OUR KIDS
The American Dream in Crisis

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The roots of many executive and behavioral differences that appear in middle childhood and adolescence are often traced back to the early years.

Child Development: What We Are Learning

In recent years, research has greatly expanded our understanding of how young children develop. This includes new insights into the cognitive, emotional, and social development of young children. Understanding these processes is crucial for raising healthy, well-adjusted children. Research has shown that early childhood experiences have a significant impact on later development. Children who experience consistent care and support during their early years are more likely to develop strong social skills and emotional regulation, which are important for their overall well-being.

Children born in a less affluent environment have been found to experience more stress, which can affect their development. This stress can lead to difficulties in learning and social interaction. Therefore, it is important to provide support and resources to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Another finding is that children who have experienced trauma or adversity early in life may have more challenges in their development. This highlights the importance of early intervention and support for children who have experienced trauma.

In conclusion, understanding the development of children is crucial for creating supportive environments that promote healthy growth and development. It is important to recognize the impact of early experiences and provide the necessary support to help children reach their full potential.
18 months, and their origins, we now know, lie even earlier in the child’s life. Neuroscience has shown that the child’s brain is biologically primed to learn from experience, so that early environments powerfully affect the architecture of the developing brain. The most fundamental feature of that experience is interaction with responsive adults—typically, but not only, parents.

Healthy infant brain development requires connecting with caring, consistent adults. The key mechanism of this give-and-take learning is termed by specialists in child development “contingent reciprocity” (or more simply, “serve-and-return” interaction). Like serving in a game of tennis, the child sends out some signal (for example, by babbling), and when the adult responds (for example, by vocalizing back), detectable traces are left on the developing circuitry of the child’s brain. Much of this learning is preverbal, of course. However, research has shown that the foundations of both mathematical and verbal skills are acquired in the earliest years more effectively through informal interaction with adults than through formal training. This interaction is classically illustrated when a parent, while reading to a toddler, points at pictures and names them and the child is encouraged to respond.

Cognitive stimulation by parents is essential for optimal learning. Children who grow up with parents who listen and talk with them frequently (a practice that Simone and Carl followed regularly) develop more advanced language skills than kids whose parents rarely engage them in conversation (as happened with Stephanie, who explained, “We ain’t got time for all that talk-about-our-day stuff”). The brain, in short, develops as a social organ, not an isolated computer.

Neuroscientists and developmental psychologists have identified an especially important set of brain-based skills that they call “executive functions,” that is, the air traffic control activities that are manifest in concentration, impulse control, mental flexibility, and working memory. These functions, concentrated in the part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, allow you to put this book down when your cell phone rings, make a mental note to pick up the kids after soccer, and then resume reading where you left off. Deficiencies in executive functions show up in such conditions as learning disabilities and ADHD.

Under normal circumstances, with supportive caregivers, executive functions develop especially rapidly between the ages of three and five. However, children who experience severe or chronic stress during that period—precisely when Elijah was living with his inattentive grandparents in the terrifying violence of the New Orleans projects, and when Stephanie deployed the only tool (whupping) she could think of to stop Michelle’s howling—are more likely to have impaired executive functioning. This, in turn, leaves them less able to solve problems, cope with adversity, and organize their lives.

One important implication of this research is that skills acquired early in childhood are foundational and make later learning more efficient. Thus, experiences in those years are especially significant. Conversely, as the child ages, the brain becomes less able to change. One consequence of this fact is that early intervention is more powerful and cost-effective than intervention during adolescence.

Intellectual and socioemotional development are inextricably intertwined from an early age. Research has shown that so-called noncognitive skills (grit, social sensitivity, optimism, self-control, conscientiousness, emotional stability) are very important for life success. They can lead to greater physical health, school success, college enrollment, employment, and lifetime earnings, and can keep people out of trouble and out of prison. These skills are at least as important as cognitive skills in predicting such measures of success, and may be even more important in our postindustrial future than in the preindustrial and industrial past.

