

medical doctors, proper child rearing training.<sup>8</sup> Teachers' wards. Moreover, and are therefore abused or neglected. Children, families can- dicals. In this con- dition of adopting possible benefits not

CHAPTER I 2

# The Power and Limits of Social Class

At the end of fifth grade, the children looked forward with trepidation and excitement to their transition to being with "big kids" in the local middle school. Lower Richmond and Swan schools each separately marked this life transition with a graduation ceremony, held on hot, sunny days in June. At Lower Richmond, there was tremendous enthusiasm for the ceremony, particularly on the part of the children and their families. Many parents arrived at school carrying bouquets of flowers and clusters of circular, shiny silver balloons emblazoned with phrases such as "CONGRATULATIONS GRADUATE!" Mothers, especially African American mothers, were in starched, immaculate, pale-colored suits and outfits of the style often worn to weddings, church, and special events. The girls, including Wendy Driver and Tara Carroll, wore frilly dresses. A number of girls wore prom dresses. Billy Yanelli was in a formal jacket, slacks, white shirt, and tie. Harold McAllister was less formal but no less carefully prepared in an assiduously ironed, print dress shirt, slacks, and dress shoes. The school provided yellow carnation wrist corsages for the girls and boutonnières for the boys. In the "cafetorium," parents, grandmothers, young children, and older siblings sat on children's chairs, reading the list of graduates, chatting, and laughing together. To the strains of a scratchy "Pomp and Circumstance," the children entered in a formal march: from opposing sides of the auditorium, two children, each at the same moment, began a promenade (step, pause, step, pause). Some of the boys, including Harold McAllister, had

a pained expression on their faces when beginning the procession. When Harold heard family members hooting, he flashed a grin, and then adopted a look of studied casualness.

Jane, Lori, and Alexis laugh when they see Harold enter the room, and say "Yo, Harold! Go!" Someone whistles lowly. Someone else says, "Lookin good, Har." Harold grins at his family, and as he walks, makes an attempt to appear cool and casual, as if all this fuss doesn't mean so much to him.

Many of the children looked elated, smiling broadly at their families as they made their formal entrance. During the ceremony, some Lower Richmond parents erupted with joy when their children received special recognition; they yelled out "All Right!" or "Yes!" or the child's name. Some parents stood up to applaud their children.

Even on this very happy occasion, however, feelings of distrust toward the school sometimes surfaced. A number of parents disapprovingly discussed how a few children had been banned from the ceremony for behavior problems. Billy Yanelli's father and mother were sitting proudly in the audience (both having taken off from work). Although Mr. Yanelli told me, "I like this school" (particularly compared to the one that Billy was about to attend), his discomfort was apparent.

Big Billy Yanelli made a number of . . . derogatory . . . comments throughout the ceremony, either to himself or for the benefit of [Ms. Yanelli], who sat next to him — mostly ignoring him. Once, when a male teacher climbed the steps to the stage, Big Billy said: "He's so stupid. What a goof." At the beginning of the ceremony, as the principal adjusted the microphone and prepared to speak, Big Billy pretended to mimic her: "Okay, everyone is suspended."

The celebration at Swan had a somewhat different feel. Many Swan children, including Garrett Tallinger and Melanie Handlon, smiled and seemed pleased, but they were not bursting with excitement. Those Swan parents who were dressed more than casually simply had on their work outfits (i.e., suits, skirts and jackets — a "professional" rather than dressy kind of look). Swan boys looked neat but also casual: a number wore polo shirts, some wore button-down shirts, and only a few had on ties. Girls wore what looked like nice Sunday dresses — not very frilly but pretty and neat. Educators gave out awards for accomplishments ranging from perfect attendance to special achievement in math. Swan parents conveyed mild and polite pride when their children were recognized; they clapped politely but briefly, took pictures, and stayed in their chairs.

The future also was portrayed differently at Swan:

Swan seemed much more hopeful and Lower Richmond more aware of danger and trouble kids might face in their lives. Swan songs were about how bright the future was, how many new doors would open for the kids, how exciting it all was. The first two songs sung at Lower Richmond had to do with confronting despair, jealousy, pain, and trouble, with waking up the next day ready to try again, with renewal for struggle, with how many kids were hurting in the world. One of the male teachers also gave an admonition to the kids to "keep their hands in their pockets next year" in middle school when someone taunted them. The emphasis appeared to be on a certain kind of behavior (restraint, "good citizenship," avoiding fights, being respectful) rather than on academic achievement, as it was at Swan.

Of course, the parents themselves differed in how much education they had. For example, the Yanellis both went only through tenth grade. They hoped that their son Little Billy would go to a state college, but they were unsure. The middle-class families had little doubt that their children would attend college. Middle-class children, including Stacey Marshall, often chattered about which college they might want to go to when they were older. The Tallingers visited the campuses of Ivy League universities when they were in the area for soccer tournaments. Alexander Williams's parents were helping one of his cousins pay for her education at an elite private university. Thus, for these middle-class children, it was a matter of *which* college they would attend. In these contrasting visions of the future, the fifth-grade graduation was a different milestone.

#### THE POWER OF SOCIAL CLASS

In the United States, people disagree about the importance of social class in daily life. Many Americans believe that this country is fundamentally *open*. They assume the society is best understood as a collection of individuals. They believe that people who demonstrate hard work, effort, and talent are likely to achieve upward mobility. Put differently, many Americans believe in the American Dream. In this view, children should have roughly equal life chances. The extent to which life chances vary can be traced to differences in aspirations, talent, and hard work on the part of individuals. This perspective rejects the notion that parents' social location systematically shapes children's life experiences and outcomes. Instead, outcomes are seen as resting more in the hands of individuals.

