



THE DARK SIDE OF “SCIENTIFIC MOTHERHOOD”



Family wealth and income are powerfully linked to children’s academic and life success. Parents up and down the economic ladder are trying to help their children, in what UC San Diego economics Garey Ramey and Valerie Ramey call “the rug rat race.” Between 1972 and 2006, the amount of money lower-income families spent on their children increased [57 percent](#). The problem is, wealthier families have the ability to do so much more. The amount of money that high-income families spent during that period increased 150 percent.

Similarly, although both higher- and lower-income families increased the amount of time they spend with their children during that period, the time increase for higher-income families was double that of the increase for lower-income families.

In a study recently published in the peer-reviewed journal *Sociological Forum*, NEPC Fellow [Maia Cucchiara](#) of Temple University and her co-author Amy C. Steinbugler of Dickinson College shed light on how that additional time is spent by more advantaged families during children’s critical first months of life. The study helps us understand the process of intergenerational advantage as well as the unhealthy toll it takes on mothers.

The study includes 48 hours of observations of two parenting classes attended by 28 mothers of newborns and four- to six-month-olds as well as interviews with nine of the mothers and one instructor. The mothers are all relatively privileged. All are, or most likely will be (in the case of a family in which the father was still in medical school), upper-middle class and all but four are white. All are women married to men.

The mothers spend extensive amounts of time reviewing, collecting, and acting upon expertise about childrearing in what Cucchiara and Steinbugler refer to as “scientific motherhood.” Using approaches often honed during graduate school, they pore over books and

anxiously question each other and their instructors (both of whom have master's degrees in social work) about everything from the amount of stimulation and types of toys best suited to developing a baby's brain, to the ideal amount of sleep, to the "right" way to feed their children and schedule their naps. Nearly all are full-time parents, leaving them with plenty of time for these pursuits.

On paper, these moms are well positioned to conquer the "rug rat race" that has contributed to the widening gap between the educational outcomes of children from higher- and lower-income families.

Yet the availability of these resources—including the financial freedom to be stay-at-home moms and sufficient income to attend parenting classes (which cost \$400 for 12 weeks)—does not give these mothers a sense of competence or relief.

Rather, the pervasive mood is one of anxiety and failure resulting from what the authors call the "expertise paradox, or the tendency for more knowledge to create less certainty and more anxiety." When it comes to information, the parents are exposed to an embarrassment of riches, yet they struggle with how to apply their knowledge, especially when experts offer conflicting advice—which is often the case. In class, there are moments of frustration when the mothers demand clear-cut answers that probably don't exist—such as the exact amount of time babies should spend sleeping, being stimulated with toys, or breastfeeding.

As a result, the information the women consume tends to add to their uncertainty, leading many to feel like failures. Asked during interviews to describe a time in which they felt good about their parenting, most struggle to come up with a single example.

"I don't think there's ever been a time where I'd say I've been a really good mom," said one participant, a social worker married to a physician.

The labor associated with "scientific motherhood" is gendered in that, with the exception of the initial class session, it is only women who attend the parenting courses. It is also a sign, the authors write, of the continuing prevalence of neoliberal (market-based, individual-focused) approaches to parenting, childhood, and education.

"Neoliberalism imagines mothers as key consumers of medical advice and expertise, who evaluate information in an open marketplace and make choices that shape their families' health and well-being," they write.

A highly privatized, neoliberal ethic diverts our attention from the role of institutions or the state, training our gaze on individual responsibility in both choices and consequences. Thus, parents, especially mothers, bear the ultimate responsibility for ensuring their children are prepared for a world characterized by insecurity and competition for scarce resources. Parenting decisions are imagined not only as private but also as deeply consequential . . . Caring for children is no longer a collective enterprise—practices of social reproduction are increasingly privatized and commoditized.

Cucchiara and Steinbugler clarify that their results do not suggest that mothers need more or better advice, or the ability to more critically consume information. Rather, they call

attention to the burden this type of approach places on middle-class women, even as they, ironically, are taking the very steps that are most likely to provide their children the very advantages that contribute to opportunity gaps in society writ large.

NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education

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