

# OUR KIDS

The American Dream  
in Crisis

ROBERT D. PUTNAM

author of *Bowling Alone*



Another future he envisions for himself is more secular and ultimately more compelling. "I'm a hip-hop head," he says, "so I wanna produce music. That's my dream. I wanna be a DJ. That's my dream right there, to have my own record label. I'm at a point now where I just don't care. I'm about to go ahead and save up some more money and get my own apartment and go to school. Nowadays I'm trying to get another job right now, and trying to fulfill that dream of being one of the greatest rappers of all time. I don't never normally tell nobody this, but all I do is write and listen to music. So that's what I see myself doing: being a rapper, living the high life."

After 21 violent, tumultuous years of life, Elijah is a self-sufficient survivor, though just barely. He still seems addicted to the adrenaline rush of violence that he first experienced as a six-year-old in New Orleans. "I just love beating up somebody," he says, "and making they nose bleed and just hurting them and just beating them on the ground." At the same time, he seems to recognize that he needs to keep his urge to be violent in check. "I try to keep it under control," he says, "because people think that weird and crazy. I don't want to go that route now, because I'm more mature now. I'm forever saying I don't live that life no more. I go to work, go to church and home. So God don't want me to beat nobody up no more. I'm pretty sure."

The troubles in Elijah's personal life obviously had roots in his parentless early childhood in New Orleans, but that turbulence accelerated with "the different transitions I had to go through, a lot of different experiences that I wasn't used to." On the other hand, he seems genuinely committed to improving his situation. As he puts it, "I ended [up] trying—becoming a champion of all my problems. Being a problem solver, and just believing that I can do everything."

He admits that he's still "going through a lot of personal issues" with his parents, but nevertheless he seems hopeful. "All I do is go to church," he says. "I have fun, chill with my friends, and just trying to be a good all-around American citizen."

The three families whose lives we have just glimpsed are obviously not representative. (Sadly, because of racial disparities in economic well-being and incarceration, Elijah's story is more typical of black youth than Desmond's story.) But the differences among these three families do help us understand the troubling class-based disparities in parenting that have emerged and grown in America in recent decades. These three families happen to be black, but the class disparities they demonstrate are at least as marked—and are growing at least as rapidly—among white families.

These changing patterns in parenting have great significance for children's prospects. I begin with a close focus on the latest scientific research on brain development in young children, which clarifies exactly what aspects of parenting help and hurt most in terms of a child's cognitive and socioemotional development. I then zoom back to a wide-angle view of class differences in parenting practices nationwide over the last several decades to explore how and why those class differences have grown, to the relative disadvantage of poor kids.

### Child Development: What We Are Learning

Recent research has greatly expanded our understanding of how young children's early experiences and socioeconomic environment influence their neurobiological development, and how, in turn, early neurobiological development influences their later lives. These effects turn out to be powerful and long-lasting. "Virtually every aspect of early human development," write the authors of a landmark study by the National Academy of Sciences, "from the brain's evolving circuitry to the child's capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years."<sup>18</sup> The bottom line: early life experiences get under your skin in a most powerful way.

The roots of many cognitive and behavioral differences that appear in middle childhood and adolescence are often already present by

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).<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 mer-<sup>1</sup> 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 (whopping) 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> Beating kids is bad, but entirely ignoring them can be even worse.

Intuitively, we know that neglect is not good for a child, and abundant evidence from neuroscience helps explain why: neglect during early childhood reduces the frequency of serve-and-return interactions and produces deficits in brain development that are hard to repair. A landmark randomized study of Romanian orphans who were institutionalized at an early age found that extreme neglect produced severe deficits in IQ, mental health, social adjustment, and even brain architecture. Most of these impairments turned out to be reversible when children were placed in home settings before the age of two, but they were increasingly difficult to repair when placements occurred at later ages.<sup>23</sup>

The effects of toxic stress on brain development can be equally appalling. The stress response itself (that is, sharp increases in adrenaline, blood pressure, heart rate, glucose, and stress hormones) represents a highly effective defense mechanism, fashioned by evolution to help all animal species deal with immediate danger. Moderate stress buffered by supportive adults is not necessarily harmful, and may even be helpful, in that it can promote the development of coping skills. On the other hand, severe and chronic stress, especially if unbuffered by supportive adults, can disrupt the basic executive functions that govern how various parts of the brain work together to address challenges and solve problems. Consequently, children who experience toxic stress have trouble concentrating, controlling impulsive behavior, and following directions.