In a distinctly different but still related vein, some social scientists acknowledge that there are systemic forms of inequality, including, for example, differences in parents' educational levels, occupational prestige, and income, as well as in their child-rearing practices. These scholars,

however, see such differences within society as a matter of *gradation*. To explain unequal life outcomes, they see it as helpful to look at, for example, differences in mothers' years of education or the range of incomes by households in a particular city. These different threads are interwoven in an intricate and often baffling pattern. Scholars who take this perspective on inequality typically focus on the ways specific patterns are related (e.g., the number of years of mothers' schooling and the size of children's vocabularies, or the number of years of mothers' education and parental involvement in schooling). Implicitly and explicitly, social scientists who share this perspective do not accept the position that there are identifiable, categorical differences in groups. They do not believe that the differences that do exist across society cohere into patterns recognizable as social classes.

In this book, I have challenged both views. Rather than seeing society as a collection of individuals, I stressed the importance of individuals' social structural location in shaping their daily lives. Following a well-established European tradition, I rejected analyses that see differences in American families as best interpreted as a matter of fine gradations. Instead, I see as more valuable a *categorical* analysis, wherein families are grouped into social categories such as poor, working class, and middle class. I argued that these categories are helpful in understanding the behavior of family members, not simply in one particular aspect but across a number of spheres. Family practices cohere by social class. Social scientists who accept this perspective may disagree about the number and type of categories and whether there should be, for example, an upper-middle-class category as well as a lower-middle-class one. Still, they agree that the observed differences in how people act can be meaningfully and fruitfully grouped into categories, without violating the complexity of daily life. My own view is that seeing selected aspects of family life as differentiated by social class is simply a better way to understand the reality of American family life. I also believe that social location at birth can be very important in shaping the routines of daily life, even when family members are not particularly conscious of the existence of social classes.

Thus, I have stressed how social class dynamics are woven into the texture and rhythm of children and parents' daily lives. Class position influences critical aspects of family life: time use, language use, and kin ties. Working-class and middle-class mothers may express beliefs that reflect a similar notion of "intensive mothering," but their behavior is quite different.<sup>1</sup> For that reason, I have described sets of paired beliefs

and actions as a "cultural logic" of child rearing. When children and parents move outside the home into the world of social institutions, they find that these cultural practices are not given equal value. There are signs that middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions. In the next section, I acknowledge areas of family life that did not appear to be heavily influenced by social class. Then I turn to highlighting the ways that social class membership matters and to discussing why these differences exist and what can be done to lessen or eliminate them.

#### THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL CLASS

Among the families we observed, some aspects of daily life did not vary systematically by social class. There were episodes of laughter, emotional connection, and happiness as well as quiet comfort in every family.<sup>2</sup> Harold McAllister and his mother laughed together as he almost dropped his hot dog but then, in an awkward grab, caught it. After a baseball game, Mr. Williams rubbed Alexander's head affectionately and called him "handsome." Ms. Handlon gave her daughter a big squeeze around her shoulders after the Christmas Eve pageant, and Melanie beamed. One summer afternoon, Mr. Yanelli and Billy played cards together, sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk. These moments of connection seemed deeply meaningful to both children and parents in all social classes, even as they take different shape by social class, in terms of language, activity, and character.

All the families we observed also had rituals: favorite meals they often ate, television programs they watched, toys or games that were very important, family outings they looked forward to, and other common experiences. The content of their rituals varied (especially by social class); what did not vary was that the children enjoyed these experiences and they provided a sense of membership in a family. Also, in all social classes, a substantial part of the children's days was spent in repetitive rituals: getting up, making the bed, taking a shower, getting dressed, brushing hair and teeth, eating breakfast, finding school books and papers, and waiting for adults to get ready. These moments were interspersed with hours, days, and weeks of household work, tedious demands, mundane tasks, and tension. This was true for all families, regardless of social class. Nor were any families immune to life tragedies: across all social classes there were premature deaths due to car accidents or suicides.

Across all social classes children and parents had different temperaments: some were shy and quiet; some were outgoing and talkative. Some had a sense of humor and some did not. The degree of organization and orderliness in daily life also did not vary systematically by social class. Some houses were clean and some were a disaster. Some of the messiest ones were middle-class homes in which the entryway was a paragon of order but the living spaces, particularly the upstairs, were in a tumble. Despite the formidable differences among the families detailed in the previous chapters, in each home, after a few visits, the research assistants and I found that the surroundings felt normal, comfortable, and safe. Put differently, they all felt like home.

#### CONCERTED CULTIVATION AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF NATURAL GROWTH

Despite these important areas of shared practices, social class made a significant difference in the routines of children's daily lives. The white and Black middle-class parents engaged in practices of *concerted cultivation*. In these families, parents actively fostered and assessed their children's talents, opinions, and skills. They scheduled their children for activities. They reasoned with them. They hovered over them and outside the home they did not hesitate to intervene on the children's behalf. They made a deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children's development and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills. The working-class and poor parents viewed children's development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they were provided with comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support. I have called this cultural logic of child rearing the *accomplishment of natural growth*. As with concerted cultivation, this commitment, too, required ongoing effort; sustaining children's natural growth despite formidable life challenges is properly viewed as accomplishment. Parents who relied on natural growth generally organized their children's lives so they spent time in and around home, in informal play with peers, siblings, and cousins. As a result, the children had more autonomy, regarding leisure time and more opportunities for child-initiated play. They also were more responsible for their lives outside the home. Unlike in middle-class families, adult-organized activities were uncommon. Instead of the relentless focus on reasoning and negotiation that took place in middle-class families, there was less speech (including less whining and badgering) in working-class and poor homes. Boundaries between adults and children were clearly marked; parents generally used language not as

an aim in itself but more as a conduit for social life. Directives were common. In their institutional encounters, working-class and poor parents turned over responsibility to professionals; when parents did try to intervene, they felt that they were less capable and less efficacious than they would have liked. While working-class and poor children differed in important ways, particularly in the stability of their lives, surprisingly there was not a major difference between them in their cultural logic of child rearing. Instead, in this study the cultural divide appeared to be between the middle class and everyone else.

