Contours of childhood: Social class differences in chlidren's daily lives

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Contours of Childhood:
Social Class Differences in Children's Daily Lives

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Abstract

This paper offers a conceptualization of social class differences in the character of child rearing and family life. Although all parents want children to obtain success and happiness, they differ in the ways they define their own roles in their children's lives as well as in how they perceive the nature of childhood. The middle-class parents in this study appear to follow a pattern of "concerted cultivation." They enroll children in numerous age-specific organized activities that come to dominate family life and create enormous labor for parents, especially mothers. Parents also stress the development of reasoning. This "cultivation" approach to raising children creates a frenetic pace for parents, imposes an enormous stress on performance on children, and creates a cult of individualism within the family. I support this conceptualization with observational data from case studies of white and black families with children in the third and fourth grade. Although there are important variations among the working-class and poor families, these two groups' approaches to raising children are quite similar, and both are distinct from the middle-class families' strategies. My "conceptual umbrellas" provide a way of thinking about differences in family life, both those I observed in my study and those that have been documented in the literature. There are important variations within social classes, including differences between black and white middle-class families. But there are also important areas of life that appear relatively indifferent to social class. The importance of social class should not be overstated. The class differences I found in children's family lives provide uneven resources for family members as they seek to comply with the standards of dominant institutions. The pattern of concerted cultivation, with its stress on the organization of individual repertoires of activities, reasoning, and questioning, encourages an emerging sense of entitlement in children.

Not all parents and children are equally assertive, but the pattern of questioning and intervening I witnessed among middle-class parents contrasts sharply with the definitions of how to be helpful and effective that I observed among working-class and poor families. Here, the pattern of the accomplishment of natural growth, with its stress on child-initiated play, autonomy from adults, and directives, created an emerging sense of constraints. The various strategies employed by children and parents are not equally valuable. The customized interactions of middle-class parents and children appear to offer potential advantages. The data suggest individually insignificant but cumulatively potentially important class differences in advantages that lie not only in the advantages parents are able to obtain for their children, but also in the skills being transmitted to children for negotiating their own paths in the world.