hannah. But Hannah is happy in her life: she works at the commune farm, marries and has children of her own, and successfully sells fruits and vegetables from the farm at local markets. The parents’ intention to raise Hannah as an autonomous adult has failed. Whether the parents believe that their child lives a flourishing life is another question, and whether others would think so is a different question still. The parents might take their daughter’s devotion to the religious commune as a substantial reason to think that she is not flourishing (within their conception of flourishing), but they might also understand and respect that their daughter has a different conception of flourishing. To many people, it will appear that the daughter flourishes, but for others this will be up for debate. So, in this sense, Bollnow’s existential *failure* does not exclude the possible flourishing life of the child.

We do think that existential failure minimally implies a subjective experience of failure on the side of the parent. In addition, we think that Bollnow had in mind examples that caused some form of crisis *within* the pedagogical relationship (such as, for example, running away from home) that both parent and child perceive as a crisis. For reasons of conceptual clarity we will proceed to interpret failure in the broadest way that Bollnow’s text allows, which is when the child does not do or become what the parent has intended.

As already noted, existential failure is something other than making a mistake. First, every parent makes mistakes, but this does not necessarily mean that the *Erziehung* has failed. Moreover, we can learn from our mistakes, so mistakes can contribute to *Erziehung*. According to Bollnow, existential failure — or, rather, coming very close to existential failure — is a window of opportunity for *Erziehung*, as is every crisis. A near failure of the whole activity of *Erziehung*

can afford both parents and children a unique learning opportunity. This does not mean, however, that parents should knowingly steer toward such near failure; the learning opportunity lies in the sincerity (and thus existentiality) of recognizing the possibility of true and total failure (*EP*, 150). Second, *Erziehung* can fail without demonstrable mistakes being made, or irrespective of such mistakes (on either side of the parent–child relationship). Thus, even when it is unclear whether the parent can be held responsible for the failure of the *Erziehung*, existential failure implies that, because the parent has risked herself while being a parent and raising her child, it is still experienced as a *personal* failure. The parent is committed to the *Erziehung*, has put herself on the line, and in that sense, regardless of what has caused the failure, the parent experiences it as existential failure. Bollnow gives an example of the pedagogical relationship between an adviser and her PhD student (*EP*, 139). The inevitable tension between showing the PhD student the way (offering guidance) and letting the student find her own way (creating space, offering trust) makes this a *Wagnis*, for it is uncertain what the right pedagogical choice is, and, for the adviser, the success or failure of the supervision of the dissertation is a personal matter. She is risking herself in taking on this supervising role, although failure in such a case will not necessarily be attributed to mistakes made by the advisor. This example shows how Bollnow sees existential risk as possible in every pedagogical relationship, not only in the parent–child relationship. This does not imply that every educational activity is (potentially) a *Wagnis*, but it does imply that teachers not only perform tasks, but also that they sometimes risk themselves in educating the child.<sup>21</sup>

#### PARENTHOOD AS A *WAGNIS*

Judith Suissa argues that “being a parent is intimately tied up with issues of our own identity, and with our values and choices in other areas of our lives.”<sup>22</sup> *Being* a parent, therefore, cannot be accurately described as a task, as merely *doing* something. To describe parenthood as a series of tasks is to impoverish the notion of parenthood.<sup>23</sup> Even though parents differ in the way they see themselves as parents — for example, for some parents having children is what makes their life meaningful, while for others this is less the case or is not so at all — we agree with Suissa that for all parents it must ring true that “parenthood” says something about who they *are*, and that how they raise their children therefore has to do with who they *are*, and as such is not reducible to a series of tasks.

We think that Suissa, by differentiating between *doing* and *being*, is pointing to the same distinction that Bollnow makes when he distinguishes an attempt or taking a risk, on the one hand, from taking an existential risk (*Wagnis*), on

21. However, in the case of the PhD supervisor, it is not altogether clear whether this *needs* to be an existential risk. One could also argue that acting as a supervisor is merely a *task* that she does. It is conceivable that some PhD supervisors consider supervision to be merely a task they execute, and it is *this task* that might fail or not (a *Risiko* instead of a *Wagnis*).

22. Suissa, “Untangling the Mother Knot,” 73.

23. *Ibid.*, 72.

the other. In taking a *Wagnis*, one has to put oneself on the line, and this, we think, is also what happens when becoming (being) an involved parent. We leave open whether Bollnow's conception of risk applies to all adult-child relationships, but we have shown that because of its particular intimacy, for the parent-child relationship the idea of *Wagnis* is particularly appropriate.