Across all social classes, child-rearing practices often appeared to be natural. Like breathing, child rearing usually seemed automatic and unconscious. Parents were scarcely aware that they were orienting their children in specific ways.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Handlon and the Tallinger children had cousins their own ages who lived within a twenty-minute drive. They saw their cousins, however, only on special occasions, not several times per week as did children in the Driver and McAllister families. While firmly committed to the strategy of concerted cultivation, Mr. and Ms. Williams did not seem especially conscious of their approach. Although both parents mentioned the pleasure they experienced from knowing that Alexander was curious, they did not appear to link that trait to their own extensive use of reasoning with him. Nor did they analyze their failure to use directives. The fact that most of Alexander's time was spent with other children his own age, rather than with his cousins (in part because they lived so far away), also was not a subject of reflection or discussion. Parts of their lives, of course, did reflect conscious choices and deliberate actions, including Ms. Williams's vehement objections to television and both parents' commitment to furthering Alexander's musical talents. The scarcity of time was also a subject of discussion. Even here, however, the focus was on the details of life (e.g., missing a baseball game to take part in a school play) rather than on the overall approach to child rearing.

Similarly, in families using the accomplishment of natural growth, there was tremendous economic constraint and almost constant talk about money. But there was a "taken for granted" character to daily life that presumed a focus on natural growth rather than concerted cultivation. Ms. McAllister stressed her strengths as a mother. As she fed, clothed, and cared for her children, took them on picnics, and watched out for them, she compared her actions favorably to the behavior of mothers living nearby, including those who took drugs. She did not compare herself to the Ms. Tallingers or Ms. Williamses of the world.

## THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND CLASS

In *Race Matters*, Professor Cornell West reports his frustration in trying to hail a cab to get to a photo shoot for the cover of his latest book. As he waited and waited, ten taxis without passengers passed him by, stopping (often within his vision) instead to pick up people whose skin color was not black. Furious, he gave up, took the subway, and was late for the appointment.<sup>4</sup> Professor West and other middle-class African Americans report feeling enraged over this inability to signal their class position in social interactions with strangers. In these situations, race trumps social class.<sup>5</sup>

The middle-class Black fathers in this study told similar tales. One father reported white women clutching their purses and looking terrified as he walked briskly one evening to use the cash machine in an upscale shopping district. Also, as I have shown, the mothers and fathers of middle-class African American children kept a keen eye out for signs of racial problems. Their worries were confirmed, as when a first-grade boy told Alexander Williams (son of a lawyer) that he could only be a garbage man when he grew up, or when Fern Marshall, the only Black girl in a camp of a hundred white girls, had fun during the morning basketball activities but at lunchtime found it more difficult (than if she had been white) to blend into the groups of girls chattering away. Although they moved heavily within white worlds, parents sought to avoid having their children be the only Black child at an event. In addition, parents sought to have their children develop a positive self-image that specifically included their racial identity. Thus, for example, they attended all-Black middle-class Baptist churches every Sunday.

Given this evidence, it would be a mistake to suggest that race did not matter in children's lives. It did. Nevertheless, the role of race was less powerful than I had expected. In terms of the areas this book has focused on — how children spend their time, the way parents use language and discipline in the home, the nature of the families' social connections, and the strategies used for intervening in institutions — white and Black parents engaged in very similar, often identical, practices with their children.<sup>6</sup> As the children age, the relative importance of race in their daily lives is likely to increase.<sup>7</sup> Most African Americans do not date or marry outside their own racial and ethnic groups. Housing markets are heavily segregated for Black homeowners, regardless of their income.<sup>8</sup> African Americans also are likely to encounter racism in their interpersonal contact with whites, particularly in employment settings. In fourth grade,

however, in very central ways, race mattered less in children's daily lives than did their social class.<sup>9</sup> Black and white middle-class children were given enormous amounts of individualized attention, with their parents organizing their own time around their children's leisure activities. This prioritizing profoundly affected parents' leisure time. In these situations, race made little to no difference. Mr. Williams, after a week of working until midnight preparing for a trial, spent Sunday driving Alexander to baseball practice, home for a quick shower and change, and then off to a school play. Mr. Tallinger flew across the country on a red-eye, had a short nap, went to work, and then was out late at a soccer practice on a chilly spring evening, yearning for the event to be over so that he could get home and sleep.

Similarly, it was the middle-class children, Black and white, who squabbled and fought with their siblings and talked back to their parents. These behaviors were simply not tolerated in working-class and poor families, Black or white.<sup>10</sup> Still, the biggest differences in the cultural logic of child rearing in the day-to-day behavior of children in this study were between middle-class children on the one hand (including wealthy members of the middle class) and working-class and poor children on the other. As a middle-class Black boy, Alexander Williams had much more in common with *white* middle-class Garrett Tallinger than he did with less-privileged Black boys, such as Tyrec Taylor or Harold McAllister.

## HOW DOES IT MATTER?

Both concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth offer intrinsic benefits (and burdens) for parents and their children. Nevertheless, these practices are accorded different social values by important social institutions. There are signs that some family cultural practices, notably those associated with concerted cultivation, give children advantages that other cultural practices do not.

In terms of the rhythms of daily life, both concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth have advantages and disadvantages. Middle-class children learn to develop and value an individualized sense of self. Middle-class children are allowed to participate in a variety of coveted activities: gymnastics, soccer, summer camps, and so on. These activities improve their skills and teach them, as Mr. Tallinger noted, to be better athletes than their parents were at comparable ages. They learn to handle moments of humiliation on the field as well as moments of glory. Middle-class children learn, as Mr. Williams noted,

the difference between baroque and classical music. They learn to perform. They learn to present themselves. But this cultivation has a cost. Family schedules are disrupted. Dinner hours are very hard to arrange. Siblings such as Spencer and Sam Tallinger spend dreary hours waiting at athletic fields and riding in the car going from one event to another. Family life, despite quiet interludes, is frequently frenetic. Parents, especially mothers, must reconcile conflicting priorities, juggling events whose deadlines are much tighter than the deadlines connected to serving meals or getting children ready for bed. The domination of children's activities can take a toll on families. At times, everyone in the middle-class families — including ten-year-old children — seemed exhausted. Thus, there are formidable costs, as well as benefits to this child-rearing approach.