So on the positive side of the ledger, the child’s interaction with caring, responsive adults is an essential ingredient in successful development. On the other side of the ledger, neglect and stress, including what is now called “toxic stress,” can impede successful development. Chronic neglect, in fact, is often associated with a wider range of developmental consequences than is overt physical abuse. Beating kids is bad, but entirely ignoring them can be even worse.
Our Kids

Table 3: Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale

11. Household member imprisoned

10. Household member depressed or suicidal

9. Household member was physically abused

8. Living with an alcoholic or drug user

7. Mother/separations was physically abused for you

6. You lacked food or clothes or your parents were too drunk or high to care

5. Friends/parents/loved you

4. Feel no one in family loved or supported you

3. Had sexual experience you didn’t want

2. Household adult hit, slapped, or injured you

1. Household adult militantly or threatened you physically

The effects of stress on brain development can be equally profound and difficult to overcome when the trauma occurred at an early age. Our Kids

Evidently, we know that neglect is not good for a child, and our Kids

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experiences, of course, but those who grow up in low-income, less educated families are at considerably greater risk. Even kids living at twice the poverty level (i.e., the level that Stephanie described as "good money") are two to five times more likely than their less impoverished peers to experience such trauma as parental death or imprisonment, physical abuse, neighborhood violence, and drugs or alcoholism in the family—all experiences that have been shown to have negative consequences, ranging from depression and heart disease to developmental delays and even suicide. As those experiences tend to cumulate, the overall impact can be very large.29

The toxic stress that undermines child development is itself typically a reflection of considerable stress in the lives of the parents—both severe (such as clinical depression) and the pile-up of daily hassles. Maternal stress during a child’s first year is especially disruptive of infant-mother attachment and caregiving. And it’s a vicious cycle: the results of childhood stress (for example, acting out or ADHD) often increase stress on parents, further worsening their parenting behavior.30

Biopsychiatrists at the Harvard Medical School have shown that mothers who frequently abuse their children even verbally can impair the circuitry of those kids’ brains. “Young adults exposed to parental verbal abuse,” the study reported, “had elevated symptoms of depression, anxiety, and dissociation.”31 This research confirms what we might call “Elijah’s hypothesis”: “When you cussing at your child all the time and just really going hammer, that really breaks—that really discourages your child.”

On the other hand, a sensitive, responsive adult caregiver can minimize the effects of even significant stress on a child.32 Laboratory studies have confirmed this in animals. McGill University neurobiologist Michael Meaney, for example, has demonstrated that newborn rat pups that had been licked and groomed frequently (which is the typical way in which mother rats nurture their newborns) display lower stress hormones, and grow up to be smarter, more curious, healthier, and better able to deal with stressful situations than newborn rats licked and groomed less frequently. Meaney and his colleagues then ingeniously demonstrated that the link between maternal behavior and pup behavior was not merely genetic. In a carefully designed study, they had genetically high lickers and groomers raise genetically vulnerable pups (that is, the offspring of mothers who were low lickers and groomers), and those pups grew up to behave more like their foster mothers than their biological ones: they were less prone to stress and flourished as adults.33

Providing physical and emotional security and comfort—hugging, for example—is the human equivalent of a mother rat’s licking and grooming behavior and can make a great difference in children’s lives. When Chelsea’s parents in Port Clinton comforted her after the suicide of a close family friend, they were, in effect, “licking and grooming.” Parents who have a warm, nurturing relationship with their children can help them to build resilience and buffer stresses that would otherwise be damaging.34 Psychologist Byron Egeland found, for example, that among low-income mothers and children in Minneapolis, children who had been more warmly nurtured at age one did better in school than their less well nurtured peers and were less anxious and more socially competent years later.35

These early cognitive and socioemotional capacities (especially self-control and determination) in turn predict how well children do in school. A long-term randomized experimental study in Montreal shows that improving children’s social skills (for example, taking turns and listening to others) and social trust as early as seven years old can powerfully enhance opportunity.36 When kids and their parents are given a “dose” of sociability, in other words, the kids stay in school and out of jail, and do much better economically over the long run. Conversely, a childhood “dose” of social isolation and distrust, such as Elijah and Kayla received, significantly compromises their prospects.

The fundamental social significance of the neurobiological discoveries that I’ve just summarized is that healthy brain development in American children turns out to be closely correlated with parental education, income, and social class.37 Consider some recent findings.
This never idea has reached all sectors of society, through child-rearing manuals, family newsletters, and experts on TV. The picture of "intuitive parenting" has become so popular that it can be followed by practically everyone. But is this really the case? 

In fact, the attitudes of parents are more likely than ever. In short, college-educated parents are more likely than ever to use the child's own preferences to make decisions, relying on their instinct rather than on professional advice. According to an annual survey by the National Association of Education Research, 72 percent of parents of middle-class children believe in the value of intuitive parenting. 