#### STRIVING FOR FLOURISHING AS A *WAGNIS*

Striving for flourishing is affected by a general uncertainty about what happens to us in life. Nussbaum argues that a good human life is fragile because human lives are subject to "luck."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, when parents strive for the flourishing of their child, some things will happen that are beyond the parents' control. We have said that, according to Bollnow, the distinctive element of a *Wagnis* is that a person risks herself. Because striving for flourishing is subject to the influence of luck, parents who are committed to striving for their children's flourishing can also be considered, for that reason alone, to take a risk of the *Wagnis* type.

We have shown, however, that child rearing entails a specific risk that can also be categorized as a *Wagnis*. Where this riskiness is due in part to the general influence of luck on the course of a life, it results from a second factor as well: the freedom of children to *not* do what their parents intend in raising them. Therefore, there are two distinct ways in which we can understand parents' striving for their children to lead flourishing lives as a *Wagnis*.

#### THE DISCOURSE OF RISK IN EDUCATION(AL RESEARCH)

Philosophers of education observe that there is a specific discourse of risk used in educational research. In this discourse, the word "risk" is depicted as something that should be avoided, that is, that educational research and policy should be mainly focused on how to eliminate the possibility that something goes wrong when raising a child. As such, this discourse denies, or at least ignores, the possibility of inevitable risk, that is, the possibility that (a) there are risks that cannot be avoided; and (b) it is necessary for good education (including both formal schooling and informal upbringing) to engage in risk taking. In other words, the discourse denies the possibility and merit of a *Wagnis*. A number of philosophers of education have criticized this discourse of risk, with some focusing on the bias in the negative connotations of risk in relation to children and families, and others emphasizing the positive role that risk should play in good or "real" education.<sup>25</sup> These examples of critique, we contend, argue for the existence of a type of risk that is existential. Therefore, we agree with their stance and think that Bollnow's description of *das Wagnis* contributes to the power of their argument.

24. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Luck is related here to the Greek word *tuchē*, and is defined as "what happens to him, as opposed to what he does or makes," 3.

25. Exemplary of the former is Smeyers, "Child Rearing in the 'Risk' Society: On the Discourse of Rights and the 'Best Interest of a Child'"; exemplary of the latter is Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*.

### FAMILIES “AT RISK”

Paul Smeyers writes that there is a “tendency to speak of children and families as being ‘at risk,’ which in many cases seems to lead to a climate in which the legitimacy of government interventions comes to be broadly accepted.”<sup>26</sup> In this use, “at risk” refers to the perception that there is a greater than average likelihood that unwanted events occur and that these unwanted events are in need of a solution — that is, they require someone (the government) who can fix them, or — even better — who is able to prevent them. According to Smeyers, this need to eliminate the potential for unwanted events, and as such make education risk-free, is “self-deceptive” because it indicates, erroneously, that every educational problem can be solved.<sup>27</sup>

If the implication is that all risks of education are, in principle, solvable — meaning that all “at risk” families could be spared unwanted events if one only made better interventions — then this view as such denies the necessity of *Wagnis* and is indeed self-deceptive. Smeyers argues that such use of the word “risk” implies both a certain way of looking at (and describing) child rearing and a *simplification* of parenthood.<sup>28</sup> It distracts us from the complexity and inherent uncertainty of parenthood. Although he makes an important point here, Smeyers should be careful that he does not lead us to the conclusion that we cannot speak of families being “at risk”; there *are* at-risk families for whom it is wise that governments intervene, just as there are risks that parents wisely seek to avoid (*before you cross the street, take my hand*). In our view, if Smeyers were to distinguish, as Bollnow does, between risks that can and *should* be avoided, and the type of existential risk that is unavoidable and *necessary*, and to acknowledge that both types of risk are a part of the complexity of parenthood, this might clarify his position. Smeyers thinks that it is “self-deceptive” to attempt to make education free of *existential* risks, but he does not argue that there are no legitimate reasons for a government to intervene when families are “at risk.”

### THE BEAUTIFUL RISK OF EDUCATION

With his book title *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, Gert Biesta refers to the inherent risk of “creation” (as in “the process of creating”), noting that “creation is a risky business and has to be a risky business and that without the risk nothing will happen; the event of subjectivity will not occur.”<sup>29</sup> Biesta’s phrase “the event of subjectivity” refers to children becoming “subjects in their own right,”

26. Smeyers, “Child Rearing in the ‘Risk’ Society,” 272.

27. *Ibid.*, 281.

28. *Ibid.*, 283.

29. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, 24; here, Biesta draws on John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

something that he insists education should contribute to.<sup>30</sup> We view Biesta's stance as connected to Spiecker's description of the aim of the pedagogical relationship: human development in the sense of becoming a *person*.<sup>31</sup>

Biesta proposes to make a distinction between an attitude of educators who are "willing to take the risk" and an attitude of parents who are not.<sup>32</sup> Educators who are not willing to take the risk perceive education as a type of craftsmanship; or, as Biesta puts it, they see education as "the *production* of something — literally the production of some *thing*."<sup>33</sup> Paraphrasing John Caputo, parents who are willing to take the risk can be summarized as "cool," whereas parents who are not to do so are "nervous wrecks." If the former is "a calm, distant, celestial, hands-off creator," the latter is "very nervous about what he is getting himself into and is much more of a hands-on micro manager."<sup>34</sup>

So, for Biesta, parental risk taking is necessary for the child to become a person. Hence, it is a *beautiful* risk. Biesta's beautiful risk falls under the category of Bollnow's *Wagnis*. For Bollnow, as for Biesta, existential risk taking is inevitable; however, Bollnow also stresses that it is something that parents generally seek to avoid, as most human beings seek to avoid danger/failure. No educator should steer toward the failure of their education (*EP*, 150). In other words, Biesta focuses on the beautiful chances for education that are opened when one is willing to take the risk, while Bollnow focuses instead on the *inevitability* of risking yourself when raising a child. We agree with both aspects of the risk taking in education, and we think that Bollnow's recognition of risk as something that people generally seek to avoid is important and should not be overlooked. This implies, to our minds, that Biesta's work should also address the possible not-so-beautiful consequences of risk taking, thereby admitting that parents who accept the risk of creation can sometimes legitimately be "nervous wrecks," precisely because they recognize that they are taking a "leap of faith."

## TRUST

The educational discourse of risk, to which Smeyers and Biesta (among others) object, generally does not recognize the existence and significance of existential risks. Such existential risks render human beings — specifically parents, in this case — vulnerable. As such, an emphasis on risk avoidance seems to minimize

30. With "subjectification" Biesta expresses "the assumption that those at whom our educational efforts are directed are not to be seen as objects but as subjects in their own right; subjects of action and responsibility" (*The Beautiful Risk of Education*, 18).

31. Spiecker, "The Pedagogical Relationship," 208.

32. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, 13–24.

33. *Ibid.*, 14.

34. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, 14–16.

the place for/of vulnerability in an educational context. According to Annette Baier, the acceptance of this vulnerability is what we mean by “trust.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, we argue an educational discourse that stresses avoiding risk has the effect of downplaying the significance of trust in child rearing. In other words, the less risk (and the less uncertainty) there is — and, consequently, the less trust is necessary — the better. The use of such a discourse in matters of education does not promote the trust parents have in their children or themselves, nor does it promote a general trust — a kind of faith — that “things will be all right” with the world and the people in it. The impression one gets is that “having” to trust one’s children is something one resorts to for lack of a better alternative, namely eliminating the risk and emphasizing *knowing* what one should do to do “it” right. It appears as if this discourse advocates that there should be no need to trust one’s children. This stance, in our view, is harmful to the parent–child relationship because it presumes that we live in a dystopian world where there is no freedom for children.

We want to argue that a conception of risk in education as an inevitable *Wagnis* actually points to the opposite, that is, to an affirmation of the importance of trust in child rearing precisely because parents cannot avoid all risks. Moreover, there are good reasons for parents to have trust in their children, and, as we will show, it seems that parents generally start from trust in the relationship with their children.

For Bollnow, the importance of trust is self-evident. In a different book he writes that human life is only possible on the basis of trust. Mistrust, on the other hand, causes life to “dry out” and eventually “die out.”<sup>36</sup> Trust is the “indispensable precondition of all human life.”<sup>37</sup> And in a third book he writes that trust is one of the key virtues for educators.<sup>38</sup> Here, we begin by making some general remarks about the concept of trust before moving on to a discussion of what kind of trust characterizes the parent–child relationship.

Spiecker argues that, in general, we can say that “if X trusts Y, then X is convinced that Y (person or thing) possesses certain qualities.”<sup>39</sup> He gives two further logical conditions of trust: if X trusts Y, it must also be true that “X expects Y, at a later point of time, to fulfil certain standards or criteria”; and that “trust

35. Annette Baier, “Trust and Antitrust,” *Ethics* 96, no. 2 (1986): 231–260.

36. “Nur auf dem Boden eines Vertrauens ist Leben überhaupt möglich. Misstrauen umgekehrt lässt das Leben vertrocknen und schließlich ganz ersterben” [Human life is only possible when built upon trust. Mistrust, on the other hand, causes life to dry out and ultimately die out]. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Wesen und Wandel der Tugenden* [The Being and Behavior of the Virtues] (Frankfurt, Germany: Ullstein Bücher, 1958), 175 (own translation).

