



CULTURE OF AMERICAN FAMILIES
INTERVIEW REPORT

Jeffrey S. Dill

INSTITUTE for ADVANCED STUDIES in CULTURE

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Culture of American Families: Interview Report

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ABOUT THE CULTURE OF AMERICAN FAMILIES PROJECT

The *Culture of American Families Project* is a three-year investigation into the family cultures that are impacting the next generation of American adults. Designed and conducted by the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and funded by the John Templeton Foundation, this project adapts the tools of contemporary social science to an investigation that is broadly interpretive and contextual. Our goal is to distinguish the cultural frameworks and diverse moral narratives that both inform and are informed by American family life. Specifically, this involves telling the complex story of parents' habits, dispositions, hopes, fears, assumptions, and expectations for their children.

The data for this project was collected in two stages:

1. A web-based survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,000 parents of school-aged children. This one-hour survey, fielded by Knowledge Networks, examines a broad range of parental priorities, aspirations, challenges, and practices, as well as a variety of other cultural and socio-demographic indicators. Data for the survey, and an accompanying non-response follow-up survey, were collected from September 2011 through January 2012.
2. Follow-up, in-person interviews were conducted with 101 of the survey respondents. These 90-minute, semi-structured interviews complement the survey with open-ended questions designed to explore how respondents articulate their visions of the good parent and

the good child. Interview questions explore the kinds of people that parents want their children to become and attempt to elicit the explicit and implicit strategies parents employ in their habits and practices of scheduling, disciplining, motivating, and communicating with their children.

Principal findings from the survey and interviews are being released in two separate reports—*Culture of American Families: A National Survey* and *Culture of American Families: Interview Report*—along with *Culture of American Families: Executive Report* that includes thoughts for practitioners working with American families. For more information, or to access other reports, please visit the project website: ias-culture.org/caf.

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PREFACE

This report summarizes preliminary findings and general, overarching themes from the interview component of the *Culture of American Families Project*. Follow-up, in-home, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 101 survey respondents in 8 regional locations around the country from November 2011 to January 2012. All respondents were parents of school-aged children, the average age was 41 years old, 69 percent of the sample were female, about half had a college degree or more, about 58 percent were white, 20 percent black, 12 percent Hispanic, and 10 percent other race. (See Appendix A for more information about the research method.)

Parents in this study talk about their experience of the world as full of rapid change and transformation—even since the days of their own childhood. Their perceptions of these changes create challenges that seem unfamiliar. Much less can be taken for granted in the cultural context that frames childrearing in the twenty-first century, leaving many parents with the feeling that they are navigating through uncharted waters. The degree to which these challenges are “new” is debatable—every generation of parents seems to think this—but the challenges are indeed intensifying. Yet parents still have a moral sense: they are attuned to their role as a primary shaper of their children’s moral character. They want their children to be good people. Parents are tasked with raising “good kids” in an uncertain and unfamiliar world.

Summary of Key Themes

Waning Influence and Authority

A Village No More. Parents seem to agree that “it takes a village to raise a child” and most remember communities and neighborhoods from their own childhood with some degree of shared responsibility for children. But

the majority of parents in this study do not trust their neighbors or other adults and have little sense of shared values and commitments within a community. Parental authority, shared by other trusted adults, can no longer be taken for granted. This leads to a lack of freedom for children, as parents attempt to make the home a closed, protected space.

Media Technologies Limit Parental Influence. Parents feel their attempts to control the home and keep external influences at bay are nearly futile in the face of technology. Media technologies introduce a host of unknown and often unwelcome influences into the private space of the home. Parents’ overriding concern is the negative influences that they are unable to keep out. Many feel helpless in the face of technologies and uncertain about how, or if, to limit them.

Alternative Strategies for Influence: The Expressive Parent

Prioritizing “Thinking for Yourself.” In an uncertain world where no one can be trusted, parents see “thinking for yourself” as a top priority to impart to their children. For a majority of parents, this does not mean autonomous self-fulfillment, but rather an internalized moral code that enables the child to do the right thing. They thus employ the language of autonomy and independence, but their concern is to instill character and virtue in their children.

Communication and Intimacy. As traditional authority and influence weaken, parents turn to constant communication and close relationships with their children. Although unsure exactly why, they feel obligated to talk to their children and seek the emotional rewards of intimacy. Parents see these communicative relationships as better than their own parents’ more authoritarian style

of discipline, yet they appear to use intimacy as a tool to influence their children in the right direction. They thus use the language of nurturing therapy with the intentions of authoritative discipline.

In the midst of a rapidly changing world, parents are aware of significant ruptures in the collective authority once shared by the adult generation in the task of raising, forming, and socializing the young. The context in which they find themselves feels unfamiliar and uncertain. Yet they still see their role and task as raising “good kids,” and they are left to figure out what “good” means in a flexible and fluid world. As they look for signposts along the way, they do find certain norms that guide them. These generally lead

parents to strategies reflective of the expressive individualism of the current age. These strategies utilize a language of autonomy, independence, self-fulfillment, and emotionally charged sentimentality. Even as these cultural forces push away from parental influence, parents know that they need to socialize and form their children, and these processes necessitate some degree of authority. While they recognize they need authority in order to form their children, parents question the very authority required to accomplish this task. Their ambivalence about this moral authority, and the lack of institutional support, leaves them in the midst of contradictions and ironies that frame the experience of parenting in twenty-first century America.