Working-class and poor children also had advantages, as well as costs, from the cultural logic of child rearing they experienced. Working-class and poor children learned to entertain themselves. They played outside, creating their own games, as Tyrec Taylor did with his friends. They did not complain of being bored. Working-class and poor children also appeared to have boundless energy. They did not have the exhaustion that we saw in middle-class children the same age. Some working-class and poor children longed to be in organized activities — Katie Brindle wanted to take ballet and Harold McAllister wanted to play football. When finances, a lack of transportation, and limited availability of programs conspired to prevent or limit their participation, they were disappointed. Many were also deeply aware of the economic constraints and the limited consumption permitted by their family's budget. Living spaces were small, and often there was not much privacy. The television was almost always on and, like many middle-class children growing up in the 1950s, working-class and poor children watched unrestricted amounts of television. As a result, family members spent more time together in shared space than occurred in middle-class homes. Indeed, family ties were very strong, particularly among siblings. Working-class and poor children also developed very close ties with their cousins and other extended family members.

Within the home, these two approaches to child rearing each have identifiable strengths and weaknesses. When we turn to examining institutional dynamics outside the home, however, the unequal benefits of middle-class children's lives compared to working-class and poor children's lives become clearer. In crucial ways, middle-class family members appeared reasonably comfortable and entitled, while working-class and

poor family members appeared uncomfortable and constrained. For example, neither Harold nor his mother seemed as comfortable as Alexander and his mother had been as they interacted with their physician. Alexander was used to extensive conversation at home; with the doctor, he was at ease initiating questions. Harold, who was used to responding to directives at home, primarily answered questions from the doctor, rather than posing his own. Unlike Ms. Williams, Ms. McAllister did not see the enthusiastic efforts of her daughter Alexis to share information about her birthmark as appropriate behavior. Ms. Williams not only permitted Alexander to hop up and down on the stool to express his enthusiasm; she explicitly trained him to be assertive and well prepared for his encounter with the doctor. Harold was reserved. He did not show an emerging sense of entitlement, as Alexander and other middle-class children did. Absorbing his mother's apparent need to conceal the truth about the range of foods in his diet, Harold appeared cautious, displaying an emerging sense of constraint.

This pattern occurred in school interactions, as well. Some working-class and poor parents had warm and friendly relations with educators. Overall, however, working-class and poor parents in this study had much more distance or separation from the school than did middle-class mothers. At home, Ms. McAllister could be quite assertive, but at school she was subdued. The parent-teacher conference yielded Ms. McAllister few insights into her son's educational experience.<sup>11</sup>

Other working-class and poor parents also appeared baffled, intimidated, and subdued in parent-teacher conferences. Ms. Driver, frantically worried because Wendy, a fourth-grader, was not yet able to read, resisted intervening, saying, "I don't want to jump into anything and find it is the wrong thing." When working-class and poor parents did try to intervene in their children's educational experiences, they often felt ineffectual. Billy Yanelli's mother appeared relaxed and chatty when she interacted with service personnel, such as the person who sold her lottery tickets on Saturday morning. With "the school," however, she was very apprehensive. She distrusted school personnel. She felt bullied and powerless.

There were also moments in which parents encouraged children to outwardly comply with school officials but, at the same time, urged them to resist school authority. Although well aware of school rules prohibiting fighting, the Yanellis directly trained their son to "beat up" a boy who was bothering him. Similarly, when Wendy Driver complained about a boy who pestered her and pulled her ponytail, and the teacher

did not respond, her mother advised her to "punch him." Ms. Driver's boyfriend added, "Hit him when the teacher isn't looking."<sup>12</sup>

The unequal level of trust, as well as differences in the amount and quality of information divulged, can yield unequal *profits* during a historical period such as ours, when professionals applaud assertiveness and reject passivity as an inappropriate parenting strategy.<sup>13</sup> Middle-class children and parents often (but not always) accrued advantages or profits from their efforts. Alexander Williams succeeded in having the doctor take his medical concerns seriously. The Marshall children ended up in the gifted program, even though they did not qualify.

Overall, the routine rituals of family life are not equally legitimized in the broader society. Parents' efforts to reason with children (even two-year-olds) are seen as more educationally valuable than parents' use of directives. Spending time playing soccer or baseball is deemed by professionals as more valuable than time spent watching television. Moreover, differences in the cultural logic of child rearing are attached to unequal currency in the broader society. The middle-class strategy of concerted cultivation appears to have greater promise of being capitalized into social profits than does the strategy of the accomplishment of natural growth found in working-class and poor homes. Alexander Williams's vocabulary grew at home, in the evenings, as he bantered with his parents about plagiarism and copyright as well as about the X-Men. Harold McAllister, Billy Yanelli, and Wendy Driver learned how to manage their own time, play without the direction of adults, and occupy themselves for long periods of time without being bored. Although these are important life skills, they do not have the same payoff on standardized achievement tests as the experiences of Alexander Williams.

These potential benefits for middle-class children, and costs for working-class and poor children, are necessarily speculative, since at the end of the study, the children were still in elementary school. Still, there are important signs of hidden advantages being sown at early ages. The middle-class children have extensive experience with adults in their lives with whom they have a relatively contained, bureaucratically regulated, and somewhat superficial relationship. As children spend eight weeks playing soccer, baseball, basketball, and other activities, they meet and interact with adults acting as coaches, assistant coaches, car pool drivers, and so on. This contact with relative strangers, although of a different quality than contact with cousins, aunts, and uncles, provides work-related skills. For instance, as Garrett shakes the hand of a stranger and looks him or her in the eye, he is being groomed, in an effortless fashion,

for job interviews he will have as an adult (employment experts stress the importance of good eye contact). In the McAllister home, family members have great affection and warmth toward one another, but they do not generally look each other in the eye when they speak; this training is likely to be a liability in job interviews. In settings as varied as health care and gymnastics, middle-class children learn at a young age to be assertive and demanding. They expect, as did Stacey Marshall, for institutions to be responsive to *them* and to accommodate their individual needs. By contrast, when Wendy Driver is told to hit the boy who is pestering her (when the teacher isn't looking) or Billy Yanelli is told to physically defend himself, despite school rules, they are not learning how to make bureaucratic institutions work to their advantage. Instead, they are being given lessons in frustration and powerlessness.