Not enough research has been done to determine the long-term effects of intuitive parenting. However, children who are raised in an environment where parents are encouraged to relax and enjoy their own preferences, are more likely to develop into confident, independent adults. This is especially true for children who are exposed to stress and conflict, which often leads to negative outcomes. 

In the last 50 years, ideas about best practices in parenting have under-
changes in parenting philosophy, however, it has spread most rapidly and thoroughly among more educated parents. As Earl (our upper class dad from Bend) put it, “Our generation has read every damn book you can read about being parents. Even more with this generation behind me, they’ve done all the homework for it.”

In the contemporary United States, parents seek to stimulate their children’s cognitive and social skills from an early age, and as a result “good parenting” has become time-consuming and expensive. Especially among college-educated parents, “good mothers” are now expected to make immense investments in their children, and “good fathers” face more demanding expectations of involvement in family life and day-to-day child care.48 Parents at all levels of society now aspire to intensive parenting, but, as we shall see, the less educated and less affluent among them have been less able to put those ideals into practice.49

The influential family ethnographer Annette Lareau has discerned two class-based models of parenting in American society today, which she calls concerted cultivation and natural growth.50

Concerted cultivation refers to the child-rearing investments that middle-class parents deliberately make to foster their children’s cognitive, social, and cultural skills, and, in turn, to further their children’s success in life, particularly in school. When Simone briefed her kids on Anne Frank, made flash cards, gave Desmond Hooked on Phonics, or arranged playgroups, or when Carl took Desmond to work, discussed the news with him, or asked him what he had learned in Sunday School, they were engaged in concerted cultivation.

Natural growth leaves the child’s development more to his or her own devices, with less scheduling and less engagement with schools. In this model, parents rely more on rules and discipline, less on close parental monitoring, encouragement, reasoning, and negotiation. Joe wanted to be a more engaged parent for Kayla as she drifted toward depression, but given the constraints he faced, as well as his own impoverished childhood, a natural growth strategy was the best he could manage. It’s the parenting model still more characteristic of poorer families today, though may be fading among them, too.

One broad class difference in parenting norms turns up in virtually all studies: well-educated parents aim to raise autonomous, independent, self-directed children with high self-esteem and the ability to make good choices, whereas less educated parents focus on discipline and obedience and conformity to pre-established rules. Figure 3.1 illustrates this sharp distinction. Parents with less than a high school education endorse obedience over self-reliance, 65 percent to 18 percent, whereas parents with a graduate education make exactly the opposite choice, 70 percent to 19 percent. Upper-class parents have more egalitarian relations with their children and are more likely to use reasoning and guilt for discipline, whereas lower-class parents are more likely to use physical punishment, like whupping.51

Figure 3.1: Parental education and parenting objectives


These class differences show up in parents’ actual behavior, not just their avowed priorities. Simone can’t recall ever punishing Desmond (not even “no TV for a week”). Carl likens a parent sometimes to a
The evidence strongly suggests that the parenting style typology of warm, active involvement, and reasoned discipline—characterized by nurturing, affection, and encouragement and desired patterns, differentiated by numerous attributes—favors children in lower-class neighborhoods, where barriers to educational opportunity are higher. 

Verbal encouragements and discouragements per year (est.)

**Figure 3.2: Class Differences in Verbal Parenting**

We found significant differences in the way parents communicate with their children based on class. Children from working-class families received more verbal encouragements and fewer discouragements compared to children from professional-class families. This suggests that parenting styles vary across social classes, influencing educational outcomes.

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*Note: The diagram shows a clear trend where children from professional-class families receive more encouragements and less discouragements compared to those from working-class families. This supports the hypothesis that parenting style is influenced by social class.*

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*Source: Child Development, 1999*
hugging and less spanking—leads to greater socioemotional competence among children. Elijah intuited this: “If you tell your child that he ain’t gonna be nothin’ but a low-down dirty-rat scoundrel, your child is gonna be a low-down dirty-rat scoundrel.”

Class-based differences in parenting style are well established and powerfully consequential. The ubiquitous correlation between poverty and child development (both cognitive and socioemotional) is, in fact, largely explained by differences in parenting styles, including cognitive stimulation (such as frequency of reading) and social engagement (such as involvement in extracurricular activities, like those Simone encouraged her kids to join).\textsuperscript{55} In particular, parental reading (controlling for many other factors, including maternal education, verbal ability, and warmth) fosters child development.\textsuperscript{56} Child development specialists Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook have found that differences in parenting—especially maternal sensitivity and nurturance, but also provision of books, library visits, and the like—is the single most important factor explaining differences in school readiness between rich kids and poor kids, as measured by literacy, mathematics, and language test scores at age four.\textsuperscript{57}

Have these class-based differences in parenting grown in recent years? Reliable indicators are hard to find, because persuasive measurement requires repeated, identical surveys over many years. But there is one exception: family dinners. And trends in family dining tell a revealing story.