INTRODUCTION

CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CULTURE OF PARENTING

The task of raising children receives significant attention in public discourse in the United States today. In the past two years, a Chinese American law professor introduced the country to “Tiger Moms,”¹ an American expat in Paris offered uniquely French insights on “bringing up bébé,”² a psychologist and consultant warned of the “price of privilege” and parental pressures for success,³ neuroscientists offered parenting tips based on the biology of the brain,⁴ and economists explained how to use cost/benefit analysis in child-rearing.⁵ All of these recent books have been vigorously reviewed, discussed, and commented on in newspapers, TV and radio, and the internet. A North Carolina father recently became the subject of much criticism and support when he posted a video of himself shooting his daughter’s laptop because of comments she made on Facebook; the video, dubbed “Facebook Parenting,” went viral, received 34 million views, and landed him on the *Today Show*.⁶ *Time* magazine and *The Atlantic* featured attention-grabbing cover articles about parenting issues; both articles produced a firestorm of controversy and buzz on talk shows and internet discussions.⁷

Why is raising children a subject for so much public conversation? It touches a nerve that runs through the heart of our society’s self-understanding and our hopes for the uncertain future. Parents who are in the midst of raising children obviously care about such questions and debates, but so do adults who have already raised children, who have not started, or who are not going to and never will. Why? Because children—as a symbol of possibility and promise—represent the ideals and hopes adults hold for the future. They are the ones to whom we pass on our culture and way of life; they are the inheritors of what adults value and cherish. In other words,

The way we talk about children is a symbolic representation of our own desires and dreams for the world we wish to create.

the way we talk about children is a symbolic representation of our own desires and dreams for the world we wish to create. What kind of world do we want to create and what kind of children do we need to help make it? Of course, in our pluralistic society, there is very little agreement about these questions of fundamental meaning and significance. It is no wonder parenting is the subject of a never-ending stream of books, articles, conversations, and debates in our public culture.

For the most part, public discourse operates around what are referred to as “middle class” parenting obsessions: educational performance, helicopter parenting, elite sports teams, college admissions, and tiger moms. On

occasion, public conversations may reach beyond these concerns to issues of obesity or inequalities in child welfare. But beneath the surface of all of these discussions are underlying moral assumptions about the kinds of people we want our children to become. These deeper concerns, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—but always present—are about the character of our children. Are they too entitled and narcissistic? Are they industrious and hard working? Are they respectful, honest, and trustworthy? When asked how they want other people to think of their children, parents in this study expressed desires for moral character in a variety of ways⁸:

I believe you have to have a good heart first. I wouldn't want all my kids to be the top students and become attorneys and doctors, but be horrible people. I wouldn't want that...you've got to be a good person. You've got to be a good kid.

—Claudia Baez,
married Hispanic mother of six children⁹

It doesn't matter if people like you or not. If you're doing the right thing, and I know that it's strength of character, it doesn't matter if people like you. It doesn't matter if you're popular. If you're doing the right thing, then that has to be your satisfaction.

—Tara Wade,
married white mother of two children

I picture [my kids] having a good heart, and honest, and trustworthy, and hardworking.

—Patti Spooner,
single white mother of two children

I want to know that he's a really nice boy and he's very kind and innocent and helpful.

—Natasha Rodriguez,
married mixed race mother of two children

I want to know that they're as good as I think they are... that my kids are doing good.

—Paul Davey,
married white father of three children

[I want to hear that] he is well respected, that I've got a real respectful son. He doesn't get in no trouble, he doesn't get out cussing and hanging with the wrong crowd and stuff.

—James Donner,
married black father of four children

It is no surprise that parents want good kids, especially if children symbolize and reflect what adults idealize about themselves and their world. It also makes intuitive sense because, for better or worse, families are the primary context in which character is formed. Character is formed in social contexts, like the family, and families are always situated in a larger cultural context. Families and other cultural institutions thus create webs of social relationships, norms, habits, and practices that constitute a “moral ecology”—an environment that shapes and patterns the moral life of the child. On this view, character is very much social in its constitution and is thus inseparable from the culture within which it is formed. As sociologist James Davison Hunter has observed, morality, like character, “is always situated—historically situated in the narrative flow of collective memory and aspiration, socially situated within distinct communities, and culturally situated within particular structures of

moral reasoning and practice.”¹⁰ This “situated” quality of character and morality means communities and social institutions that form the young will always reflect the patterns and moral frameworks of the culture at large. In this way, gaining insights into how parents in twenty-first century America understand their task of parenting—their priorities and goals, and their perceived challenges and threats—can offer a glimpse into the larger cultural and moral fabric of our society.

When it comes to the moral frameworks and deeper contexts within which parenting occurs—the social and cultural conditions that provide the taken-for-granted backdrop in which children are raised—things are both staying the same and significantly changing. Although the public rhetoric may make us believe otherwise, in many ways, parents today sound a lot like parents from almost a century ago.

Continuity and Change in Childrearing

The authors of the famous *Middletown* study examined the issues and concerns facing parents and childrearing in 1924 in a small, Midwestern town in the midst of major cultural and economic changes. They observed that children’s responsibilities around the household changed as the industrial economy replaced an agrarian one, and coupled with new technology like the automobile and telephone, children’s social freedom increased. Because children were spending less time at home, and more time out with friends, it became increasingly difficult for parents to keep an eye on their children’s behavior. The authors found that “the swiftly moving environment and multiplied occasions for contacts outside the home are making it more difficult to secure adherences to established group sanctions,” which were understood as the “approved ways of the group” acquired in “a ‘good’ home.” Many Middletown parents commented on loosening social norms, evident, for example, in the dress and “aggressiveness” of teenage girls. “Girls have more nerve nowadays—look at their clothes!” “Girls are far more aggressive today. They call the boys up to try to make dates with them as they never would have when I was a girl.”¹¹