Extreme stress causes a cascade of biochemical and anatomical changes that impair brain development and change brain architecture at a basic level.<sup>24</sup> Stress caused by unstable and consistently unresponsive caregiving, physical or emotional abuse, parental substance abuse, and lack of affection can produce measurable physiological changes in the child that lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health, including depression, alcoholism, obesity, and heart disease.

Scientists have developed the Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale to measure the incidence of a selected list of events that can produce toxic str

childhood is not typically associated with bad adult outcomes. However, as the number of negative experiences increases, the rates of lifelong adverse consequences escalate. Summarizing the results of many studies, the Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman writes, “Early adverse experiences correlate with poor adult health, high medical care costs, increased depression and suicide rates, alcoholism, drug use, poor job performance and social function, disability, and impaired performance of subsequent generations.”<sup>26</sup>

Table 3.1: Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale

1. Household adult humiliated or threatened you physically
2. Household adult hit, slapped, or injured you
3. Adult sexually abused you
4. Felt no one in family loved or supported you
5. Parents separated/divorced
6. You lacked food or clothes or your parents were too drunk or high to care for you
7. Mother/stepmother was physically abused
8. Lived with an alcoholic or drug user
9. Household member depressed or suicidal
10. Household member imprisoned

As a child, Elijah experienced at least eight of these ten stressful events, so his very survival is extraordinary. To be sure, some kids (like Elijah) seem resilient even in the face of severe, chronic stress. Innate resilience can be overrated, however, because the wear and tear of chronic stress can have adverse physiological effects even on kids who seem to be beating the odds.<sup>27</sup> This is sometimes called the “John Henry effect,” after the pile driver who hammered hard enough to beat a steam engine, but “worked so hard, it broke his heart; John Henry laid down his hammer and died.”<sup>28</sup> Statistically speaking, Elijah is living on borrowed time.

Kids at any socioeconomic level can encounter such adverse

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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

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.”<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> Consider some recent findings.

- Growing evidence indicates that children who grow up in poverty are at higher risk for elevated levels of cortisol, a frequently studied stress hormone. Poverty seems to contribute to a context of chaos that impinges on children's physiology.<sup>38</sup>
- A recent study found that the part of the brain responsible for emotional regulation was impaired in adults who had been exposed to the stresses of poverty as children years earlier.<sup>39</sup>
- Canadian researchers found differences in the brain waves of children from lower- and upper-class backgrounds that suggested the former had more difficulty in concentrating on a simple task, apparently because their brains had been trained to maintain constant surveillance of the environment for new threats.<sup>40</sup>
- Another recent study reported MRI evidence of slower brain growth and less gray matter in a small sample of young children living in poverty compared to children from more affluent backgrounds, though more research is needed before this finding can be generalized.<sup>41</sup>
- Kids from upper-income, well-educated homes benefit from richer verbal interaction because their parents have larger vocabularies and use more complex syntax.<sup>42</sup> In a landmark study, child development specialists followed 42 families in Kansas, carefully observing the families' daily verbal interactions one hour each month over three years. They estimated that by the time the children entered kindergarten, the children of the professional families had heard 19 million more words than the children of working-class parents, and 32 million more words than the children of parents on welfare.<sup>43</sup>
- According to one national study, 72 percent of middle-class children know the alphabet when starting school, as opposed to only 19 percent of poor children.<sup>44</sup>

In short, college-educated parents are more likely than high-school-educated parents to volley when their kids serve, and kids from

more affluent homes are exposed to less toxic stress than kids raised in poverty. Moreover, class-based disparities in cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities emerge at very early ages and remain stable over the life course, which implies that, whatever the causal factors, those factors operate most strongly in the preschool years.<sup>45</sup> Of course, this does not mean that later interventions are useless, still less that the class-based disparities are God-given or predetermined, but it does suggest the importance of focusing on early childhood development.