Waldfogel has shown that (even after controlling for many other factors) family dining is a powerful predictor of how children will fare as they develop. “Youths who ate dinner with their parents at least five times a week,” she writes, “did better across a range of outcomes: they were less likely to smoke, to drink, to have used marijuana, to have been in a serious fight, to have had sex... or to have been suspended from school, and they had higher grade point averages and were more likely to say they planned to go on to college.”\textsuperscript{58}

Among the folks we met in Bend and Atlanta, affluent families made regular dinner conversation between parents and children a priority. “My dad and my mom have always made sure that we eat dinner together,” Andrew reported, adding, “it’s our only real time that all four of us could talk.” Desmond said, “I actually learned a lot from those conversations that we had at the dinner table.” By contrast, the poorer families didn’t—or couldn’t—make eating together a priority. “We tried to,” Darleen recalled, “but it wasn’t always like that... We would watch TV together.” Stephanie and her daughter Lauren summed things up very simply. “We’re not a sit-down-and-eat family,” Stephanie said, and Lauren added, “When it’s time to eat, it’s whoever wants to eat. It wasn’t everybody sit at the table, like a party or something.”

From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, as Figure 3.3 shows, family dinners became rarer in all social echelons, as families struggled to manage the new scheduling complexities of having two working parents. In the mid-1990s that steady waning of opportunities for family conversation was suddenly halted among college-educated parents, but it continued uninterrupted among high-school-educated families.\textsuperscript{59} Single-parent families are less likely to have dinner as a family, but that doesn’t account for much of the widening class gap, since the growth of the gap is actually concentrated among two-parent families. The result is another of the scissors charts that appear throughout this book—a growing gap in childhood experience between kids from well-educated, affluent backgrounds and kids from less educated, impoverished backgrounds.

Family dining is no panacea for child development, but it is one indicator of the subtle but powerful investments that parents make in their kids (or fail to make). What happened in the 1990s? It’s hard to tell from these data, but a plausible interpretation is that better-educated parents were indirectly influenced by the growing recognition of the importance of serve-and-return interactions for child development—and devoted more time to making them possible, whereas less educated parents were slower to get the word or were leading such complicated lives that family dinners were not a realistic option.
important in determining upward mobility. Parents who send their children to preschool and kindergarten are more likely to have higher incomes, and their children are more likely to attend college.

These differences in parental investment, in turn, are strongly predictive of various academic outcomes. Higher parental investment leads to higher test scores, better attendance, and a greater likelihood of attending college. Moreover, children from higher-income families are more likely to attend high-quality schools, have access to extracurricular activities, and receive better-quality child care. This is true even when controlling for other factors such as race, gender, and ethnicity.

Higher parental investment also leads to better health outcomes. Children from higher-income families are more likely to have access to healthcare, and their parents are more likely to invest in their children's health. This is especially true for children from lower-income families, who are more likely to experience health disparities.

In conclusion, parental investment is a critical factor in determining upward mobility. It is important for policymakers to consider how they can support parents in making these investments, such as through policies that provide access to high-quality preschool and kindergarten, and that reduce the costs of child care for low-income families.
advantages in life—but as a society we have yet to invest adequately in those years, and instead devote most of our public resources to the K–12 years. (We shall explore class differences in schooling in the next chapter.)

Figure 3.4: Trends in spending on children per child, by household income, in constant (2008) dollars, 1972–2007

Parents at all educational and income levels are spending more time with their kids nowadays than their counterparts did a half century ago. However, as we saw above with money, the increase is much greater among college-educated parents than among high-school-educated parents. Moreover, the growing class gap is concentrated in “Goodnight Moon time”: that is, time spent on developmental activities. (Researchers who study how parents allocate their time often distinguish between this Goodnight Moon time and the time spent on physical care of the child—“diaper time.”) Finally, the class differences in time investment are

concentrated during early childhood—precisely when, as we learned in the previous section of this chapter, time with parents matters most. Figure 3.5 shows trends in the time that parents from different educational backgrounds have spent on developmental care for infants aged 0–4.62

In the 1970s, there were virtually no class differences in how much time a child got with mom or dad. By 2013, however, the average infant or toddler of college-educated parents was getting half again as much Goodnight Moon time every day as the average infant or toddler of high-school-educated parents. That means they were getting nearly three quarters of an hour more of serve-and-return interaction every day.