The familiar mantra of “kids these days” appears to be nothing new. Nor are parents’ struggles and anxieties

about raising children in the midst of societal pressures and changes. Many Middletown parents became increasingly anxious about parenting their children in the context of these increased freedoms and changing norms. One mother remarked, “You see other [parents] being more lenient and you think perhaps that is the best way, but you are afraid to do anything very differently from what your mother did for fear you may leave out something essential or do something wrong. I would give anything to do what is wisest, but I don’t know what to do.” Others feared that strict parenting would limit their child’s social opportunities: “Even as it is, we’re a good deal worried about [our daughter]; she’s beginning to feel different from the others because she is restricted and not allowed to go out as much as they do.”¹²

In short, parents had become increasingly anxious about parenting the growing independence of children. Middletown parents, such as the mother mentioned above who worried about restricting her daughter’s social opportunities, feared limiting their children’s freedom and consequent happiness. Many felt paralyzed: they faced obstacles their own parents never faced and did not know where to turn to learn how to parent this new generation of “young adults.” One mother remarked, “I am afraid of making mistakes and usually do not know where to go for advice.”¹³ Not surprisingly, this period became known as the “age of the expert,” when parenting advice books, manuals, and magazines—all written under the authority of the science of psychology—became widely popular.¹⁴ These themes and concerns were not just confined to Middletown. Many other scholars point to the same far-reaching trends that transformed the family during these years. Psychoanalysis was growing in popularity, bringing new attention to the emotions and passions of children, and a consequent fear of repressive modes of childrearing.¹⁵ As these varied external forces buffeted the institution of the family, a different model, the “companionate family,” where the family has a primary responsibility to meet the emotional and psychological needs of its members, became the ideal.¹⁶ A “new normal” emerged in the culture of childrearing.

“My mother was a splendid mother in many ways, but I could not be that kind of mother now. I have to be a pal and listen to my children’s ideas.”
—Mother in Middletown, 1924

Middletown parents did not want to go to their parents for advice because there was an increasing sense that what the older generation valued and instilled in their children, such as “strict obedience” or “loyalty to the church,” was not what the next generation of parents wanted for their own children. While many parents still considered these values important, they thought that others, such as “independence” and “frankness,” were equally, if not more, important. Many responses to this issue were similar to that of one Middletown mother who commented, “I am afraid that the things I really have emphasized are obedience, loyalty to the church, and getting good grades in school” when what she really wanted to stress was “independence and tolerance.” Another remarked, “Strict obedience does not accomplish anything at all.” The authors found that, in many homes, this created a “more democratic system of relationships with exchange of ideas.” This led some parents to seek a sort of friendship with their children that their own parents had not desired. “My mother was a splendid mother in many ways, but I could not be that kind of mother now. I have to be a pal and listen to my children’s ideas.”¹⁷ Whereas older generations of children sought their parent’s approval and parents sought their children’s acquiescence, this new generation of parents was interested more in their children’s approval and freedom. Independence, not obedience, had become the key to happy and successful children.

As will be evident in this report, parents in this study are repeating the same chorus as parents in Middletown, almost 90 years later. Just like the parents in Middletown, parents in this study want to raise successful, happy, “good” children. Just like the parents in Middletown, parents today feel like raising children is more difficult now, and they feel that their parents were more strict than they are with their children. Middletown parents worried about how technology (telephones and automobiles) was changing family dynamics, just as parents today struggle to stay informed about new technological devices and media. In many ways then, the themes and concerns that American parents face in the twenty-first century are not necessarily novel. While this study reflects longstanding themes in research on

parenting and childrearing, it also demonstrates how these themes are reproduced and intensified in each new generation.

Parenting and the Late-Modern Condition

Many of the challenges and issues parents face today are rooted in cultural processes and transformations that have been centuries in the making. Social scientists and theorists use a number of terms for these transformations—deinstitutionalization, post-traditional society, and even post-modernity.¹⁸ There are important debates about what exactly these changes are, what they mean, and how they matter.¹⁹ For our purposes, these changes can be understood as the gradual shift from “traditional” organizing structures of society that defined roles and made personal identity “given” to a much more open-ended social experience defined by individual autonomy and unlimited choice.

What are most important about these transformations for the present study are their consequences for our collective understandings of authority. As sociologist Anthony Giddens observes of traditional societies, “all traditions have a normative or moral content, which gives them a binding character.”²⁰ But “detraditionalization,” as social theorist Paul Heelas notes, “involves a shift of authority: from ‘without’ to ‘within.’ Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and contingency which is thereby generated.”²¹ These changes result in a much more fluid and flexible understanding of social life—“liquid modernity” in sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s memorable phrase—with clear consequences for how we understand the very ideals of “morality” and “authority,” “character” and “commitment.” The Greek etymology of the word “character,” for instance, suggests something engraved, etched, or carved—a kind of binding address that seems implausible in our “liquid” times: “These days patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given,’ let alone ‘self-evident’; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another

and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers.”²² Plausibility structures lose their credibility.

Naturally, this affects how we think about raising children. Several elements of these transformations

have crystallized in a set of common-sense assumptions about childrearing: the innocent and vulnerable child must grow naturally, without the imposition of parental and societal constraints, and parents must nurture the child’s sovereign and expressive self toward autonomy and independence. In the cultural context of twenty-first century America, parents have a strong suspicion of moral authority and a deep reluctance or ambivalence about

exercising it over children. This continues to complicate the process of socializing children for late-modern society. Less can be taken for granted when it comes to raising children because there is no coherent set of shared ideals and practices. Parents seem uncomfortable with exercising authority, yet, to some extent, the process of raising children demands it. This is a uniquely late-modern condition.

In the midst of all of these changes, parents in this study reveal that they still seek to pass on a moral framework to their children and that they are doing their best to prepare their children for an uncertain future. Parents wish to raise their children in a culture that confronts them with ironies, contradictions, and paradoxes. Though parents are not always articulate about these challenges, several key themes emerged in the interviews that point to contradictions in the culture of parenting.²³ External conditions—or perceptions of them—significantly constrain parents in their hopes to both influence and control their children. The perception of declining social and institutional trust (chapter one) and the rise of perceived threats from technological changes (chapter two) both open the child’s world to unknown influences beyond their parents’ control and significantly constrict the child’s domain to constantly supervised spaces and interactions.

