Parents and their relationships with their children rarely feature in the work of philosophers writing about education. When they do, I argue, they are discussed in a language that draws primarily on the political concepts of rights, duties and obligations. Often, in this context, the parent-child relationship is seen as posing interesting or troubling conceptual problems for our political or moral theories, rather than as a subject for philosophical reflection in itself. At the same time, talk of “parenting” and notions of “good parenting” are increasingly prominent in government policy on families and children, as well as in the popular media and self-help books. The language and logic of this discourse in overwhelmingly drawn from the field of developmental psychology, using supposedly neutral, descriptive concepts in a manner that both masks their evaluative aspects and makes it difficult to talk about parent-child relationship in any other way.

In this paper, I explore the possibilities for talking about the parent-child relationship in other, possibly richer, languages, using resources from philosophy and literature. My critique is focused mainly how the dominant language of “parenting” defines and restricts how we conceptualize and talk about the parent-child relationship, and how parents are expected to understand and relate to their children. We can describe this phenomenon as “the scientization of parenting”; a phenomenon captured in the way in which theoretical constructs such as “attachment”, which are often embedded in a complex and contested background of evaluative assumptions, become part of our every-day language about “parenting”, and act as universal categories by which to assess the quality of particular relationships between parents and children, children’s behaviour, or the appropriateness of parental choices and actions.

Some critics of the recent trend for government intervention in family life through prescriptive accounts of “good parenting” have expressed the concern that parenting is becoming “politicized”. Yet, as I argue, there is an irreducible moral and political aspect to parenting, or upbringing. What I want to address is the sense in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about the moral and political aspects of being a parent in a particular relationship with a particular child, as opposed to construing such relationships and the dilemmas they pose as part of a general, neutral scientific account. I will develop my critique and my exploration of alternative perspectives through a discussion of some philosophical literature in the area of moral theory, alongside some recent accounts of and by parents in literature and the popular media.