#### WHY? THE SEARCH FOR EXPLANATIONS<sup>14</sup>

As I discuss shortly, some commentators today decry the "overscheduled" lives of children; they long for the days when most children had unstructured lives, filled with informal play. But this is a romanticized view of the family in the past. Although there have always been important social class differences in childhood, for much of U.S. history, children played an important economic role in family life. For example, in colonial America, a boy of six or seven was expected to move out of his parents' home to live with a skilled craftsman as an apprentice. As the country gradually industrialized, children's small, "nimble fingers" were useful in factory work.<sup>15</sup> Children also were economic assets on family farms. According to a 1920 study in North Dakota children helped herd cattle and dig holes for fence posts. They also had daily responsibilities, as this description of a nine-year-old boy's chores shows: "Built the fires in the morning, swept the floor of a two-room house, and brought in fuel and water; in addition, before he made a two-mile trip to school, he helped feed stock (five horses and twelve cows) and chopped wood; in the evening he did the chores and washed dishes."<sup>16</sup> Children, especially working-class and poor children, also helped with the informal paid labor their mothers did, such as laundry and "sewing, embroidering, flower making, and tag tying"; most older siblings looked after younger siblings, as well. Children did have some time for unstructured leisure, but it was limited.

Viviana Zelizer shows that through the end of the nineteenth century and into the early decades of the twentieth century, these practices were

accompanied by beliefs supporting the importance of children working hard. If anything, the concern was that without specific training in "useful work," children might grow up to be "paupers and thieves."<sup>17</sup> In children's books and magazines, in which stories stressed "the virtues of work, duty, and discipline," Zelizer notes, "The standard villain . . . was an idle child."<sup>18</sup> The period after 1920 saw a dramatic decline in children's economic contributions, however, as child labor laws were put into place and a new vision of the "economically useless but sentimentally priceless child" took hold.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, although a definitive account of historical changes in children's leisure practices remains to be written, it appears that it was for only a relatively brief historical period that children were granted long stretches of leisure time with unstructured play. In the period after World War II, white and Black children were permitted to play for hours on end with other neighborhood children, after school, during evenings, and on weekends. Other than going to church, the few organized activities children participated in (e.g., music lessons or Scouts) began at a later age than is typical today. The "institutionalization of children's leisure" and the rise of concerted cultivation more generally are recent developments.<sup>20</sup> Today's parents are not transmitting practices they learned in their families of origin. Parents of the eighty-eight children in our study were born in the 1950s and 1960s. *None* reported having had a very active schedule of organized activities as a child. Rather, the middle-class parents in this study and, possibly throughout the country, appear to have been raised according to the logic of the accomplishment of natural growth.

In attempting to understand this historical shift, particularly the institutionalization of children's leisure and the emphasis on "intensive mothering," commentators often point to the impact of modern life, especially the impact of increasing "rationalization."<sup>21</sup> This view, termed the "McDonaldization of society" by George Ritzer, finds an increasing standardization of daily life, with an emphasis on efficiency, predictability, control, and calculability.<sup>22</sup> Ritzer notes that these principles from the world of fast food have been adapted to other parts of social life, including Kidsports Fun and Fitness Club, Kinder Care, Kampgrounds of America, Toys 'R' Us, and other stores.<sup>23</sup> Family life, too, is becoming increasingly rationalized, being

invaded by not only public schools, the courts, social service workers, gardeners, housekeepers, day-care providers, lawyers, doctors, televisions, frozen dinners, pizza delivery, manufactured clothing, and disposable diapers, but also, and more critically, by the *ideology* behind such insti-

tutions, persons, and products. They bring with them . . . the logic of . . . impersonal, competitive, contractual, commodified, efficient, profit-maximizing, self-interested relations.<sup>24</sup>

Busy affluent parents can hire chauffeurs to take children to their organized activities, hire educators at "Learning Centers" in shopping malls to help children do homework and improve in school, and hire personal shoppers to help buy and wrap holiday gifts. The services available for birthday parties (e.g., a special room at McDonald's, an overnight at a science museum, or a professional party coordinator) are signs of the increasing rationalization of family life.

The rationalization of children's leisure is evident in the proliferation of organized activities with a predictable schedule, delivering a particular quantity of experience within a specific time period, under the control of adults. That children's time use has shifted from unstructured play to organized activities does not mean that families no longer have fun during their leisure hours. Many find the time spent together during soccer and baseball games, for example, to be very enjoyable. The point is that areas of family life are growing more systematic, predictable, and regulated than they have been in the recent past. Forces that have converged to bring about this change include increasing concerns about the safety of children who play unsupervised on local streets, rises in employment (resulting in adults being at home less), and a decline in the availability of neighborhood playmates due to a dropping birth rate and the effects of suburbanization, especially the increased size of homes and decreased density of housing.<sup>25</sup>

Greater emphasis on the use of reasoning in the home, particularly as a form of discipline, as well as interventions in institutions, can also be seen as a form of rationalization, particularly the well-documented trend of "scientific motherhood." Still, any analysis of the rise of concerted cultivation must also, I believe, grapple with the changing position of the United States in the world economy, and the accompanying decline in highly paid manufacturing jobs and increase in less desirable service-sector jobs. This restructuring makes it very likely that when today's children are adults, their standard of living will be lower than that of their parents. It means that there will be fewer "good jobs" and more "bad jobs," and that the competition for them will be intense. Moreover, since children must be successful in school to gain access to desirable positions, many middle-class parents are anxious to make sure their children perform well academically. Institutional gatekeepers, such as college admissions officers, applaud extracurricular activities. Thus, many parents see



children's activities as more than interesting and enjoyable pastimes. They also provide potential advantages for children in the sorting process.

All of these factors may contribute to the rise of a new standard of child rearing in the middle class. As Hays shows, this new standard is legitimated in a variety of ways.<sup>26</sup> Professionals actively support advancement of children's creative and leisure talents, cognitive growth, and school performance through the active involvement of their parents as cultivators. The older logic of child rearing, the accomplishment of natural growth, receives less institutional support. If this analysis is correct, if there has been a shift in the cultural repertoires of child rearing, and if that change has been legitimated, why is there a class difference in child-rearing strategies? Why doesn't everyone raise their children the same way?