While this study reflects longstanding themes in research on parenting and childrearing, it also demonstrates how these themes are reproduced and intensified in each new generation.

Parents seek to develop engaged strategies to influence and control their children in the face of these constraining external conditions. Parents value autonomy and independence for their children, and they desire emotional closeness and intimacy with their children. They employ a language of expressive individualism rooted in emotive self-fulfillment when discussing these goals. Parents utilize this more culturally acceptable vocabulary to describe fairly traditional intentions: most parents want their children to obey them and to internalize the parents' own sense for right and wrong (see chapters three and four.) While parents say they value independence, most still expect conformity; while they want autonomy and freedom, perceived threats from technology and other external dangers lead to constant supervision.

Parents want to form their kids; they want them to embrace their values and moral frameworks. They're doing their best to shape their children and prepare them for the culture of late-modernity. But given the contradictions of this culture—that parents both resist and perpetuate—the task is difficult. Such deliberate formation requires a coherent culture and some

degree of shared meaning and authority—for parents and the institutions in which they and their children are embedded. Parents do not appear to have a language of virtue or a grammar of morality from which to draw for the task of forming their children. There is no inherited body of knowledge that they embrace. Parents have a moral sense, but a very limited moral vocabulary. Rather, the primary language and vocabulary that parents utilize is one inherited from a therapeutic culture focused on emotional satisfaction, individual autonomy, and fulfillment. They want their children to be good kids, but parents, standing in a long historical line of cultural processes, are hesitant to be explicit about what “good” means, and they are wary of moral authority and about exercising it over their children. Given the way technology undermines their ability to influence their children, given that parents do not feel supported by the wider community, and given that parents now resort to language and strategies rooted in expressive individualism, they are left with very little authority to do what they want to do. It remains to be seen if they can get what they want for their children—character—without the authority, institutions, and language to express it.

1

LIMITED FREEDOM PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF DANGER AND DISTRUST

Although the saying “it takes a village to raise a child” was highly polarizing when Hillary Clinton used it for a book title in 1996, the essence of the phrase, if it can be de-politicized, is fairly non-controversial: raising children requires the support of numerous people and institutions, from extended families to neighbors to civic associations to schools to religious congregations. Parents, whether liberal or conservative, intuitively know this.

Social science research confirms these intuitions. The presence of nonparental adults in a child’s life that offer support, care, and advice—what sociologists call “network closure”—makes a difference to a host of “well being” outcomes (educational success, religious belief and thus higher pro-social behaviors, low levels of drug and alcohol use, etc.). It is important for parents to be embedded in larger networks that offer support for both parents and children.

For a variety of reasons, many parents in our study *feel* much more alone in the task of raising children than they believe their parents were. And as a result, the world feels much more dangerous and isolating. As we will see in the next chapter, technological changes contribute to this feeling. This chapter, however, deals with parents’ *perceptions* about safety and danger, fear and trust. As will be explored later, perceptions do not always match reality. But nevertheless, the human imagination is a powerful force, and perceptions have a way of palpably structuring the parameters of social life and interactions. As the pioneering sociologist William I. Thomas famously said, in a book called *The Child in America* written in 1928, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”²⁴

The majority of parents in this study perceive that they have lost a basic social trust—trust that neighbors will

support them and watch their children—and that danger lurks on every street corner and playground.²⁵ The village concept, where a group of people holds shared values, purpose, and responsibility for their children, appears to be a figment of the imagination of most parents in this study. These perceptions of danger and distrust seem to create a culture of overprotection, one that many parents push back against but cannot totally resist. Despite concerns about overprotection, most parents find it difficult to balance freedom and safety, and thus they help to propagate a culture that significantly limits the freedom of their children.

This limited freedom is set against parents’ memories of their own childhoods. Just about all parents remember childhoods of nearly unlimited freedom, when they could ride bicycles and wander through woods, streets, and parks, unmonitored by their parents. Many parents remember being instructed to “come home when the street lights go on,” and they would leave the house and not return until dark. It is difficult to measure or empirically verify claims of this nature. Do parents remember their childhoods as they actually were or do they hold selected memories that now work to construct a nostalgic past that never really existed? Whatever the case may be, parents today perceive a very different childhood for their children. Many are bothered by this perceived change and experience it as a loss. They feel it was “better” to have more freedom and independence; their children, though perhaps safer, are missing out on important formative experiences. But very few parents can even imagine giving their own children that kind of freedom. They are thus in an odd place of both lamenting a world gone by and being active participants in the construction of a new world of constant monitoring and control.

The Danger of Freedom

Joel Davis, a white father of two children who installs audio-visual equipment, illustrates this dynamic as he describes his memories of an independent and free childhood:

I don't remember what age it was, it might have been—I'd learned to ride a bike at eight years old, on my eighth birthday, I learned to ride a two-wheeler. I want to say that by nine or ten I could go anywhere that I wanted to go. I mean it was only limited by how far I was willing to pedal. My parents had no, I mean they didn't put any restrictions on me in the sense that they probably figured I wouldn't go any farther than I could pedal there and back in time for dinner, or whatever. I would just go. You would just do that. You wouldn't—no one, no other parent had to watch you. And I don't, I can't imagine that now. I can't imagine ever letting your kids go off on their own at that early an age. Even just to ride down the block or go to the schoolyard and play or go wherever.

