

# The Relentlessness of Modern Parenting

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March 2,  
2019

Parenthood in the United States has become much more demanding than it used to be.

Over just a couple of generations, parents have greatly increased the amount of time, attention and money they put into raising children. Mothers who juggle jobs outside the home spend just as much time tending their children as stay-at-home mothers did in the 1970s.

The amount of money parents spend on children, which used to peak when they were in high school, is now highest when they are under 6 and over 18 and into their mid-20s.

Renée Sentilles enrolled her son Isaac in lessons beginning when he was an infant. Even now that he's 12, she rarely has him out of sight when he is home.

"I read all the child-care books," said Ms. Sentilles, a professor in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. "I enrolled him in piano at 5. I took him to soccer practices at 4. We tried track; we did all the swimming lessons, martial arts. I did everything. Of course I did."

While this kind of intensive parenting — constantly teaching and monitoring children — has been the norm for upper-middle-class parents since the 1990s, new research shows that people across class divides now consider it the best way to raise children, even if they don't have the resources to enact it.

There are signs of a backlash, led by so-called free-range parents, but social scientists say the relentlessness of modern-day parenting has a powerful motivation: economic anxiety. For the first time, it's as likely as not that American children will be less prosperous than their parents. For parents, giving children the best start in life has come to mean doing everything they can to ensure that their children can climb to a higher class, or at least not fall out of the one they were born into.

"As the gap between rich and poor increases, the cost of screwing up increases," said Philip Cohen, a sociologist at the University of Maryland who studies families and inequality. "The fear is they'll end up on the other side of the divide."

But it also stokes economic anxiety, because even as more parents say they want to raise children this way, it's the richest ones who are most able to do so.

“Intensive parenting is a way for especially affluent white mothers to make sure their children are maintaining their advantaged position in society,” said Jessica Calarco, a sociologist at Indiana University and author of “Negotiating Opportunities: How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School.”

Stacey Jones raised her two sons, now in their 20s, as a single mother in a working-class, mostly black neighborhood in Stone Mountain, Ga. She said she and other parents tried hard to give their children opportunities by finding affordable options: municipal sports leagues instead of traveling club teams and school band instead of private music lessons.

“I think most people have this craving for their children to do better and know more than they do,” said Ms. Jones, who works in university communications. “But a lot of these opportunities were closed off because they do cost money.”

### ‘Child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing’

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“Parent” as a verb gained widespread use in the 1970s, which is also when parenting books exploded. The 1980s brought helicopter parenting, a movement to keep children safe from physical harm, spurred by high-profile child assaults and abductions (despite the fact that they were, and are, exceedingly rare). Intensive parenting was first described in the 1990s and 2000s by social scientists including Sharon Hays and Annette Lareau. It grew from a major shift in how people saw children. They began to be considered vulnerable and  moldable — shaped by their early childhood experiences — an idea bolstered by advances in child development research.

The result was a parenting style that was “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive,” Ms. Hays wrote in her 1998 book, “The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood.” And mothers were the ones expected to be doing the constant cultivation.

The time parents spend in the presence of their children has not changed much, but parents today spend more of it doing hands-on child care. Time spent on activities like reading to children; doing crafts; taking them to lessons; attending recitals and games; and helping with homework has increased the most. Today, mothers spend nearly five hours a week on that, compared with 1 hour 45 minutes hours in 1975 — and they worry it’s not enough. Parents’ leisure time, like exercising or socializing, is much more likely to be spent with their children than it used to be. While fathers have recently increased their time spent with children, mothers still spend significantly more.

Ms. Sentilles’s mother, Claire Tassin, described a very different way of parenting when her two children were young, in the 1970s. “My job was not to entertain them,” said Ms. Tassin, who lives in Vacherie, La. “My job was to love them and discipline them.”

Of her grandchildren, Isaac and his three cousins, she said: “Their life is much more enriched than mine was, but it definitely has been directed. I’m not saying it doesn’t work. They’re amazing. But I know I felt free, so free as a child. I put on my jeans and my cowboy boots and I played outside all day long.”

The new trappings of intensive parenting are largely fixtures of white, upper-middle-class American culture, but researchers say the expectations have permeated all corners of society, whether or not parents can achieve them. It starts in utero, when mothers are told to avoid cold cuts and coffee, lest they harm the baby. Then: video baby monitors. Homemade baby food. Sugar-free birthday cake. Toddler music classes. Breast-feeding exclusively. Spraying children’s hands with sanitizer and covering them in “natural” sunscreen. Throwing Pinterest-perfect birthday parties. Eating lunch in their children’s school cafeterias. Calling employers after their adult children interview for jobs.

The American Academy of Pediatrics promotes the idea that parents should be constantly monitoring and teaching children, even when the science doesn’t give a clear answer about what’s best. It now recommends that babies sleep in parents’ rooms for a year. Children’s television — instead of giving parents the chance to cook dinner or have an adult conversation — is to be “co-viewed” for maximum learning.