Ironically, the new research findings tend to amplify class differences, at least in the short run, because well-educated parents are more likely to learn of them, directly or indirectly, and to put them to use in their own parenting.<sup>46</sup> As we'll see, a class-based gap in parenting styles has been growing significantly during recent decades. Simone and Stephanie both clearly love their children, but as their stories and the scientific research make clear, when it comes to parenting, love alone is not enough to guarantee positive outcomes.

### Trends in Parenting

In the last 60 years, ideas about best practices in parenting have undergone two broad waves of change, in accord with the evolving views of developmental psychologists.<sup>47</sup> After World War II, the runaway best-seller *Baby and Child Care* by the famed pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock taught parents of the baby boom that children should be permitted to develop at their own pace, not pushed to meet the schedules and rules of adult life. Parents were encouraged to relax and enjoy their children. Beginning in the 1980s, and at an accelerating rate since the 1990s, however, the dominant ideas and social norms about good parenting have shifted from Spock's "permissive parenting" to a new model of "intensive parenting," in part because of the new insights into brain development that I have just described.

This newer ideal has reached all segments of society, through child-rearing manuals, family magazines, and experts on TV. Like previous

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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

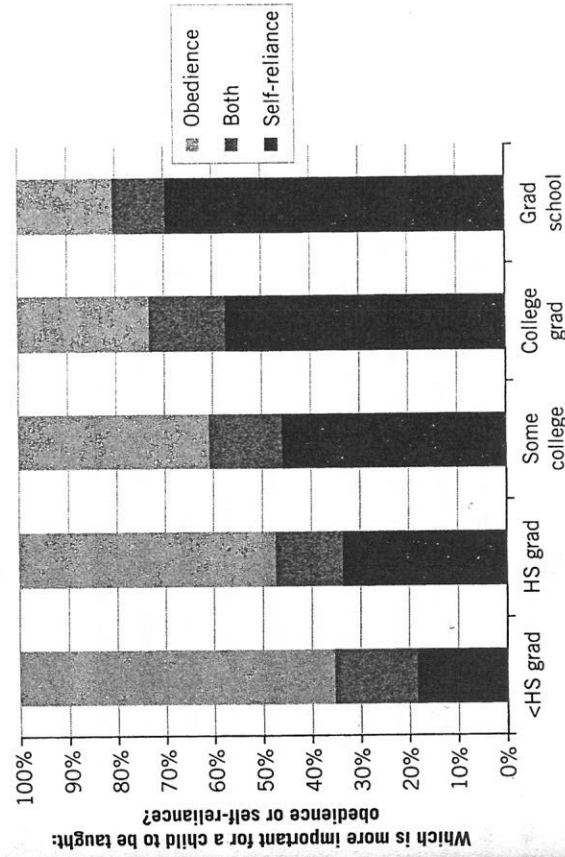
The influential family ethnographer Annette Lareau has discerned two class-based models of parenting in American society today, which she calls concerted cultivation and natural growth.<sup>50</sup>

*Concerted cultivation* refers to the childrearing 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.<sup>51</sup>

Figure 3.1: Parental education and parenting objectives



Source: Faith Matters national survey, 2006.

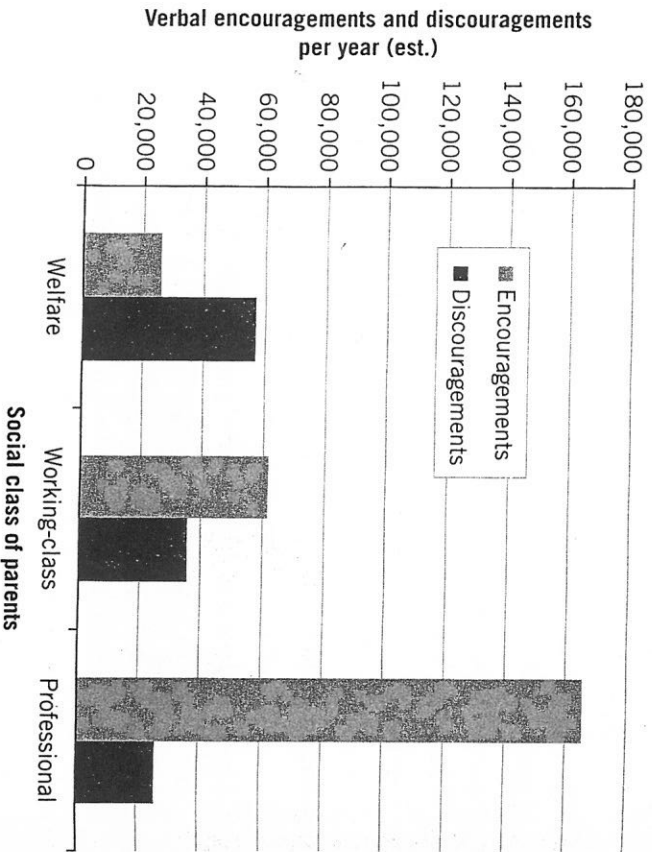
These class differences show up in parents' actual behavior, not just their avowed priorities. Simone can't recall ever punishing Desmond (not even "no TV for a week"). Carl likens a parent sometimes to a