Joel laments that his children spend too much time inside, yet he can't imagine letting them walk or ride their bikes two blocks to the schoolyard. Joel offers three possible reasons for this change, all of which come up in interviews with other parents. On the one hand, he thinks “there's a societal expectation that if you've left your child to their own devices before the community in general thinks you should,” then you'll get labeled a “bad parent” and someone might “call the police on you.” There seems to be a threat of sanction from “society” or an external other that structures parental actions; parents have internalized a sacred moral code that, they believe, carries sanctions for violations. He also realizes that, “statistically, [crime] hasn't changed in 50 years,” but the media loves a child predator story, so it's “on everybody's mind.” Parents are cognizant of the “stranger danger” threats being fueled by the media, yet their fears are no less real. Finally, Joel says the “world is just a bigger, more crowded place” with a lot more cars on the road. And, he notes, his busy street “doesn't even have a sidewalk, let alone a shoulder.” Parents express

“We learned how to problem solve a little bit more than today because there was no one there telling you what to do or how to do it.”

the effects of significant social and structural changes—population growth, mobility, and even changes in city and suburban planning and greater dependence on the automobile.

Colleen MacArthur, a former nutritionist, is a married white mother with a 16-year-old daughter and a 10-year-old son. When she and her husband, who does nutrition research at a nearby university, had their first child, they decided she would stay at home. Colleen's own father was “very strict” when she was growing up, but “in retrospect, I think we had a lot of freedom, a lot more than my kids have.” Like so many other parents, she remembers staying outside “until the street lights went on” and “not a lot of organizing of what kids' activities were, we just organized ourselves.” She thinks parents now “just get a little bit too involved with what their kids are doing.” There were tangible benefits, Colleen believes, to the freedom she experienced: “we learned how to problem solve a little bit more than today because there was no one there telling you what to do or how to do it. You just figured it out.” In this sense, she believes her children might be missing out on valuable experiences that might be important for their development and maturation. Although she is quick to avoid the “it's so bad now” lament and says that things probably aren't “better or worse, just different,” she does find it difficult to strike a balance between freedom and safety for her children:

I think that there's a real culture for overprotecting kids, and I want my kids to be able to go out into the world and not be afraid. And you know, when you turn on the news, or when you hear about things, it's frightening, but I don't want them to be afraid. I want them to have some kind of wanderlust. It's a difficult balance, particularly since we're a Christian family, too, so we're trying to teach our kids to love people, but then, you know, on the other hand—be careful. Fear people, too, so it's—it's a really difficult balance.

Colleen tries to encourage her daughter to ride her bike over to her friend's house, but she feels like

“kids are used to getting driven places.” She also says that there is not really any place to walk. There is a Dunkin’ Donuts at the end of the street, and “kids will do that kind of thing.” Even though Colleen grew up very close to where she is now living, she feels that the townscape itself works against her: “there’s not—when I grew up [in the neighboring town], there was a whole downtown area we could walk to. There’s not really a place like that.”

Janelle Edwards is a white married mother of two young children. She works full-time as a microbiologist at a medical laboratory. Janelle believes that parents face an onslaught of “fear tactics” from the media offering “on a daily basis remind[ers] about vaccines, apple juice, abduction, child porn sites.”

And that translates into more time watching them, because I remember as a kid just getting on my bike and running into the park and playing. Now for the kids to go to the park, I have to go with them and I have to stand there and watch them. So it does require more parenting time on a daily basis.

Those requirements for additional monitoring do not come with extra support. As a child, Janelle’s grandparents lived two blocks away and she consequently felt “very loved and supported by my grandmother.” She does not feel the same support from her parents or her husband’s parents. “So, we don’t really have a lot of support” and so she has more “confidence in professionals to help with parenting.” Janelle struggles to know exactly what to do as a parent: “I don’t think it’s very intuitive.”

Because I don’t think there’s a lot of guidance, and also you have to kind of just figure it out as you go and put the fires out and handle the crises and make the U-turns and deal with crazy schedules and noise all the time, so you have to learn as you go. So I think that’s what I’m taking away from the experience. And without guidance it really makes you feel that you’re driving with a blindfold sometimes.

“Now for the kids to go to the park, I have to go with them and I have to stand there and watch them. So it does require more parenting time on a daily basis.”

Janelle would like to have some guidance and support, especially because of increased expectations for monitoring, so she doesn’t feel like she is driving blindfolded. But she doesn’t seem to receive it. The therapist she and her husband visit is very helpful, but they have recently been forced to stop the visits because of changes to their health insurance coverage.

Abby Tyndale is a white married mother with two young children. After a career in the music industry as a manager of an independent record label, she stays home with her kids. Her husband, a software developer, works from home.

When discussing why they purchased their house, which is deep in the woods, she says she wanted her kids “to go out and be able to explore nature.” They live on “federally protected wetlands” and they enjoy going on hikes and catching yellow-spotted salamanders, frogs, and toads. She does not, however, allow her children (a 7-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son) to go exploring alone: “we kind of keep a watch on them because they are young, and it is water, but also there’s—you know, the roads here are very old colonial roads, so they are the only

roads, and they are very well traveled, so we’re always with them.” She goes on to say that, in terms of safety, she is “hyper-vigilant,” which she says, is “better than, you know, kind of asleep at the wheel.”

Like many other parents, Abby finds it difficult to balance the freedom she wants to give her children with her concerns for their safety.

It is a difficult line because, you know, you want your children to be independent and confident, and be able to know that they can do things, and of course, you know, they’re not going to do the things on the swing set if you’re there.

Abby admits that if her children “knew half the crap that we did when we were kids,” she would be in “so much trouble”:

I don’t even let them run around the stairs in socks. We use to take the boxes and go down—you know. I do think that is something I have

to be conscious of, because I want them to have that freedom, and to be confident in what they do and everything, but I want them to know that I'm around.

She sees benefits to giving her children freedom, but she finds it difficult to do so.

