

Question and Answers:
Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*
University of California Press

What made you decide to write this book?

I found myself exasperated with many of the portraits of family life in the culture --- in academic books as well as on television. Many of the portraits are idealized. I wanted to produce a realistic picture of the day-to-day rhythms of family with elementary school-aged children. I also sought to study different kinds of families: Black families, white families, middle-class, working-class, and poor ones.

Didn't you visit the families inside of their home?

We did. My research assistants and I started by doing interviews with parents in 88 families with children in third and fourth grade, most of whom were from elementary schools we visited in a large northeastern city and its suburb. Then we selected twelve children for more intensive study. We visited the twelve families, usually everyday for 21 times --- in other words everyday for three weeks --- for a few hours. We went to baseball games, church services, family reunions, grocery store, beauty parlors and barbershops, and generally participated in the normal routines of family life. We saw siblings fuss with each other and parents yell at kids. We also sat around and watched TV as well as played outside in the street. In most families there was one overnight visit. One-half of the families were Black and one-half were white; they were middle-class, working-class, and poor families. The families were paid \$350. As social science research goes, it was unusually intensive.

Didn't your presence have an impact?

It did, especially the first day or two. But we noticed that yelling and cursing went up, especially on the third day. It is hard for young children who are nine and ten years of age to sustain "company manners" for long stretches of time. When we finished the visits, we did interviews and we asked family members how things had been different while we were there. Some children told us very specific things: "my Mom talked more" or "the house was cleaner." Mostly, however, they said that things had been as they usually were. The children generally liked being in the study. They said that it made them feel "special" to be in a book, even though their real names wouldn't be used.

What did you learn?

All of the families want their children to be happy and to grow and thrive. Still, social class makes a difference in how parents go about meeting this goal. Middle-class parents promote what I call "*concerted cultivation*." Middle-class parents actively foster children's talents, opinions, and skills: enrolling children in organized activities, reasoning with children (i.e., answering questions with questions), and closely monitoring

children's experiences in institutions such as schools. Through this pattern of concerted cultivation, middle-class children gain an *emerging sense of entitlement*. There is a focus on children's individual development. Most of the middle-class families in the study are extremely busy; this pattern holds for white and Black middle-class families. Children have soccer games, Girl Scout trips, homework, and birthday parties; parents need to arrange these activities as well as get children there and back. (None of the parents report having this kind of schedule of activities when they were children.) Despite this busy schedule, most parents work full-time and some of the parents have overnight travel for their jobs. In addition, parents need to manage the details of life: going to the grocery store, preparing dinner, having children take showers, and getting children to bed. I detail in the book what children's schedules mean for family life; I use the term "the frenetic family." Things are so hectic that the house sometimes seems to become a holding pattern between activities.

How were things in the working-class and poor families?

The differences are striking. In working-class and poor families, parents promote what I call "*the accomplishment of natural growth*." Working-class and poor parents care for their children, love them, and set limits for them, but within these boundaries they allow the children to grow spontaneously. Children do not have organized activities but play outside with cousins and watched television, the parents use directives rather than reasoning, and children are given more autonomy in institutions. The families are often very distrustful of "the school" or of health care institutions. They are fearful that professionals in them would "come and take my kids away." Rather than an emerging sense of entitlement the working-class and poor children developed an *emerging sense of constraint*. The working-class and poor families have severe economic shortages but they do not have as much of a hectic pace as middle-class families. The lack of resources, however, hangs over the household and vastly complicates the enactment of daily life. In the poor families there are often food shortages.

Do these differences in child rearing matter?

Neither the approach of concerted cultivation or the accomplishment of natural growth is without flaws. Both have strengths and weaknesses. Middle-class children, for example, are often exhausted, have vicious fights with siblings, and do not have as much contact with their extended families as working-class and poor children. But when children enter institutions such as schools and health care settings, the strategy of middle-class child rearing of concerted cultivation is far more in compliance with the current standards of professionals than is the approach of the accomplishment of natural growth. There are signs that middle-class children gain advantages, including potentially in the world of work, from the experience of concerted cultivation. Working-class and poor children do not gain this benefit.

Your book shows that class is more important than race in these children's lives. Why was that the case?

The Black middle-class children have much more in common with white middle-class children than they do with other Black children who are poor or working-class, in terms of children's time use, parents' methods of talking to children, and parents' interactions with schools and other institutions. For example, a Black middle-class girl, Stacey Marshall, has gymnastic lessons, church choir, Sunday school, and many different specialized summer camps. Her parents reason with her; they do not hit her. Her mother closely monitors, and frequently intervenes, in her schooling, for example arranging for her to be privately tested so that she qualified for the school's gifted program. This pattern is very similar to that of white middle-class families.

Still, race does matter in key respects: children live in racially segregated neighborhoods, middle-class Black parents complain of racial-based difficulties in the workplace, and Black middle-class parents are very worried about their children being exposed to racial insensitivity at school. Middle-class Black parents also seek to promote a positive racial identity for their children, for example, by taking them to a Black middle-class church. But in terms of the overall rhythm of children's family lives, and the ways in which parents seek to address any concerns they had, class is much more important than race in my study. Other studies also show key divisions between middle-class Blacks and working-class and poor Blacks.

What was the most surprising discovery you made in your research?

The families differ in how much they interacted. The working-class and poor families often sit around in the same room and watch television. Partly because they live in relatively small spaces, working-class and poor family members often spend time together as a family. The middle-class families spend less time actually together as an entire *group*. Middle-class parents and children do spend time in the car riding to and from but this is not as a family, since often parents take two cars because of busy schedules. The style of interaction also varies. The sibling fights are more vicious in the middle-class families than in the working-class and poor families; open expressions of hatred are routine in some of the middle-class families. (For example, one white middle-class girl said to her mother about her brother, "I hate him!" The mother calmly said, "I know.") In working-class and poor families, siblings have their squabbles but the tone is less openly hostile. All told, middle-class family members scatter throughout the house when they are home and, overall, spend less time interacting *together* than do working-class or poor families. While the fireplace was the center of the 19th century home, today for middle-class families the family calendar ---usually posted on the wall in the kitchen near the phone --- is a core center of middle-class homes. We have an image of children's activities, such as Little League games, bringing family members together. The reality is that in children's organized activities, by disrupting the dinner hour, requiring regularly scheduled practices and games, and dividing up parents as they take children to different activities, often can replace, rather than promote, family interaction.

Can we learn anything from an intensive study of twelve families?

I believe that we can. The book does support established findings in social science research, which have shown, using statistical analyses important differences in how parents raise children. Rather than using numbers, *Unequal Childhoods* uses the stories of real families to highlight important social patterns. Moreover, we are in a time of change. Children are being raised differently today than in earlier decades: middle-class children have more organized activities than before. This shift has important reverberations for family life that have not been sufficiently discussed. As “soccer Moms” become an important part of the culture, this book provides detailed insight into intimate details of daily life of families with young children. It gives us a chance to step back and reflect on how we are spending time in family life as parents, how we are currently raising our children, and how there are important differences across social groups in the contours of childhood.

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