#### THE ROLE OF RESOURCES

Parents' economic resources helped create the class differences in child rearing discussed in this book. Children's activities were expensive. A \$2.5 enrollment fee, which middle-class parents dismissed as "insignificant," "modest," or "negligible," was a formidable expense for all poor families and many in the working class. The enrollment fee was just the tip of the iceberg. Many activities also required special clothing. Stacey Marshall needed gymnastic leotards as well as a training warm-up suit. She had special bags to carry her equipment to and from the gym, and a balance beam at home. Participating in tournaments required paying special fees. Children's hectic schedules increased the number of meals eaten out, as the families raced from one event to the next. Tournaments out of the local area resulted in special fees as well as hotel bills and restaurant bills. There were special end-of-season events, banquets, and gifts for the coaches. There were assorted hidden costs, such as car maintenance and gas. In 1994, the Tallingers estimated the cost (including all of the factors listed above, except car repair) of Garrett's activities at \$4,000 annually; nor was that figure unusual.<sup>27</sup> Thus, in addition to disposable income for the cost of lessons and activities, families usually needed other advantages, such as reliable private transportation and flexibility in work schedules to be able to get children to events. These resources were disproportionately concentrated in middle-class families.

Differences in educational resources are important as well. Middle-class parents' superior levels of education gave them larger vocabularies and more knowledge. More education facilitated concerted cultivation,

particularly with respect to interventions in institutions outside the home. As I have shown, poor and working-class parents had difficulty understanding key terms bantered about by professionals, such as "tetanus shot" or "cavity." Middle-class parents' educational backgrounds also gave them the confidence to criticize educational professionals and intervene in school matters. For working-class and poor parents, educators were social superiors. For middle-class parents, they were equals or subordinates. In addition, research indicates that middle-class parents tend to be more sensitive to shifts in child-rearing standards than do working-class parents, probably because middle-class parents tend to be more attuned to the advice of professionals.<sup>28</sup>

Others have shown that parents' occupations and working conditions, particularly the complexity of their work, influence important aspects of their child-rearing beliefs.<sup>29</sup> In this study, there were not only suggestions that parents' work mattered, but also signs that the experience of adulthood itself influenced how individuals conceived of childhood. Middle-class parents, spared severe economic struggles, often were preoccupied with the pleasures and difficulties of their work lives.<sup>30</sup> They tended to view childhood as an opportunity for play, but also as a chance to develop talents and skills that could be valuable in the self-actualization processes that take place in adulthood. Mr. Tallinger, for example, saw implications for the world of work in his assessment of the value of sports for Garrett, noting that playing soccer taught his son to be "hard nosed" and "competitive." Ms. Williams, similarly, mentioned the value of Alexander learning to work with others on a team. Middle-class parents were very aware of the "declining fortunes" of the middle class and of the country as a whole at the close of the twentieth century. They worried about their own economic futures and those of their children.<sup>31</sup> This uncertainty made them feel it was important that children be developed in a variety of ways in order to enhance their future possibilities.

The experiences and concerns that shaped the views of the working-class and poor parents had little in common with those of the middle-class parents. For working-class families, it was the deadening quality of work and the press of economic shortages that defined their experience of adulthood and influenced their vision of childhood. For poor families, it was dependence on public assistance and severe economic shortages that most affected their views about adulthood and childhood. Working-class and poor families had many more worries about basic issues: how to endure food shortages, get children to doctors despite a lack of reliable transportation, purchase clothing, and manage other life necessities.

Thinking back over their childhoods, these adults acknowledged periods of hardship but also recalled times without the kinds of worries that troubled them at present. Many appeared to want their own youngsters to spend their time being happy and relaxed. There would be plenty of time for their children to face the burdens of adulthood and adulthood. In summary, then, parents' conceptions of adulthood and childhood appeared to be closely connected to their lived experiences. The factors influencing parents' child-rearing strategies thus seem to go beyond the role of education per se to encompass these adults' occupational and economic experiences as well.

In fact, it was the interweaving of life experiences and resources, including parents' economic resources, occupational conditions, and educational backgrounds, that seemed to be most important in leading middle-class parents to engage in concerted cultivation and working-class and poor families to engage in the accomplishment of natural growth. Still, the structural location of families did not *determine* their child-rearing practices. The agency of actors and the indeterminacy of social life are inevitable. It is important to keep in mind this "relative autonomy" of individuals in the enactment of social structural position and biographical outcomes.<sup>32</sup>

Aside from economic and social resources, there are other factors that might influence child-rearing practices by social class. Indeed, one might imagine two different scenarios: if the resources of the poor and working-class families were transformed overnight so that they equaled those of the middle-class families, would their cultural logic of child rearing shift as well? Or are there cultural attitudes and beliefs that are somewhat independent of economic and social resources that are influencing parents' practices here? Unfortunately, the size and scope of this study do not permit a clear answer to this question. On the one hand, some poor and working-class parents reported that they wanted their children to have more organized activities, expressed a belief in the importance of listening to children, and felt it was important for them as parents to play an active role in their children's schooling. In these families, the parents' practices appeared to be directly limited by their resources. On the other hand, in other families, parents did not view children's participation in activities as particularly important. Ms. Taylor, for example, "prayed" that Tyrec would not want to play football again; she did not see his involvement in the sport as helping him in any special way.

Other parents were even more dubious. For example, during the parent interviews, the research assistants and I described the real-life sched-

ules of two children (using data from the twelve families we were observing). One schedule was similar to that of Alexander Williams: restricted television, required reading, and many organized activities, including piano lessons (for analytical purposes, the child was described as disliking his piano lessons and not being permitted to quit, neither of which was true for Alexander). Some working-class and poor parents found this scenario unappealing.<sup>33</sup> One white, poor mother complained:

I think he, I think, uh, I think he wants more. I think he doesn't enjoy doing what he's doing half of the time (light laughter). I think his parents are too strict. And he's not a child (laughter).