A mother who lives in a major city, instead of a wooded lot, struggles with some of these issues. An artist who is now “mainly a mom,” Jeannie Simpson has two children, ages 10 and 4. Jeannie talks about how her own mother “would just let us go” play outside. She doesn’t “feel comfortable letting [my kids] go out where we live.” When asked about what has changed, she says:

That's an interesting question. I think a change in parenting styles also. I think parents are much more watchful now, much more present, to different degrees. I also think that the media—you hear about these awful stories about what happens to children, and those things, I think, just really are haunting to parents, and definitely influence how much freedom you give your children.

This concern, similar to what Joel Davis expressed above—stranger danger influenced by pervasive high-profile media stories—is common among parents when discussing what has changed in recent decades. Nina Klein, a former Army officer and now a special education teacher, expresses the same concerns. She refers to three channels of news when she was a kid and remembers that news stories were more positive. She feels like “all these horrible things happening all the time” get reported more frequently and it creates fear.

Or you know, I remember following [my son] in a car the first time he [walked] to his buddy's house, you know, and he stopped and talked to some guy and I'm like, "Really? You talking to some dude?" And I was like, you know, the guy was the husband of someone I knew, he's marching around the neighborhood to get his exercise.

But still, at first you're like... "Oh my God!" The first assumption is it's somebody bad.

Nina was worried enough that she followed her son in her car as he walked through the neighborhood, and she panicked when he stopped to talk to a neighbor. She realizes that her knee-jerk reactions about stranger danger are constructed by the media, but this does not change the fact that she is still concerned enough to follow her son the first time he walked to a friend's house alone. The net effect for many parents is much less “free play,” especially outside.

“You hear about these awful stories about what happens to children, and those things...just really are haunting to parents, and definitely influence how much freedom you give your children.”

Eric Dillard is a white father of two adopted children, an 8-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son. Eric and his same-sex partner of 25 years live in a large house in a new suburban subdivision in the Midwest, surrounded by cornfields and shopping centers. Eric is a lawyer working for the court system in the nearby large city.

Eric grew up in a section of the nearby city, and he discussed his freedom as a child: “when I was eight [the age of his daughter], I was out of the house from morning ‘til night.” Although Eric now lives in a neighborhood that is, by all accounts, much safer than where he grew up, he is uncomfortable giving his daughter the same freedom:

Eric: It's very different. I would never—Isabella's never out front by herself. Ever!

Interviewer: Tell me why. Are you worried about...what?

Eric: Yeah, because people are—I don't know what it is. I guess part of it is I was never alone. We were never alone. If we were out, if I was alone, I was walking five houses to someone's house, but it was almost always two to eight of us together. It's just not the same.

Interviewer: She doesn't walk down the street to knock on somebody's door?

Eric: No.

Interviewer: Are there parks or pools in the subdivision?

Eric: We have a pool that we can go to obviously in the summer. There's a park that's open, but she would never—we would never let her go to the park by herself.

Interviewer: She wouldn't ride her bike down there?

Eric: No, we wouldn't, like I said...I mean the boy behind us, he's in third grade, and he's an avid fisherman. He's always out fishing all by himself, which to me is scary, even more scary because you're by open water.

Interviewer: Tell me about the fear. Is the fear about falling in and drowning?

Eric: No, predators. Nowadays you just—we get once in a blue—about maybe once or twice a year we'll have a thing where the schools now are pretty good that if like there's a suspicious van or something, some kid, then they send out a thing that day to watch out for this blue van, or whatever the case might be. I think it's just that and there's so many more times where they're not in a group. It's they're more isolated. It's sad in a sense.

Eric thinks it's sad and isolating, but he would still never let his daughter in the front yard by herself.

Danger and Neighbor Distrust

Fear of stranger danger and other threats leads parents to increase monitoring and control of their children. In addition to this, many parents express a distrust of their neighbors and a concern that other adults do not share the same values and responsibility for their children. A black mother of three in a former industrial town in the Northeast, Judy Pitcher, says that her children are outside very little. When asked why, Judy says, "I don't want my kids to go across the street and play with the guy whose father's getting drunk, or there's a lot of drinking and drugs or alcohol or they might try to touch you." Because she doesn't know or trust her neighbors or other parents, she would rather have her kids in her own home:

In this crazy world that we live in today, you don't know your neighbors like you used to. Your neighbors aren't disciplining you. Remember people would say, "I'm gonna tell your mother. I'm gonna tell her I saw you doing so and so." Like the whole block, nobody knows each other like they used to and we just feel it's a risk to let them go over [to] other people's house. I don't know what those people do in their house.

"In this crazy world that we live in today, you don't know your neighbors like you used to."

But then Judy says, "So we ask ourselves, wait a minute, we don't know anyone like us who keeps their kids in the house as much as we do. So we teeter and totter, you know. Should we let them out?" For her, the perception of danger is directly related to distrust: she doesn't know her neighbors, so she doesn't trust them with her kids, and she also can't count on them to keep an eye on her kids when they are out of her sight.

Larissa Walsh also doesn't trust her daughter around the other kids or parents in the neighborhood, an apartment complex surrounded by gas stations and fast food restaurants on the edge of large metropolitan area. She is a black single mother who had her first child at 16 and her second child a few years later. She was recently laid off from Wal-Mart, and she is now working to finish her college degree through an online program and hoping to get a job at a temp agency. Larissa says she doesn't allow her daughter, now five years old, to go outside too much. As she talks about not letting her daughter outside, Larissa motions to the corner of the cramped dining room, where a new-looking, small, pink bicycle with training wheels and a helmet are sitting. Part of her concern is the stranger danger problem: Larissa says her daughter is a "beautiful girl" and she doesn't want her to get "snatched." But Larissa is also concerned that she doesn't know the other children in the neighborhood, and furthermore she doesn't know their parents. She is unsure if other parents' standards of behavior match her own, and she is uncomfortable if she doesn't know that:

Because I don't know what the other kids...I don't know what's going on with their parents. And if you not gonna come meet me and your child's around my child, that speaks volumes.