37. “Das Vertrauen ist die unerlässliche Voraussetzung alles menschlichen Lebens” [Trust is the indispensable precondition of all human life], Bollnow, *Wesen und Wandel der Tugenden*, 175 (own translation).

38. Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Die Pädagogische Atmosphäre* [The Pedagogical/Educational Atmosphere] (Heidelberg, Germany: Quelle & Meyer, 1965), 52–62.

39. Ben Spiecker, “Forms of Trust in Education and Development,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 10, no. 2 (1990): 158.

implies a certain degree of uncertainty."<sup>40</sup> Trust of powers or capacities can be placed in both things and people, whereas trust of inclinations or good will can only be placed in human beings and is based on a moral judgment. For Bollnow, however, "real" trust is applicable only to human beings, because human beings are, in principle, unpredictable/incalculable on account of their free will.<sup>41</sup>

Interpersonal trust can be roughly defined as "accepted vulnerability to another's possible but not expected ill will (or lack of good will) toward one" or to another's possible but not expected lack of competence.<sup>42</sup> Baier's account of trust allows for "unconscious trust, for conscious but unchosen trust, as well as for conscious trust the truster has chosen to endorse and cultivate."<sup>43</sup> Pamela Hieronymi argues that if one decides to trust, one rather *entrusts* someone with something, which is not the same as what she calls full-fledged trust, which must be based on a trusting belief, that is, a belief in the trustworthiness of the one that is trusted. And a belief is not something one can choose to have.<sup>44</sup> Carolyn MacLeod makes a further distinction between Hieronymi's full-fledged trust and therapeutic trust.<sup>45</sup> Full trust requires a trusting belief and people therefore cannot *decide* to trust someone just *because* it is "useful" for some reason. Therapeutic trust (or "useful trust"), on the other hand, does work like that. It depends on (external) reasoning, that is, one *decides* to trust as the result of reasoning. But this kind of trust is really a matter of "entrusting." Hieronymi gives the example of a "trust circle" (a trust-building exercise in which you have to let yourself fall backwards, trusting that the group will catch you). When you are in doubt about whether you trust the others to catch you (there is no trusting belief), perhaps because you don't know them very well, you can *decide* that it is good to *entrust* the others with catching you because you have good reasons to do so (for example it is beneficial to the group-building/trust-building/and so on).<sup>46</sup>

#### TRUST IN THE PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIP

First, although we can say that someone is a trustworthy person, often trust is about *me* trusting *you*, or — in this article — about the parent trusting the child, and vice versa. So, the question we seek to answer here is how trust (and what type of trust) is important for the parent–child relationship. That being said, the parent–child relationship is a relationship between unequal participants, in the

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40. *Ibid.*, 159.

41. Bollnow, *Wesen und Wandel der Tugenden*, 177–178.

42. Baier, "Trust and Antitrust"; and Spiecker, "Forms of Trust in Education and Development."

43. Baier, "Trust and Antitrust," 244.

44. Pamela Hieronymi, "The Reasons of Trust," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 2 (2008): 213–236.

45. Carolyn MacLeod, "Trust," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Fall 2015 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trust/>.

46. Hieronymi, "The Reasons of Trust."

sense that the adult (generally) is the educator and the child the one being educated. The trust they have in each other might therefore be of a different kind.

Baier sketches the “natural order” of trust to show how children progress from initially unselfconscious proto-trust to eventually self-conscious (chosen) trust.<sup>47</sup> We agree that most children start from a position of great — possibly unconditional — trust (or better yet, “proto-trust,” since the concept of “trust” arguably does not meaningfully apply to babies and infants yet) in their parents, which is rooted in their (initial) full dependency on their parents.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, children *need* parental trust. In a general sense, as Bollnow said, trust is important for human beings, and especially for human (intimate) relationships. But it is also important in a particular, pedagogical sense, because “[b]y this trust the child is stimulated to both accentuate and expand his capacities.”<sup>49</sup> As such, trust is “a condition for the development of the capacities of children.”<sup>50</sup>