In addition, even parents who remarked that this kind of schedule would pay off "job-wise" when the child was an adult, still expressed serious reservations, as these comments (each from different interviews) show:

"I think he is a sad kid."

"He must be dead-dog tired."

"Unless you're planning on him being Liberace as far as piano . . . I think it is a waste of money . . . I think he is cutting himself kind of short. He's not being involved with anything as far as friends."

Thus, the belief systems of working-class and poor parents were mixed: some longed for a schedule of organized activities for their children; others did not. Still, there were a few indications that if parents' economic and social resources were to change, their cultural practices would shift as well. A number of middle-class children in the study had parents who were upwardly mobile. The parents were middle class, but the children's grandparents were poor or working class. In some cases, these grandparents objected to the child-rearing practices associated with concerted cultivation. They were bewildered by their grandchildren's hectic schedules of organized activities, outraged that the parents would reason with the children instead of giving them clear directives, and awed by the intensive involvement of mothers in the children's schooling. The small number of cases limits generalizing, but the evidence does suggest that it is economic and social resources that are key in shaping child-rearing practices; as parents' own social class position shifts, so do their cultural beliefs and practices in child rearing. Untangling the effects of material and cultural resources on parents and children's choices is beyond the scope of this study. These two forces are inextricably interwoven in daily life.

fer by social class, the solutions do as well. Below, I review some of the possibilities.

### *Slowing It Down: Policy Implications for Middle-Class Families*

The frenetic schedule of some middle-class families is a topic that increasingly bubbles up in media reports. As a result, there is an emerging social movement of professionals and middle-class parents to resist the scheduling of children's lives. Books, including *The Over-Scheduled Child*, insist that children's schedules are out of control:

It is Tuesday at 6:45 A.M. Belinda, age seven, is still asleep. School doesn't start until 9:00 A.M. and her mother usually lets her sleep until 7:30 A.M. But not on Tuesdays. That's the day Belinda has a 7:30 A.M. piano lesson. From it she goes directly to school, which lasts until three. Then the babysitter drives Belinda to gymnastics for the 4:00-6:30 P.M. class. While Tuesday is the busiest day, the rest of the week is filled up too, with religious school and choir practice, ballet, and (Belinda's favorite) horseback riding. "She's pretty worn out by the end of the day," her mother laments. . . . "I'm not really sure it is a good thing [to be so busy]. But I want to give her the advantages I didn't have."<sup>37</sup>

The authors are outraged by this kind of schedule:

We sense that our family lives are out of whack, but we aren't sure why. We know we are doing too much for our kids, but we don't know where it might be okay to cut back . . . every time we . . . turn [around] . . . someone else is adding something new to the list of things we are supposed to be doing for our children to make sure they turn out right.<sup>38</sup>

Resistance is spreading. At the collective level, grassroots organizations such as "Family Life First," based in Wayzata, Minnesota, are pressuring coaches and adult leaders of other organized activities to make family time a priority (by, for example, not scheduling events on Sundays or not penalizing children who miss games while on family vacations). Ridgewood, New Jersey, gained national attention when citizens declared a community-wide (voluntary) "Family Night" and arranged for children's organized activities (and homework) to be canceled for the evening. These incipient movements have in common an explicit recognition that children's schedules are absurd, that family life is in thrall to a frenzy of "hyper-scheduling."<sup>39</sup> Decrying the development of children's appointment books, professionals call for children to have more opportunities for unstructured play.<sup>40</sup> At the individual level, parents are

### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In his thoughtful book *The Price of Citizenship*, historian Michael Katz shows that in recent years Americans' conception of welfare has grown excessively narrow.<sup>34</sup> A preoccupation with public assistance to the poor has led Americans to overlook two other important forms of social distribution: social insurance programs and taxation policies. Yet in size and scope, social insurance programs, particularly Social Security and Medicare, dwarf the cost of payments to poor families. Moreover, these programs have been effective in reducing the percentage of poor among the elderly. It is very likely that the state could take similar steps to reduce inequality among American families. State intervention would probably be the most direct and effective way to reduce the kinds of social inequality described in this book. For example, a child allowance, similar to what Sweden and other Western European nations provide, would likely be very effective in eliminating child poverty and reducing the gap in economic and social resources.<sup>35</sup> As David Karen points out, increasing the "safety net" for poor and working-class families would be helpful:

Anything that can be done to provide a safety net for the poor (and working class) will increase the resources of . . . children and therefore make it possible for them to engage in some of the activities that they're currently excluded from. This exclusion takes place not only because they don't have the money to participate but also because parental time is so limited. If parental time (say, thanks to fewer hours at work) were more available, there might be more access to participation. Under this rubric, I'd put things like universal health care, state-supported daycare, (and) a guaranteed minimum income.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, an increase in federal and state recreation monies would be useful since, in interviews I conducted with directors of recreation programs in the regions surrounding Swan and Lower Richmond schools, it was clear that as the township became more affluent, more elaborate recreational programs were available. Vouchers for extracurricular activities and transportation to activities (e.g., music lessons, art lessons, sports programs, and specialized summer camps) are another possibility. A problem is that neighborhoods are often relatively homogenous by social class. Consolidating neighborhoods so that working-class and poor children become part of more affluent neighborhoods would be likely to increase access to desirable facilities. What is far less likely, however, is the existence of the political will to support this redistribution of wealth. Instead, Americans, as is their wont, are likely to remain preoccupied with more individual solutions. Since, however, the problems dif-