If you feel it's responsible enough for you to live way down there and your kids are way back on my patio and walking through my door and I don't know them, that's a problem. So what some parents may find acceptable, I do not. And so in order to kind of filter that behavior I'm watching her.

Larissa tells a story of her daughter coming to the door one day, while she was playing with another child outside. Her daughter says, “Mom, I need a dollar for taking out the trash.” Larissa says, “I’m like, where does she get this dollar for taking out...there’s no dollar for taking out the trash.” She then told her daughter: “No you don’t, you don’t need a dollar and you tell your little friend who told you that don’t come back over here with that nonsense.” In order to avoid the negative influences of this kind of “nonsense” from people she doesn’t know, Larissa chooses to keep her daughter inside much of the time.

Heather Muck, a married white mother with three children, lives outside of a small city in the Midwest. She never finished her teaching degree in college and now provides full-time childcare for several children in her home. When Heather compares the challenges of raising children now to those that her own parents faced, she says, “You have to be more cautious now as a parent.” She expresses this increased caution in terms of lower levels of trust and shared responsibility:

You can't just automatically expect everybody to watch your kids as closely as you do. I think sometimes that it goes too far that way. You have to place your trust in other people, but I think for the most part now, and I don't know if it's just because it's in the news more or there is more attention to it now than there used to be, but just like letting them walk to school and back, even though it's not very far, I think those kinds of things it's more scary now than it was for my parents' generation.

Heather thinks that parents need to place trust in other people, but because she can't seem to do it, allowing her children to walk to and from school is scarier now.

Cecelia Briggs is a white married mother of two teenagers. She lives in a suburb of a major city in the Midwest and, after completing her MBA, started her own business staging homes for realtors. When Cecelia was a child, she remembers regularly walking to the grocery store to pick up groceries for her mother, who was busy at home with several younger siblings. Cecelia says she would walk everywhere she needed to go, but now “parents drive kids everywhere.” When asked how she feels about this change, Cecelia says:

I think it's a bad thing because the whole idea that the world, your own neighborhood is basically so unsafe. I mean parents just don't trust their—not that they don't trust the child, they just don't trust the situation anymore. Before, it used to be a no-brainer. Just walk three blocks or half a mile and go to the grocery store and come back, and now it's like, “Will they get run over? Will they get abducted? Will the dog bite them?” It just seems that parenting today, you are just aware of a lot more dangers than I guess maybe parents were aware of way back then.

Cecelia is not sure why parents are more worried about these things now—“I don’t know if there are more pedophiles and evil people in the world”—but she thinks that “mushrooming of information” from “newspapers and media and the internet” has something to do with it because parents “can find out about all this stuff and it kind of freaks them out.”

For Cecilia, the anxieties stem from more than “stranger danger.” Like Joel Davis above, she connects these general fears and distrust to societal expectations: “society as a whole is a lot more stringent on what they consider to be proper behavior between parents and children.” She gives an example of leaving children in the car to run into the store for something. When she was a child, she says her parents “would not think anything of” leaving kids in the car. “You do that for five minutes now, somebody has called the police, child neglect.” She thinks that “you can’t do things now without society, other people interfering”:

“I mean parents just don't trust their—not that they don't trust the child, they just don't trust the situation anymore.”

Somebody takes their toddler and swats them on the rear end because they're throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of the grocery store? That would have happened all the time when I was a kid. Nowadays, it's like you have to look around like somebody is going to call DCFS [Department of Children and Family Services].

Cecelia admits that many of the laws established to protect children are important and were established for good reasons, but “once you make a law, that law starts to get interpreted” and its effects can grow out of control. While the laws are important, she thinks that the result is a more “stringent society” and that as a parent “you have to worry about all that, and that you don’t get sanctioned.”

Alison Potter is a married, white mother with a teenage daughter and a pre-teen son. She had a career in the publishing industry and then stayed home with her children; she is now writing a novel. Her moderately sized house, located on the rural-suburban fringe about an hour from a large Western city, looks out onto a wooded yard that holds a sizable garden, chickens, and a goat. But the quiet, idyllic setting does not lend itself to strong connections with neighbors:

I grew up in a very, very small town where everybody knew everybody, and you couldn't walk down the street without another parent knowing it. Here, most of the neighbors, I don't think they could even identify my kids, let alone know their names or anything else.

Alison is troubled by the lack of other adults looking out for her children, or “network closure” in social science terminology. She is cognizant of nostalgia blurring her memories, but she does think things are different now. The freedom she had as a child was tied to her parents’ trust of others to keep an eye on her:

I know a lot of people say this from looking back, but we could be gone all day within our neighborhood, and my parents would—pretty much could be sure, 98 percent sure, we were safe. If we weren't, they could be sure someone

would call them and tell them, or tell them if we were out of line, or whatever.

In Alison’s neighborhood now, “you’d never know... I don’t think anyone would notice.” She thinks that “people would be a lot less apt to get involved even if they did see something here.” She remembers knowing “all the kids in the neighborhood because you wander out and meet them,” which she contrasts with the organized and structured lives she crafts for her children: “When the kids are little you set up play dates, and drive them there, and they meet while you watch over, and then here you drive them back.” Alison told a story about a boy her son’s age who lived a block away; the two boys did not meet until they happened to be in a class together in middle school. They had grown up a block away from each other, but because the structures of their lives did not intersect until middle school, they never knew the other existed.

