

## **The Real Problem With Helicopter Parents: There Aren't Enough of Them**

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*Mocking obsessive parents is fun. But their excesses are small compared to the parenting failures in so many homes. This "Parent Gap" is a real force behind America's stark and unyielding income inequality.*

Today's hyperventilating "helicopter parents" are comic fish in a barrel. Playing Mozart to their babies in utero and dangling Baby Einstein gewgaws over their bassinets. Obsessing over peanut allergies, turning school science fairs into arms races of one-upmanship, and hiring batteries of private tutors to eke out another 10 points on the SAT. When we stop giggling, it's only to cluck with disapproval. Katie Roiphe, writing in Slate, says that overparenting "is about too much presence, but it's also about the wrong kind of presence. In fact, it can be reasonably read by children as absence, as not caring about what is really going on with them, as ignoring the specifics of them for some idealized cultural script of how they should be."

Well-educated parents of means these days do have their own distinctive way of messing things up. And so it's entirely appropriate for those of us in this group to mock and admonish ourselves into lightening up a bit. Yet when we extend our gaze beyond the relatively narrow confines of college-educated parents and their college-bound kids, things look very different.

Examining American society as a whole and the role of family life in shaping that society, a good case can be made that the main problem with helicopter parents is that there aren't nearly enough of them.

### **THE PARENTHOOD DIVIDE**

The kind of intensively hands-on parenting that we now like to lampoon and criticize is of relatively recent vintage. In this regard, it's worth noting that the terms "helicopter parent" and "overparenting" only entered general usage in the past decade or so. New

words were needed to describe a new phenomenon. We can actually document its emergence statistically: according to husband-and-wife economists Garey and Valerie Ramey, starting in the 1990s parents began spending significantly more time with their kids.

And what really stands out in the Rameys' findings is a clear distinction between college-educated parents and everybody else. Prior to 1995, college-educated moms averaged about 12 hours a week with their kids, compared to about 11 hours for less-educated moms. By 2007, though, the figure for less-educated moms had risen to nearly 16 hours while that for college-educated moms had soared all the way to 21 hours. Similar trends were observed for fathers: The time that college-educated dads spent with their kids rose from 5 to 10 hours, while for less-educated dads the increase was from around 4 hours to around 8 hours.

So while the time parents spend with children living at home has increased across the board, the trend has been especially pronounced among highly-educated households. The parental attention gap is growing.

This is part of a larger parenting shift that breaks down along class lines. Through in-depth observation of family life in select homes the sociologist Annette Lareau has identified clear differences in parenting across the socioeconomic spectrum. Among the poor and working-class families she studied, the focus of parenting was on what she calls "the accomplishment of natural growth." In these families, "parents viewed children's development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they were provided with comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support."

College-educated parents have taken on a much more ambitious role - one that Lareau calls "concerted cultivation." "In these families, parents actively fostered and assessed their children's talents, opinions, and skills," Lareau writes. "They made a deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children's development and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills."

The findings of Lareau and the Rameys document the emergence of a growing class divide in American family life. But the fissure is actually much wider than the work of these scholars shows it to be. The parenting gap isn't just about how much time parents spend with their kids. It's also about whether they live together with their kids.

## **THE RISE OF THE SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLD**

Over the course of the past half-century, American society generally has seen a dramatic rise in single-parent families. Children born to unmarried mothers have soared from 10 percent of the total in 1969 to an astonishing 41 percent in 2008. Meanwhile, the share of children living with two married parents has fallen from 77 percent in 1980 to 65 percent in 2011.

The rise in single-parent households is much more pronounced among minority families. In 2008, 29 percent of white, non-Hispanic children were born to single mothers, compared to 53 percent of Hispanic children and 72 percent of black children. In 2011, 75 percent of white, non-Hispanic children were living with two married parents, while the same could be said for 60 percent of Hispanic children and only 33 percent of black children.

These racial cleavages are largely explained by a similar divide along class lines. As of 2011, 87 percent of children who have a parent with a bachelor's or higher degree were living with two married parents. The corresponding figures for high school grads and high school dropouts were 53 and 47 percent, respectively.

A major contributor to the growing class differences in family structure is the emergence in recent decades of a "divorce divide" along educational lines. Divorce rates have traditionally been lower for college-educated couples than for the rest of the population, but marriage breakup rates for everybody soared during the 1960s and '70s. For women whose first marriage occurred between 1970 and 1974, the share whose marriage failed within 10 years stood at 24.3 percent for those with a college degree or better and 33.7 percent for the rest. But since the '70s, divorce rates among the highly educated have fallen significantly; among non-college grads, by contrast, they have stayed high. Specifically, only 16.7 percent of women with at least a college degree experienced a marital dissolution within 10 years of a first marriage between 1990 and 1994 - a 31 percent drop from 20 years earlier. For other women, though, the marriage breakup rate in the latter period was now 35.7 percent - 6 percent higher than 20 years before.

Family life on either side of the class divide has thus been heading in opposite directions over the past few decades. Among the roughly 30 percent of Americans with college degrees, marriages have grown more stable and parents have committed themselves to a more intensive, hands-on, and time-consuming approach to raising children. But for everybody else, a more modest increase in time commitment by parents in intact families has been swamped by a rising tide of family breakdown. Children of the well-educated elite now receive unprecedented parental attention aimed at "concerted cultivation" of the skills they will need to thrive in today's highly complex knowledge economy. Other kids, meanwhile, are left more on their own in the traditional style - except that now the "accomplishment of natural growth" is hampered by all the distractions, disruptions, and stresses of family breakup.