Figure 3.5: Time spent by both parents in developmental child care, children aged 0–4, 1965–2013

College-educated moms are more likely to be working outside the home than less educated moms. This reduces the time they can spend with their kids—but this is mitigated by the fact that they are much
The class gaps widen when we consider formal pre-K instruction.

Child development psychology teaches that the first three years of life are crucial. If you want educated their children, they need to focus on early childhood education. The National Institute for Early Education Research found that the lowest 40 percent of families by income and 90 percent of those by poverty live in homes that are not pre-K ready. Pre-K can make a difference.

Families below the poverty line are three times more likely to have lower income and no pre-K. In fact, about 40 percent of children in pre-K and early childhood programs are from homes with less than 12 months of pre-K readiness.

Children in pre-K are more likely to have higher-achieving parents. The National Institute for Early Education Research found that children in pre-K are more likely to have parents with college degrees. Pre-K can make a difference.

What does this mean for parents? It means that pre-K is crucial. If you want your child to succeed, you need to focus on early childhood education. The National Institute for Early Education Research found that the lowest 40 percent of families by income and 90 percent of those by poverty live in homes that are not pre-K ready. Pre-K can make a difference.

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no matter what measure of parental investment in child development we use, kids from more educated, affluent homes have a substantial and even widening lead.

PARENTAL STRESS

The everyday hassles of parenting are stressful: cleaning up after the kids, managing multiple schedules, lack of privacy, and lack of time for self and partner. Moreover, parents also have to cope with the ordinary stresses of the rest of life, especially work. Everyday stress levels vary across families, of course, but a vast body of research links parental stress with less sensitive, less responsive parenting, and thus with bad outcomes for kids. Stressed parents are both harsher and less attentive parents. Economic stress, in particular, disrupts family relations, fosters withdrawal and inconsistent parenting, and directly increases chronic stress among children.

All of the life stories in this book illustrate this linkage from economic hardship to stressed parenting to bad outcomes for kids. The Great Recession created exceptional stresses, but as Figure 3.6 shows, the class gap in economic stress on parents had been growing steadily for the previous three decades, with serious consequences for parenting. (Here financial worries are measured by an index of responses to a series of questions about family income and debt.) As Laura Bush once observed in a 2007 White House discussion of the growing class gaps among American kids, “If you don’t know how long you’re going to keep your job, or how long you’re going to keep your house, you have less energy to invest in the kids.”

The first lady’s comments anticipated arguments that the behavioral economists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir made in their 2013 book, Scarcity. Under conditions of scarcity, they write, the brain’s ability to grasp, manage, and solve problems falters, like a computer slowed down by too many open apps, leaving us less efficient and less effective than we would be under conditions of abundance. What we usually understand as an impoverished parent’s lack of skills, care, patience,
Grandparenting.

Grandparents are the least likely to become depressed. Furthermore, their income levels are higher, which means they are less likely to become depressed. Consequently, lower-income, lower-grandparent families have lower rates of depression, lower rates of unemployment, and lower rates of poverty.

Grandparents today are more important in their grandchildren's lives than their counterparts were in earlier centuries. This trend is accompanied by higher educational attainment and more economic resources. Grandparents are the least likely to become depressed. Furthermore, their income levels are higher, which means they are less likely to become depressed. Consequently, lower-income, lower-grandparent families have lower rates of depression, lower rates of unemployment, and lower rates of poverty.
handicapping children born to poorer, less educated parents. Material
deprivation—poor nutrition, inadequate health care, exposure to envi-
ronmental risks like lead paint—can have powerful long-term effects on
children’s intellectual and emotional development. Conversely, several
high-quality experimental studies have shown that simply giving poor
families money can improve the academic and social performance of
their kids—money matters. Even ideal parenting cannot compensate
for all the ill effects of poverty on children, and even incompetent par-
enting cannot nullify all the advantages conferred by parental affluence
and education.

That said, the best scientific evidence confirms that the patterns of
parenting illustrated by our three Atlanta families represent broad trends
across America. The disadvantages facing poor kids begin early and run
deep, and are firmly established before the kids get to school—which is
the subject of the next chapter.