soccer referee (“That’s when you pull that parental card and say, ‘This is it’”), but as his kids got older, he preferred Socratic dialogue (“Explain to me why you are doing that. Have you thought of this?”).

By contrast, Stephanie, whose parents “beat the hell” out of her, believes in very tough love (“You can’t be soft. You gotta be hard, really hard”). Despite the undoubted fact that she “love[s] her] kids to death,” her first response to disobedience is a beating. Even Elijah—who was beaten unconscious by his father after the arson episode, who displays remarkable insight into the costs of abusive parenting, and who talks about the importance of “say[ing] good words” to children—doesn’t display any doubts about how to handle a wayward son. (“Don’t get me wrong: I’m gonna beat him. I’m gonna teach him what’s right from wrong.”)

**Figure 3.2: Class differences in verbal parenting**



This class-based difference in positive and negative parenting also shows up in verbal interactions. A careful study of the daily verbal exchanges between parents and children found, as illustrated in Figure 3.2, that parents with professional degrees annually delivered about 166,000 encouragements and 26,000 discouragements, whereas working-class parents delivered 62,000 and 36,000, respectively, and parents on welfare delivered 26,000 and 57,000.<sup>52</sup>

Why is this class-based difference in parenting approaches—what we might term the “hug/spank ratio”—so stark and pervasive? An earlier generation of experts tended to attribute this difference to an ill-defined “working-class culture,” but brain science has now shown that poor, less educated, more isolated parents are more restrictive, punitive, and harsher disciplinarians, in part because they themselves experience higher levels of chronic stress.<sup>53</sup> Elijah recognized this about his abusive mother: “When you come home as a mother, and you see bills on the table, and you see the dishes ain’t washed, and you see your son’s room not cleaned up, and you see everything messy, I think that’s why she’s so angry. . . . I can’t blame her.”

Harsh discipline is not just a function of “working-class culture” nor just a consequence of parental stress. It is often a sensible response to the differing environments in which upper- and lower-class families live. Well-off parents can use what the sociologist Frank Furstenberg and his colleagues call “promotive” strategies, nurturing their children’s talents in comfortable settings that provide many opportunities and few dangers (like the one where Desmond and his family live). Impoverished parents, by contrast, use “preventive” strategies, aimed at keeping their children safe in rough neighborhoods where dangers far outnumber opportunities (like the ones where Stephanie raised her kids).<sup>54</sup> As Stephanie put it to us, “We don’t do all that kissing and hugging. That’s other races’ stuff. . . . You can’t be mushy in Detroit [or Atlanta]. . . . Be a thug!”

The evidence strongly suggests that the parenting style typical of affluent and educated parents, characterized by nurturance, affection, warmth, active involvement, and reasoned discipline—in short, more

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).<sup>55</sup> In particular, parental reading (controlling for many other factors, including maternal education, verbal ability, and warmth) fosters child development.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