Here, it is important to bear in mind the ever-changing nature of institutional standards (phonics is "in" one year, whole language the next; computers are promoted and then challenged). Providing children with the resources needed to comply with institutional standards may be helpful, but it leaves unexamined the problematic nature of class-based child-rearing methods themselves. It is possible that policies could be developed to help professionals learn how to be more sensitive to differences in cultural practices and how to "code switch"; they, in turn, might be able to teach children to "code switch" as they move between home and encounters with institutions. One promising development is the success of programs that offer to working-class and poor children the kinds of concerted cultivation middle-class children get at home. Examples include intensive interventions in high schools and in "I Had a Dream" philanthropic ventures through which schools and private tutors take on the roles often carried out by middle-class parents (and the tutors they hire). These programs have improved children's school performance; reduced suspensions, behavior problems, and teen pregnancies; and increased college admittance rates. Many have been shown to double the high school graduation rates of students.<sup>42</sup> Other interventions have produced similarly positive results.<sup>43</sup> In some, for example, high school teachers provide low-income students with tours of college campuses, remind them about key deadlines, and help them fill out college applications. Programs such as these, as well as more traditional programs, such as "Big Brother/Big Sister," have improved school experiences.<sup>44</sup> In sum, policy recommendations for working-class and poor children do not address hectic schedules or the need for greater parental control, as those for middle-class children do. Rather, they focus on gaining institutional advantages for children by encouraging parents to use reasoning to bolster their children's vocabulary and to play a more active role in their children's schooling.

#### BIOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The birth of a new family member is usually treated as a joyous event. Family members mark the arrival of the newest niece, nephew, daughter, or grandson with celebrations beforehand, such as baby showers, excitement and gifts on the baby's arrival, with visits to the hospital and detailed conversations about who the baby looks like, and formal blessings such as christenings or "dedications" in churches of various denominations. All of these events celebrate the promise offered by this new life.

encouraged to set strict limits on children's activities. Some parents proudly announce on websites that they require their children to limit themselves to only one activity at a time.

A systematic critique of parents' role in supervising and intervening in institutions has not yet emerged. Indeed, many professionals actively recruit and encourage parental involvement in schooling. Doubts about the value of extensive reasoning with children, on the other hand, are mounting. Problems stemming from the blurring of boundaries between parents and children are especially well covered by professionals and the media. With titles such as *Parents in Charge: Setting Healthy, Loving Boundaries for You and Your Child* and *I'll Be the Parent, You Be the Child*, professionals are signaling the need for parents to provide directives to children. The books provide cautionary tales of rude, obnoxious, and ungrateful children who refuse to be polite to guests, who feel that they, as children, may decide when they will or will not join the family for dinner, and who are unable to convey appreciation for the gifts they receive. Describing these children as out of control and craving adult intervention, the authors call for parents to "set limits and make decisions." The solution the experts offer calls mainly for individual action: each parent is encouraged to look within her or himself to find the necessary strength to take charge, to give clear directives to children, and to resist the temptation to seek their children's approval.

Ironically, the new agenda for middle-class parents, whether expressed collectively or individually, amounts to a reinstatement of many of the elements of the strategy of the accomplishment of natural growth. For overburdened and exhausted parents, the policy recommendations center on setting limits: reducing the number of children's activities, scheduling family time, making family events a higher priority than children's events, and generally putting the needs of the group ahead of the needs of the individual.

#### *Gaining Compliance with Dominant Standards: Implications for Working-Class and Poor Families*

For working-class and poor families, the policy recommendations center on trying to gain advantages for children in institutional settings. Some programs stress the importance of reading to children, bolstering vocabulary, and addressing "summer setback" (a reference to working-class and poor children's tendency to lose academic ground when they are out of school while middle-class children's academic growth spurts ahead).<sup>45</sup>

Looking at social class differences in the standards of institutions provides a vocabulary for understanding inequality. It highlights the ways in which institutional standards give some people an advantage over others as well as the unequal ways that cultural practices in the home pay off in settings outside the home. Such a focus helps to undercut the middle-class presumption of moral superiority over the poor and the working class. And a vocabulary of social structure and social class is vastly preferable to a moral vocabulary that blames individuals for their life circumstances and saves the harshest criticism for those deemed the "underserving poor."<sup>47</sup> It is also more accurate than relying only on race categories. The social position of one's family of origin has profound implications for life experiences and life outcomes. But the inequality our system creates and sustains is invisible and thus unrecognized. We would be better off as a country if we could enlarge our truncated vocabulary about the importance of social class. For only then might we begin to acknowledge more systematically the class divisions among us.

Each person's life also unfolds in a unique way. Within the same family, brothers and sisters have different temperaments and preferences as well as different genetic configurations. Fern Marshall spent hours and hours each week playing basketball while Stacey was absorbed with gymnastics; Garrett Tallinger was quiet while Spencer was such a chatterbox that, as his father said in mock despair, "You can't shut him up." Melanie Handlon's older brother was tall and thin while she was short and stocky. Moreover, even members of the same family do not have the same child-rearing experience. Family configurations change over time and parents' life circumstances and parenting styles change as well. There are important variations in the choices siblings make and in their life outcomes.

But this unique character of each human life, as well as the distinctive gifts that each individual brings to a family, should not blind us to the way that membership in a broader social group matters in the creation of inequality. Social group membership structures life opportunities. The chances of attaining key and widely sought goals—high scores on standardized tests such as the SAT, graduation from college, professional jobs, and sustained employment—are not equal for all the infants whose births are celebrated by their families. It turns out that the family into which we are born, an event over which we have no control, matters quite a lot. It matters in part because the system of institutions is selective, building on some cultural patterns more than on others. To be sure, there are also significant amounts of upward and downward mobility. There are those in the population who overcome the predicted odds, particularly certain immigrant groups. The social structure of inequality is not all determining. But it exists. This system of social location, largely unacknowledged by most Americans, means that Katie Brindle, Wendy Driver, and Tyrec Taylor have important elements of their lives in common, just as Garrett Tallinger, Alexander Williams, and Stacey Marshall have important aspects of their lives in common. It means that class, in some instances, is more important than race. And it suggests that boys and girls of the same social class, while having important gender-related differences in their lives, also have important commonalities.<sup>45</sup>

Americans tend to resist the notion that they live in a society of social classes. Most people describe themselves as middle class. When asked about social divisions, many readily discuss the power of race, but the idea of social class is not a systematic part of the vocabulary of most Americans.<sup>46</sup> Nor is there a set of widely discussed beliefs, as in earlier decades, of the importance of eliminating poverty or narrowing gaps in social inequality.