

Lyudmila Petranovskaya in her office at the Family Placement Development Institute, which she founded. Behind her is a list of children that were adopted in recent years thanks to the institute's work. (June 13, 2019; Moscow. Photo by Maria Danilova)

Russia's Parenting Boom Reveals Signs of Social Change

Maria Danilova

One evening in June last year, about a hundred women and men gathered in an auditorium in central Moscow to listen to a popular Russian psychologist and parenting expert. After Lyudmila Petranovskaya finished her lecture, anxious parents peppered her with questions. How to help a pre-teen complete homework on time and without tears? How to motivate a child to read "Harry Potter?" After-school art studio or Taekwondo?

Russia is in the midst of a parenting boom. Bookstores are teeming with children's and parenting literature. Lectures and classes in Moscow and other cities abound, offering pedagogical and psychological advice. The Russian-language internet is awash with parenting communities, blogs and shows. Never before have

Russians invested so much energy, effort and worry into raising children.

This kind of intensive, all-in parenting took off in the 2000s. After a decade of hardship that followed the Soviet collapse in 1991, an oil-fueled economic boom gave Russian parents additional resources to invest in their children, said Maria Mayofis, a culture historian with the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. And with political and civic freedoms continuing to shrink under President Vladimir Putin, some Russians see parenting as an outlet for creative energy and personal fulfillment. Children's book publishing is booming, and so are educational and extracurricular programs for children.

"We are moving away from a model of austerity, survival, hunger or overcoming never-ending difficulties and obstacles to a place where people have the capacity to enjoy life and enjoy children," said Olga Bezrukova, a sociologist at St. Petersburg State University who studies Russian parenting. "And that is wonderful."

Less discipline, more hugs

Today's young parents, men and women in their twenties and thirties, were raised in the waning days of the Soviet Union or shortly after. They grew up in an education system focused on discipline and conformity. When in daycare, they were often forced to eat soup. When in school, left-handed students were made to relearn to write with their right hand. A strong hierarchy was enforced at home and at school, and parents and teachers were by and large not to be argued with or questioned.

"This is a hierarchical relationship, when the parent is the boss and the child is the employee," said Bezrukova. "The parent is always right, he is on top. And the child is always weaker and the parent stronger."

Petranovskaya touched a nerve when she offered a different approach: accept and love your child for what he is; respect her individuality freedom; hug more, lecture less. "A child's readiness to listen is not determined by lectures and sermons, punishment and rewards, but by the quality of his attachment," Petranovskaya writes in her best-selling book, *Secret Pillar*. "Do you want your child to be able to deal with life? Then hug him, soothe him, accept his feelings his whole childhood."

Petranovskaya started her career as a therapist by working with orphans and eventually founded the School for Adoptive Parents, which prepares and supports families during adoption. Thanks in large part to Petranovskaya, adoptions, which carried a stigma in the Soviet era, have grown dramatically in Russia over the past two decades. It was while counseling these children who are deeply scarred by parental absence or neglect that Petranovskaya realized the value of a deep emotional bond between the child and his caregiver. She started blogging, publishing books, and giving talks on the subject and became a leading authority on child rearing. One parenting website has compared Petranovskaya to the ultimate national Russian icon, whose portrait hangs in just about every Russian school: the 19th century poet Alexander Pushkin. "Lyudmila Petranovskaya is for modern parenting what Pushkin is for Russian literature and poetry: our everything," the website said.

"I want to humanize parenting in Russia," Petranovskaya said in an interview last summer at her organization's office. As she spoke, a giant blackboard displayed the names of dozens of children adopted in recent years thanks to Petranovskaya's help: Anya, Nikita, Ilya.

"It used to be about how to force that brat to clean up after himself and do his homework," Petranovskaya said. "Now it's about making sure that the child develops and believes in himself, about trying not to wound him."

An in-depth study of over 100 Russian children and youth aged 8-22 and their parents from the Validata market research firm conducted in 2016 in Moscow and two other cities illustrates this shift. The study found that today's parents tend to practice a more



Lyudmila Petranovskaya delivers a public lecture on parenting and the different types of intelligence children possess. (June 14 2019: Moscow. Photo by Maria Danilova).

liberal approach, giving their children more freedom to choose what to wear, how to look, and how to spend their leisure time. They are also ready to negotiate with their child on equal terms and work out compromises.