But for parents the relationship is different. They are not dependent on their child in the same way the child is dependent on them; they do not depend on their child to stay alive. In a different sense, however, one might argue that parents and children are mutually dependent because they are in an intimate relationship together, and as such what the child does will affect the parent and vice versa. This type of dependency makes it important for parents to be able to trust their child as well. According to Spiecker, *appropriate* trust is characterized by a cognition (belief) that is properly grounded.<sup>51</sup> We think that this is true for parents’ trust in the capacities/powers of the child. For example, letting one’s child crawl up the stairs all by herself — trusting her to be able to do that — is usually well grounded in the fact that before this point, the parents have supervised her crawling up the stairs numerous times. “Statistics” persuade them to trust the child’s stair-climbing capacities. Trusting the good will/inclinations of one’s child seems to be a different matter. *Initially*, there are no “proper grounds” for parents to trust their child’s good will; this does not, however, seem to be a reason not to trust one’s child. Generally, we think, out of love for one’s *own* child, and because of the uniqueness of this intimate relationship (the mere fact of the child being one’s *own* child), a parent will start from a sort of a priori position of (an inclination to) trust in the good will of their child.<sup>52</sup> We argue that this is not a rational form of

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47. Baier, “Trust and Antitrust,” 236.

48. See also *ibid.*, 241–242.

49. Spiecker, “Forms of Trust in Education and Development,” 163.

50. *Ibid.*, 158.

51. *Ibid.*

52. It can be argued that rather than start from trust, parents should start with the hope that their children will be of good will. We think that hope can be defined as desire plus expectancy (see Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015]). Moreover, parents also expect that their child is trustworthy, and therefore it can be assumed that parents start with an inclination toward trusting their child.

trust, if “rational” is taken to mean that other (external) grounds are required to justify one’s trust in one’s children. Deliberating whether trust in the good will of one’s child is (or was) appropriate might be done in hindsight, and there might well be good (pedagogical or developmental) reasons to trust one’s children, but we argue that parents do not decide whether or not to trust their children on the basis of such reasons.

Therefore, following Hieronymi, we think that it is characteristic for parents to have a trusting belief in their child. We propose here that this belief is “a priori,” meaning that the parent does not build up this trusting belief. As such, we are not able to judge whether parents have good grounds for their belief, but because, as said, there are good grounds *for* parents to trust their children from the start, we side with Spiecker in saying that parental a priori trust can be called appropriate. If it were the case that parents decide to trust based on the pedagogical/developmental merits of trust, parental trust would be a form of therapeutic or “useful” trust rather than full or pure trust. This, to our minds, would reduce parenthood to something that parents “do” instead of what they are.<sup>53</sup>

Bollnow’s emphasis on the importance of engaging in existential risk when educating reflects his conviction regarding the importance of trust in human lives. To trust someone means that we are not certain, but that we take this leap of faith anyway. According to Bollnow, the trust of a parent in their child creates space to take existential risks and is therefore something that parents ought to do (*EP*, 143). Moreover, the consequence of not trusting, as already mentioned, is that one takes away one’s children’s freedom.<sup>54</sup> But trust in itself is also a *Wagnis*, says Bollnow (*EP*, 144). To trust someone *is* taking an existential risk, while at the same time trust is required in a situation of uncertainty — that is, in a situation of risk.

#### CONCLUSION

Striving for a flourishing life is fragile, and parents who are committed to their children’s flourishing are therefore engaged in existential risk taking. John Lennon’s song “Beautiful Boy” gives us a sense of how this vulnerability affected him as a father. We have also shown in this article that child rearing entails a specific risk that can be recognized as a *Wagnis*. There are, therefore, two distinct ways in which we can understand parent’s striving for a flourishing life for their children as a *Wagnis*.

We conclude that a conception of risk as a *Wagnis* affirms the importance of trust in the parent–child relationship. Trust is something that is necessary for children’s development. Parents start from an a priori position of trust, a form of trust that is not based on reasons or reasoning. It requires a belief — a belief not grounded in reasons, though not immune to falsification — in the trustworthiness of the child.

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53. See Suissa, “Untangling the Mother Knot.”

54. See also Spiecker, “Forms of Trust in Education and Development,” 160.

Bollnow's distinction between inevitable existential risks, in which a parent risks herself, and avoidable risks that do not require such an existential dimension contributes to an understanding of the objections philosophers of education have to the prevalent use of the concept of "risk" as something that is, and ought to be, avoided. Such an understanding makes clearer why Biesta is convinced that educators have to be willing to take (beautiful) risks and why Smeyers argues that it is "self-deceptive" in principle to aim to eliminate risk in education. When making these arguments, Biesta and Smeyers have a type of existential risk taking in mind.