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.”<sup>58</sup>

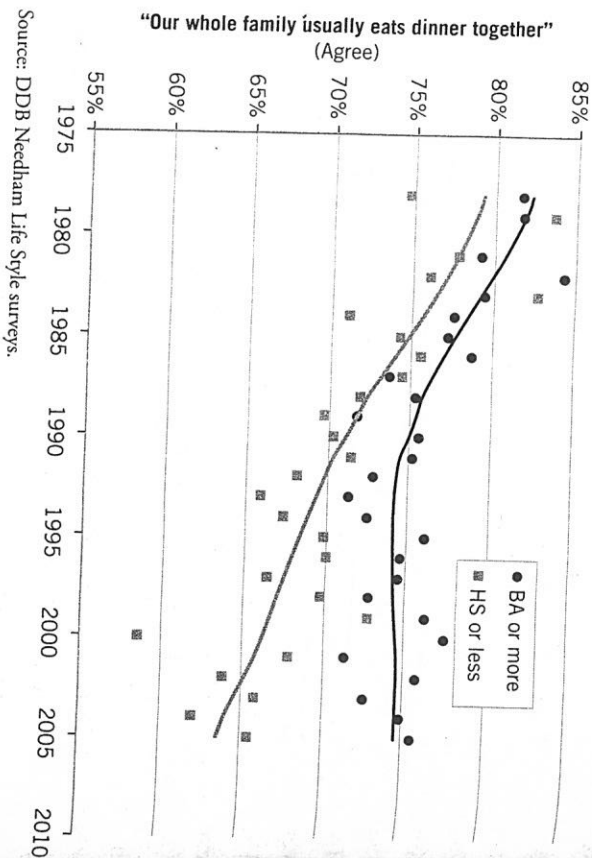
Among the folks we met in Bend and Atlanta, affluent families made

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.<sup>59</sup> 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.

Figure 3.3: Trends in family dinners, by parental education, 1978–2005



Source: DDB Needham Life Style surveys.

Parents from all social backgrounds nowadays invest both more money and more time in raising their kids than was true a generation ago. The increased parental investments are focused on experiences (especially enriched care for preschoolers) that foster cognitive and socioemotional development. However, college-educated parents have increased their investments of both money and time much more rapidly than less affluent parents—and not just at the dinner table, as we shall shortly see.

These increased investments in child development have come mostly at the expense of other aspects of home life (such as adult personal care, housekeeping, and consumer goods). Parents in all classes have been cutting back elsewhere to focus their resources on their kids, but because affluent, educated families have not only more money but also more time (because they typically split child care between two parents), they have been able to increase their investments much faster than poor parents (usually single moms). As a result, the class gap in investments in kids has become wider and wider.

To better understand what is happening, let's take a closer look at the ways in which parents from different classes devote money and time to their children.

### MONEY

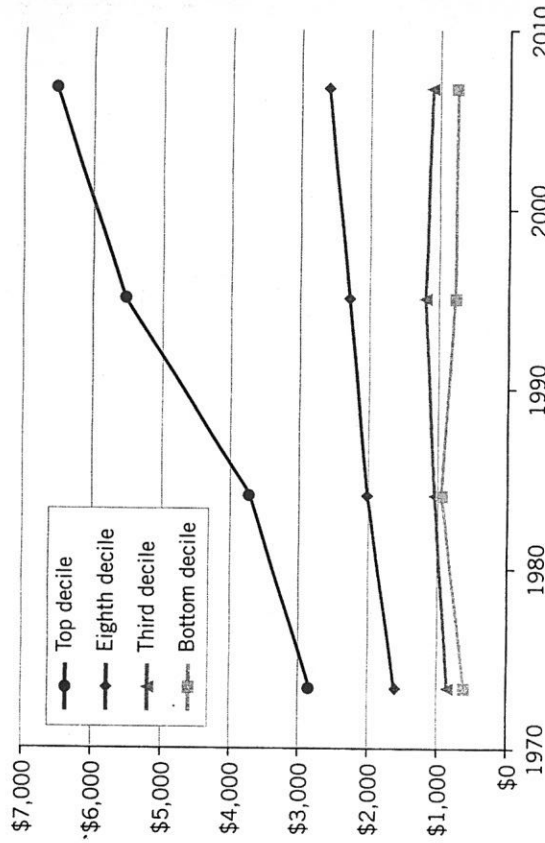
On average, parents from all socioeconomic strata have increased their spending on child care and education over the past five decades. But that spending, always somewhat unequal, has become steadily more unequal over the decades. (See Figure 3.4.) In fact, after the mid-1980s the very lowest income families began to spend less in absolute terms, mostly (but not entirely) because they had less to spend, while higher-income families continued to spend more, partly (but only partly) because they had more to spend. Between 1983 and 2007, spending per child by families in the top tenth of the income distribution increased by 75 percent in real dollars, compared to a drop of 22 percent in the bottom tenth. By 2007, the average child of parents in the top tenth of the economic hierarchy was the beneficiary of about \$6,600 a year in enrichment spending; nine times the amount (about \$750) spent annually on a child of parents in the bottom tenth of the income hierarchy.