“The focus has moved from discipline, from obeying your elders, following strict rules without a discussion of whether you like it or not; to understanding that one should be engaged in what one likes, that the opinion of the child matters, that if you do that, you can build equal relations and that is valuable,” said Larisa Shpakovskaya, with the Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Liubov Borusyak, a sociologist at Moscow City University who studies education and parenting,

agrees: “It isn’t the child who is bad, but it’s the parents who didn’t find the right approach, especially when it comes to teenagers. You should accept the child the way he is and try to influence him in the softest way possible.”

This new approach is especially popular among urban middle-class parents. Yevgeniya Safonenkova, a 42-year-old economist in Moscow, said she has learned to see her children as independent entities. When Safonenkova was growing up, she recalled, her parents expected her to babysit her younger brother even if that meant missing parties with friends. By contrast, she rarely entrusts her sixteen-year-old daughter Alexandra with watching her seven-year-old brother Semyon; and when she does, she views it as asking for a favor.

"She has her own life as a child, as a teenager, and it wasn't her decision to have a brother, it was my decision," Safonenkova said. "Children are individuals, same as parents," she added. "And we shouldn't disregard their views."

Victoria Godunova, 40, an advertising specialist in Moscow, whose son, Mark, is four, says she is very careful not to hurt his self-esteem or wound him when criticizing him. "You shouldn't tell the child that he is bad. If he did something naughty, if he broke something — you should say that this was a bad thing to do," Godunova said. "I follow this rule all the time because I don't want my child to think that he is bad just because he did something bad."

"Even if I am mad at you right now, I still love you," she tells him.

Ekaterina Leshchenko, 35, a real estate agent in Moscow and a fan of Petranovskaya's work said that she has learned to appreciate her son's strengths and peculiarities and help him develop the skills that he still lacks, such as time management. When her nine-year-old son, Vladimir, was struggling with an art project at school, she let him miss the deadline for turning it in, as long as he continued to work on his drawing and eventually submitted the assignment. "I could have just forced him, but what would I have gained? He would have been obedient, yes, but wounded and hurt," Leshchenko said. "You need to be patient and gentle."

Authoritative Care

At the same time, Petranovskaya warns parents against giving children free rein and sliding into anarchy. She says that children require boundaries and that parental values should be respected.

Children need "authoritative care, the care of someone strong and responsible, a dominance that is used not for the sake of subjugating and suppressing, but for the sake of helping and protecting," Petranovskaya writes in her book.

Leshchenko, the real estate agent, says she is always looking for a fair balance between her will and her child's wishes. When Vladimir, who goes by the nickname Vova, refused to attend an after-school English program that she had signed him up for, Leshchenko put her foot down. "You are allowed to say no to eating cucumbers or tomatoes, but when it comes to your education, I am your mother and I have the final say. Period," she recalled saying. "You are still too young to understand how important it is."

During one of her lectures, Petranovskaya was asked for advice on parenting a teen who is littering the house with his smelly socks. "If the socks are in his room, then just don't go there and you won't smell them," replied Petranovskaya, cracking up the audience. "But if you find them in your room, you have the right to defend your territory and make a fuss about why they are there."

Petranovskaya believes that the change in parenting practices signifies a larger liberal shift in Russian society: a deepening of social ties, more attention paid to one's health, greater care for the environment, a more robust civil society.

"It is part of a broader process," Petranovskaya said. "When people stop being hit on the head or barely survive, they begin moving up the Maslow Pyramid and begin to work on bettering their lives at higher levels."





The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

Endnotes


1. "Lyudmila Petranovskaya," Priyama Rech, https://www.pryamaya.ru/lyudmila_petranovskaya
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4. "Lectures and interviews by Lyudmila Petranovskaya that you might have missed," Nen.ru, December 12, 2018, <https://n-e-n.ru/petrvideo/>
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