## **THE CONNECTION WITH INCOME INEQUALITY**

It's no coincidence that rising inequality in the home has been occurring at precisely the same time as rising inequality in the workplace. These two kinds of social polarization - one cultural, the other economic - are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Discussions of economic inequality often focus on the top 1 percent of earners versus the other 99 percent. But the more socially significant distinction is the one between the 30

percent and the 70 percent - between, that is, the 30 percent of Americans who have college degrees and everybody else.

The average college grad today makes about 70 percent more than the average high school grad - up from around 30 percent back in 1980. According to data compiled by the Economic Policy Institute, wages for college grads rose 23 percent between 1979 and 2007 after adjusting for inflation, while real wages for workers with advanced degrees climbed by 27 percent. Meanwhile, the inflation-adjusted wages for high school grads actually fell 3 percent over the same period, and those for high school dropouts dropped by 17 percent. If you add fringe benefits to wages and make different adjustments for inflation, you can make the numbers look better for everybody, but the disparities will remain.

Why have wages for the college-educated and everybody else been moving in opposite directions? It's a simple story of supply and demand: the demand for highly skilled workers has kept growing as the economy gets ever more advanced and complex, but the supply of those workers has failed to keep up. According to Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, the relative supply of college graduates rose at an average rate of only 2 percent a year between 1980 and 2005 - a steep decline from the average rate of 3.8 percent a year that prevailed between 1960 and 1980. And all of the growth that has occurred has been due to women: the college graduation rate for young men is roughly the same as it was in 1980.

Things would surely look very different if the trends in college-educated homes toward greater family stability and "concerted cultivation" had been mirrored in the rest of the country. Consider, for example, a recent study by economists *Sheldon Danziger and Patrick Wightman*. Looking back at people born between 1956 and 1958, they found that 37 percent of those born to college-educated parents could expect to finish college by age 25, compared to only 8 percent of those whose parents had a high school education or less. Fast-forward to people born between 1979 and 1982, and the share of the kids of college-educated parents who earned a college degree by 25 had risen to 53 percent, while for the kids of high school grads and dropouts the share had slipped to 6 percent.

In other words, families with well-educated parents have been moving in sync with economic trends: They have been increasingly likely to produce new college grads in step with the rising demand for highly skilled workers. For families with less educated parents, however, there has been a total disconnect. And as a result, their kids have been falling behind.

### **MORE HELICOPTER PARENTS, PLEASE**

The advantages of having well-educated parents are varied. Smart parents who naturally do well in school pass on their genes. They also tend to make more money, which can buy a safer neighborhood and a higher-quality education. But a less appreciated advantage is that college-educated parents are more likely to dote obsessively - even, yes,

comically - on their children. And there is evidence that the very nature of their parenting style is good for grooming productive workers.

Thanks to Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling *Outliers*, many of us are now familiar with the "10,000 hour rule": in almost any field you can think of, you can't perform at the very highest level without logging the requisite hours of diligent, focused practice. The move in well-educated homes toward "concerted cultivation" - or helicopter parenting, if we want to be snarky about its sometimes absurd excesses - can be seen as an effort to inject a lot more deliberate practice into childhood. Practice, in particular, at developing the skills needed to excel in school, and later in the workplace.

Most obviously, the children of well-educated parents receive much more intellectual stimulation in the home than do other kids. For example, child psychologists Betty Hart and Todd Risley estimate that by the time they reach age three, children of professional parents have heard some 45 million words addressed to them - as opposed to only 26 million words for working-class kids, and a mere 13 million words in the case of kids on welfare. By the time kids start school, kids of well-educated parents are much better prepared than their classmates. Consequently, they're much more likely to receive praise and encouragement from their teachers, which means their attitudes about being in school are much more likely to be positive. Even relatively small advantages conferred early in life can thus snowball over time.

The deliberate practice that is going on constantly in well-educated homes extends beyond purely intellectual pursuits. As they march their kids through the weekly gauntlet of organized activities, the practitioners of concerted cultivation are drilling their kids in a host of skills critical to academic and economic success. Skills like managing one's time by making and keeping schedules, getting along with other people from different backgrounds on the basis of common interests, and deferring gratification in order to maximize rewards down the road. All of these, as well as fluency in the three Rs, are vital components of "human capital" - economist-speak for economically valuable skills.

So by all means, keep making fun of helicopter parents. The delusion that drives them off the deep end -- that, with enough exertion and planning, the crooked timber of their little ones can be lathed to perfection - is, after all, risible. But keep in mind that the excesses of concerted cultivation are of little account when compared to the deficits that now afflict so many homes. Those deficits are a major factor behind some of the thorniest problems in American society today, from multi-generational poverty and mediocre and worse schools to stagnant wages for large segments of the workforce. Policymakers tasked with addressing these problems face the daunting challenge of designing bureaucratic substitutes for the hovering, loving harassment supplied by Mom and Dad. A tall order, indeed.

*This piece is adapted from the author's new e-book: Human Capitalism: How Economic Growth Has Made Us Smarter -- and More Unequal.*