The increase was concentrated in spending on private education and child care, but a class gap in spending is also visible for music lessons, summer camp, travel, school supplies, books, computers, extracurricular activities, recreation, and leisure. Moreover, even if income is held constant, disparities by parental education also appear to be high and growing. This means that children of affluent *and* educated parents (like Desmond and Andrew) have been getting a double dip, while children of poorer *and* less educated parents (like Michelle and Kayla) have been getting a double whammy.<sup>60</sup>

These differences in parental investment, in turn, are strong predictors of children's cognitive development.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the biggest increases in parental spending are concentrated in the preschool and college years: the two periods of development that we now know are especially important in determining upward mobility. Parents who afford it

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**



Source: Sabino Kornrich and Frank Furstenberg, “Investing in Children: Changes in Parental Spending on Children, 1972–2007,” *Demography* 50 (2013): 1–23.

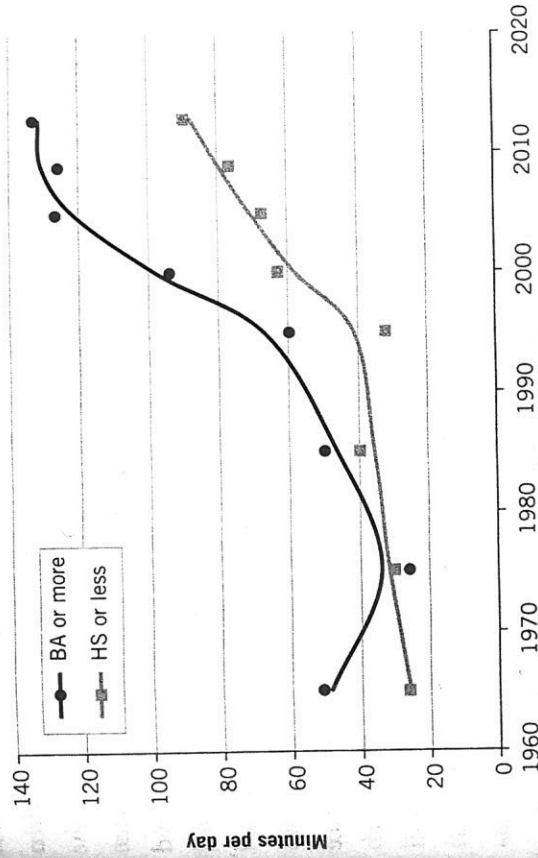
TIME

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—“*dinner 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.<sup>62</sup>

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**



Source: Evrim Altintas, “Widening Education-Gap in Developmental Childcare Activities in the U.S.,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* (forthcoming 2015).

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

more likely to have a partner who also spends time with the kids. Moreover, even among married couples, college-educated parents engage more strongly in intensive parenting, with its emphasis on spending time with children and on dads sharing child care responsibilities. The higher incomes of married, college-educated parents need not come at the expense of time with the kids, whereas less educated single moms with jobs outside the home, like Stephanie, work hard merely to keep their heads above water, and this cuts into the time they can spend with their kids. So kids from affluent, educated homes get the best of both worlds—more monetary investment (because their parents can afford it) and more time investment (because their two parents are able to make it a priority)—whereas kids from lower-class homes get the worst of both worlds.

What are kids from less educated homes doing when they are not getting personal attention from their parents? Studies of how children actually spend their days suggest that the most important part of the answer is TV, just as Darleen said when we asked about family dinners. Children with well educated parents (like Desmond and Andrew) spend less time watching TV and more time reading and studying compared to children of less educated parents (like Kayla, Michelle, and Elijah).<sup>63</sup> With the spread of the Internet, TV is being gradually replaced by Web-based entertainment, but the basic fact remains: rich kids get more face time, while poor kids get more screen time.

