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Both Sides of Inequality

For the past two decades, Annette Lareau has embedded herself in American families. She and her researchers have sat on living room floors as families went about their business, ridden in back seats as families drove hither and yon.

Lareau's work is well known among sociologists, but neglected by the popular media. And that's a shame because through her close observations and careful writings — in books like "Unequal Childhoods" — Lareau has been able to capture the texture of inequality in America. She's described how radically child-rearing techniques in upper-middle-class homes differ from those in working-class and poor homes, and what this means for the prospects of the kids inside.

The thing you learn from her work is that it's wrong to say good parents raise successful kids and bad parents raise unsuccessful ones. The story is more complicated than that.

Looking at upper-middle-class homes, Lareau describes a parenting style that many of us ridicule but do not renounce. This involves enrolling kids in large numbers of adult-supervised activities and driving them from place to place. Parents are deeply involved in all aspects of their children's lives. They make concerted efforts to provide learning experiences.

Home life involves a lot of talk and verbal jousting. Parents tend to reason with their children, not give them orders. They present "choices" and then subtly influence the decisions their kids make. Kids feel free to pass judgment on adults, express themselves and even tell their siblings they hate them when they're angry.

The pace is exhausting. Fights about homework can be titanic. But children raised in this way know how to navigate the world of organized institutions. They know how to talk casually with adults, how to use words to shape how people view them, how to perform before audiences and look people in the eye to make a good first impression.

Working-class child-rearing is different, Lareau writes. In these homes, there tends to be a much starker boundary between the adult world and the children's world. Parents think that the cares of adulthood will come soon enough and that children should be left alone to organize their own playtime. When a girl asks her mother to help her build a dollhouse out of boxes, the mother says no, "casually and without guilt," because playtime is deemed to be inconsequential — a child's sphere, not an adult's.

Lareau says working-class children

seem more relaxed and vibrant, and have more intimate contact with their extended families. "Whining, which was pervasive in middle-class homes, was rare in working-class and poor ones," she writes.

But these children were not as well prepared for the world of organizations and adulthood. There was much less talk in the working-class homes. Parents were more likely to issue brusque orders, not give explanations. Children, like their parents, were easily intimidated by and pushed around by verbally dexterous teachers and doctors. Middle-class kids felt entitled to individual treatment when entering the wider world, but working-class kids felt constrained and tongue-tied.

Back-seat sociology looks at families.

The children Lareau describes in her book were playful 10-year-olds. Now they're in their early 20's, and their destinies are as you'd have predicted. The perhaps overprogrammed middle-class kids got into good colleges and are heading for careers as doctors and other professionals. The working-class kids are not doing well. The little girl who built dollhouses had a severe drug problem from ages 12 to 17. She had a child outside wedlock, a baby she gave away because she was afraid she would hurt the child. She now cleans houses with her mother.

Lareau told me that when she was doing the book, the working-class kids seemed younger; they got more excited by things like going out for pizza. Now the working-class kids seem older; they've seen and suffered more.

But the point is that the working-class parents were not bad parents. In a perhaps more old-fashioned manner, they were attentive. They taught right from wrong. In some ways they raised their kids in a healthier atmosphere. (When presented with the schedules of the more affluent families, they thought such a life would just make kids sad.)

But they did not prepare their kids for a world in which verbal skills and the ability to thrive in organizations are so important. To help the worse-off parents, we should raise the earned-income tax credit to lessen their economic stress. But the core issue is that today's rich don't exploit the poor; they just outcompete them. □