## An American phenomenon

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At the same time, there has been little increase in support for working parents, like paid parental leave, subsidized child care or flexible schedules, and there are fewer informal neighborhood networks of at-home parents because more mothers are working.

Ms. Sentilles felt the lack of support when it became clear that Isaac had some challenges like anxiety and trouble sleeping. She and her ex-husband changed their work hours and coordinated tutors and therapists.

“Friends are constantly texting support, but no one has time,” she said. “It’s that we’re all doing this at the same time.”

Parenthood is more hands-off in many other countries. In Tokyo, children start riding the subway alone by first grade, and in Paris, they spend afternoons unaccompanied at playgrounds. Intensive parenting has gained popularity in England and Australia, but it has distinctly American roots — reflecting a view of child rearing as an individual, not societal, task.

It’s about “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” said Caitlyn Collins, a sociologist at Washington University in St. Louis whose book, “Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving,” comes out in February. “It distracts from the real

questions, like why don't we have a safe place for all kids to go when they're done with school before parents get home from work?"

In a new paper, Patrick Ishizuka surveyed a nationally representative group of 3,642 parents about parenting. Regardless of their education, income or race, they said the most hands-on and expensive choices were best. For example, they said children who were bored after school should be enrolled in extracurricular activities, and that parents who were busy should stop their task and draw with their children if asked.

"Intensive parenting has really become the dominant cultural model for how children should be raised," said Mr. Ishizuka, a postdoctoral fellow studying gender and inequality at Cornell.

Americans are having fewer children, so they have more time and money to invest in each one. But investment gaps between parents of differing incomes were not always so large. As a college degree became increasingly necessary to earn a middle-class wage and as admissions grew more competitive, parents began spending significantly more time on child care, found Valerie Ramey and Garey Ramey, economists at the University of California, San Diego.

Parents also began spending more money on their children for things like preschools and enrichment activities, Sabino Kornrich, a sociologist at Emory, showed in two recent papers. Rich parents have more to spend, but the share of income that poor parents spend on their children has also grown.

In states with the largest gaps between the rich and the poor, rich parents spend an even larger share of their incomes on things like lessons and private school, found Danny Schneider, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and colleagues in a May paper. Parents in the middle 50 percent of incomes have also increased their spending. "Lower socioeconomic status parents haven't been able to keep up," he said.

Besides having less money, they have less access to the informal conversations in which parents exchange information with other parents like them. Ms. Jones recalled that one of her sons liked swimming, but it wasn't until he was in high school that she learned about swim teams on which he could have competed.

"I didn't know because I don't live in a swim tennis community," she said. "Unfortunately colleges and universities tend to look at these things as a marker of achievement, and I feel like a lot of kids who have working-class backgrounds don't benefit from the knowledge."

Race influences parents' concerns, too. Ms. Jones said that as a parent of black boys, she decided to raise them in a mostly black neighborhood so they would face less racism, even though it meant driving farther to many activities.

This is common for middle-class black mothers, found Dawn Dow, a sociologist at the University of Maryland whose book, “Mothering While Black: Boundaries and Burdens of Middle-Class Parenthood,” comes out in February. “They’re making decisions to protect their kids from early experiences of racism,” Ms. Dow said. “It’s a different host of concerns that are equally intensive.”

## The growing backlash

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Experts agree that investing in children is a positive thing — they benefit from time with their parents, stimulating activities and supportive parenting styles. As low-income parents have increased the time they spend teaching and reading to their children, the readiness gap between kindergarten students from rich and poor families has shrunk. As parental supervision has increased, most serious crimes against children have declined significantly.

But it’s also unclear how much of children’s success is actually determined by parenting.

“It’s still an open question whether it’s the parenting practices themselves that are making the difference, or is it simply growing up with college-educated parents in an environment that’s richer in many dimensions?” said Liana Sayer, a sociologist at the University of Maryland and director of the Time Use Laboratory there. “I don’t think any of these studies so far have been able to answer whether these kids would be doing well as adults regardless, simply because of resources.”

There has been a growing movement against the relentlessness of modern-day parenting. Utah passed a free-range parenting law, exempting parents from accusations of neglect if they let their children play or commute unattended.

Psychologists and others have raised alarms about children’s high levels of stress and dependence on their parents, and the need to develop independence, self-reliance and grit. Research has shown that children with hyper-involved parents have more anxiety and less satisfaction with life, and that when children play unsupervised, they build social skills, emotional maturity and executive function.

Parents, particularly mothers, feel stress, exhaustion and guilt at the demands of parenting this way, especially while holding a job. American time use diaries show that the time women spend parenting comes at the expense of sleep, time alone with their partners and friends, leisure time and housework. Some pause their careers or choose not to have children. Others, like Ms. Sentilles, live in a state of anxiety. She doesn’t want to hover, she said. But trying to oversee homework, limit screen time and attend to Isaac’s needs, she feels no choice.

“At any given moment, everything could just fall apart,” she said.

“On the one hand, I love my work,” she said. “But the way it’s structured in this country,

where there's not really child care and there's this sense that something is wrong with you if you aren't with your children every second when you're not at work? It isn't what I think feminists thought they were signing up for."