#### NONPARENTAL CHILD CARE

About a third of college-educated moms nowadays are stay-at-home-moms, like Patry in Bend and Simone in Atlanta, but the other two thirds of them must (like many high-school-educated moms) find some sort of day care. Many studies have shown that better-educated working moms put their children in higher-quality day care, at least in part because they can afford it. In turn, higher-quality day care generally produces better results in terms of children's cognitive and noncognitive development, though some doubts remain about how strong that

relationship is, and whether it tends to fade as the child progresses through school. Not surprisingly, good day care makes less difference to child development than good parenting—but, on average, children of more educated parents get more of both.<sup>64</sup>

This class gap, too, is growing, at least as it concerns access to professional and regulated day care centers for younger children. Over the last 15 years, better-educated mothers of kids aged 0–4 have shifted from informal to more professional day care arrangements for their children, whereas less educated working moms have come to rely more heavily on arrangements with relatives (especially grandparents) or no regular arrangements at all. To be sure, some day care centers provide less than top-quality care, and many grandparents provide excellent day care, but generally speaking, center-based care is higher-quality care. In short, more educated moms have upgraded their infant day care, while less educated moms typically have not.<sup>65</sup>

Class differences in child care for somewhat older children (aged 4–6) are even more substantial, with about 70 percent of college-educated moms using center-based, professional day care, compared to about 40 percent of high-school-educated moms. This class difference has been stable over recent years, even as class differences in day care for younger children have been growing. Well-educated parents have long invested more resources than less educated parents in high-quality day care for their 4–6-year-olds, but in recent years upper-class parents have extended that investment edge into an even younger stage of life (0–4)—precisely the stage that the latest brain science suggests is so critical developmentally.

These class gaps widen when we consider formal pre-K instruction. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, “At age 4, enrollment in pre-K (public and private) is about 65 percent for the lowest 40 percent of families by income and 90 percent for the highest income quintile. At age 3, when state pre-K is rarely provided, enrollment is only about 40 percent for low-income and moderate-income families while it is 80 percent for the top income quintile.”<sup>66</sup> In short,

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

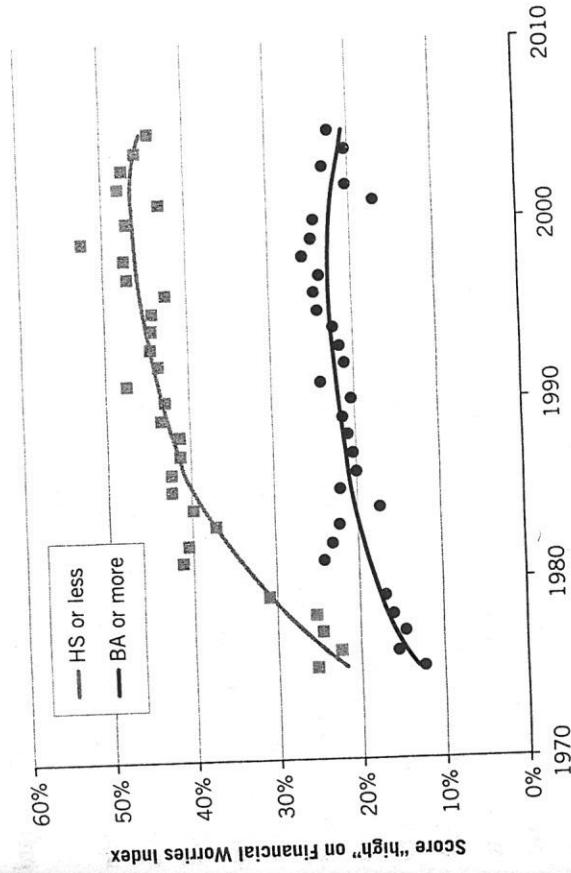
The everyday hassles of parenting are stressful: cleaning up after the kids, managing multiple schedules, lack of privacy, and lack of time for self and partner. Moreover, parents also have to cope with the ordinary stresses of the rest of life, especially work. Everyday stress levels vary across families, 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.<sup>67</sup> Economic stress, in particular, disrupts family relations, fosters withdrawn 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.<sup>68</sup>) 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.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> as an impoverished parent’s lack of skills, care, patience,

tolerance, attention, and dedication can actually be attributed to the fact that the parent’s mind is functioning under a heavy load. “Good parenting,” they write, “requires bandwidth. It requires complex decisions and sacrifice. Children need to be motivated to do things they dislike, and appointments have to be kept, activities planned, teachers met and their feedback processed, tutoring or extra help provided or procured and then monitored. This is hard for anyone, whatever his resources. It is doubly hard when your bandwidth is reduced.”<sup>70</sup>

**Figure 3.6: Growing class gap in parental financial worries, 1975–2005**



Source: DDB Needham Life Style surveys.

The investment gaps that we discussed above (time, money) tend most noticeably to affect cognitive development. Stress gaps, on the other hand, seem particularly important for children’s socioemotional development, including mental health.<sup>71</sup> To make matters worse, single parents are more likely to experience stresses of the sort I have described even when education and income are held constant, and thus tend to

be less able to offer nurturing, supportive parenting to their kids.<sup>72</sup> The widening economic cleavage in America exacerbates the parenting gap both directly and indirectly (via the effects on family structure we discussed in Chapter 2).

#### GRANDPARENTING

Grandparents today are often more important in their grandchildren's lives than their counterparts were a half century ago, because grandparents are healthier and wealthier than they used to be.<sup>73</sup> This trend plays out very differently in upper-tier and lower-tier families, however. Generally speaking, lower-tier grandparents mostly donate time, replacing parental resources, whereas upper-tier grandparents mostly donate money, supplementing parental resources.

Nationwide, 4 percent of all children are primarily cared for by their grandparents, as happened in Elijah's case. This pattern is concentrated among the children of younger, unmarried, poor, less educated, and unemployed parents, and these grandparents themselves tend to be poor and less educated. The percentage of grandparents who serve as primary caregivers roughly doubled between 1970 and 1997, with virtually all of that increase concentrated in poor and minority families.

Such full-time grandparents are increasingly forced to replace parents because of the collapse of the lower-class family. This has provided a valuable human safety net—children of single parents who live with grandparents are less likely to become depressed, for example, than those who don't. In the next chapter we shall meet Lola and Sofia, two sisters from Orange County, who are lucky that their maternal grandparents took them in when their drug-addicted mother died. But replacement grandparenting typically does little more than replace younger, poor, less educated (and now often missing) caregivers with older, poor, less educated caregivers—not much of a gain for the kids. (The kids are all, but they are not better off than if their own parents were able to care for them.) Elijah's plight illustrates this situation. Replacement grandparenting is more common among nonwhites, but it is rising more

rapidly among poor whites. In upper-tier families, by contrast, replacement grandparenting is infrequent and not rising, because the number of fractured families in that tier is relatively low and declining.

Upper-tier grandparents today are more affluent than their counterparts a generation ago. This means they are increasingly able to supplement (not simply replace) the financial resources that their grandchildren are already getting from their parents. Upper-tier kids are thus more likely than lower-tier kids to get financial assistance from their grandparents, even though they are less likely to need it. In short, taking grandparenting into account magnifies the growing youth class gaps.

I close with three cautions.

First, in recent years we've heard much talk of excessive parenting under labels like "helicopter parents" and "overparenting."<sup>74</sup> No doubt one can find occasional illustrations of that phenomenon, which irritates both the kids and bystanders. It is misleading, however, to assume a false equivalency between excessive and inadequate parenting. There is no credible evidence that excessive parenting produces anything approaching the abundant ills associated with inadequate parenting. Moreover, if there is a problem of excessive parenting, the solution lies in the hands of parents themselves, but that is much less true of the problem of inadequate parenting.

Second, although the research summarized here has established robust correlations between parental social class (especially education) and parenting practices, and between parenting practices and child outcomes, relatively few of these studies prove beyond all doubt that the correlations are causal. The studies that I have cited have all used careful statistical controls to try to exclude spurious correlation, but they have not typically used random-assignment experimental design. In short, the evidence is generally "stare of the art," but the stare of the art in this field is not perfect. This deficiency does not represent scientific carelessness. It would not be easy to get authorization for studies that randomly assigned children to parents, as scientists can do with rat pups.

Third, class-based differences in parenting are not the only factor

handicapping children born to poorer, less educated parents. Material deprivation—poor nutrition, inadequate health care, exposure to environmental risks like lead paint—can have powerful long-term effects on children's intellectual and emotional development.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup> Even ideal parenting cannot compensate for all the ill effects of poverty on children, and even incompetent parenting 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.