All of this has led Alison to rethink some of the choices she and her husband made earlier in life. She says that one thing she would do differently is “live in a different area so that I wasn’t parenting in a vacuum.” This might mean choosing a neighborhood with “closer houses” and “more parents with kids.” But she also says, “I might even consider doing something very drastic and stay closer to family, go back to the Midwest where I have family and I’d have support.” She thinks that support “would have been huge.” When asked how she thinks it would have affected her kids, she replies:

I think the kids have grown up without that sense of a whole community caring about them. It's very much just us and I don't think that's healthy. You know, my son has a Mormon friend, he stayed with us for awhile when his family had financial and health problems. I think the Mormons still do this well. They really care for each other; they have that sense of community.

For Alison, the “sense of community” that cares for others and shares the responsibility for children

“Here, most of the neighbors, I don’t think they could even identify my kids, let alone know their names.”

“would have been huge” as she raised her children. But their significant mobility early in their careers sent them on a different path.

Florette Thompson did the “drastic” thing that Alison Potter wished she had done—moved back to her roots. The black divorced mother with two children works as nurse’s aide in a nursing home and lives in the small Southern town where she was born and raised. She feels that the sense of shared authority and responsibility has changed from when she was a child:

You had older people...around all the time, they see, they see everything...but now you’ve got some parents that, you know, back then anybody could say something to you, “Oh you know you’re not supposed to be doing that.” But now you can’t hardly say anything to children these days because the parents’ll get mad or something like that. But now times are so much different and it’s a lot harder now to try to raise a child because they can get into all sorts of stuff.

The role that “older” people played in this shared responsibility was particularly salient for Florette. “A lot of people have passed on, you know, and it’s just not the same anymore; it’s not the same.” She says that people in the neighborhood now are “nice,” but there are “very little elderly” that you can count on to keep watch. She feels that there are not “people caring about what goes on with your child.”

A lot of people just care about their own and if somebody falls out there and their parents are not around, they just stare, you know, they don’t go out there and say, “Hey, are you all right, do you need something, can I help you?” It’s just, none of that is around anymore, and it’s just not there.

Florette says that now “you’ve got grown-ups that give kids drugs and you got grown-ups that act like kids.” Because of all this, “you’ve got to watch your child... you’ve got to watch ‘em. If you don’t know the person that your child is dealing with, if you don’t know ‘em,

“I think the kids have grown up without that sense of a whole community caring about them. It’s very much just us and I don’t think that’s healthy.”

then you better get to know ‘em.” When asked how she gets to know the people her kids are dealing with, she explains, “I try to keep my kids on the level that you are...these are the people that you’re to deal with. These are the people that I want you to go places with or these are the people I want you to talk to.” Florette is not against her kids meeting new people, but “I’ve got to know, I mean if you pick up a new friend, I need to know who he is, who they are, who their parents are, where they come from...I need to be able to see ‘em, talk to ‘em.” Florette wants to know other parents and “where they come from” to see if they share her values and perspectives on raising kids; for her, this is indispensable, yet much more difficult now, even in her hometown.

Gabriel Trulio is a married Hispanic father of three teenagers. He was born and raised in South America and now works in the accounting department of a small manufacturing company. As Gabriel reflects on his own upbringing, he knows a lot of the differences are cultural, but he also thinks “the times have changed too.”

I was raised with a very strong family, family principles, you know? Where we are as a family was very important for us. You know, always, we were surrounded by people, by family. And also we’d respect—I think was one of the things that I can say that always was important growing [up].

Gabriel recognizes that there is a downside to the thick community life in which he was raised:

We were more afraid to be more independent, so maybe in that area sometimes, being raised in a country like that it make you more dependent on people than in yourself just trusting more in yourself than be more confident, just doing things by yourself.

Gabriel says that you were often worried about stepping on someone’s toes and that people were always “into people’s business.” American culture is different, he says, because “you just mind your own business.” But

he also recognizes that the stronger family and community focus creates important networks of support:

Because you have the family and everything is surrounded by family, you know it's like you get more use [to] depending on other people, those things. In a way it's good too because you know it's a good sense of community. It's a good sense of, you know, you are part of somebody or somebody can come and help you whenever something is happening, everybody also is helping you. Here it's a little more different, you know in a way sometimes it's positive and sometimes it's more negative because sometimes you feel just by yourself, alone. It's like if you are not part of a community here you sometimes... you can be by yourself, you know alone like an island and over there [in South America], you feel more part of the community because of the big family and people are there all the time. People are more into your own business there.

When he reflects on how his own children, raised in the United States, have experienced these differences, Gabriel feels that they are “more confident in themselves and who they are and knowing that, you know, that they are individual people.” But he also feels that his children have a harder time when he and his wife, and the extended family, want to “get in their business.” And he feels that the stronger community, though it has its problems, ultimately “demands more” from children: “the way we were raised, parents demanded more from us, and you know not just only the parents, but also the community that we were involved with demanded more from us.”

Annie West, a married white mother with a PhD in developmental psychology, decided to stay home with her two boys, now 11 and 5, because “why pay someone for something I can probably do better?” She grew up in a major city on the East Coast and had a lot of independence as a child: she rode the train to school and would walk around the city after school with her siblings. Annie thinks her 11-year-old son is old enough to be given freedoms similar to those she had: “[I’m thinking], wow, when I was 11, what was I doing, and which things, and where am I sort of reigning him in, and where am I letting him have even more freedom.” But she admits, “I’m probably reigning in more than giving him more freedom than what

I had.” She believes kids “do need a lot of freedom,” so they can “push against” the boundaries, but now that she is a parent she finds herself saying, “No, let’s set the boundaries here, so then they’ll never be unsafe or anything.” She struggles with the balance, and though it makes her nervous, she has started allowing her son to walk home from school with a few friends.

Annie notes that “the more you know the parents up and down the street,” the more you develop “that kind of network” where other parents will watch out for your kids. “I think that was the big thing about growing up. Everybody knew everybody else.” She says, “My mom was lucky and sort of had a village, and really did, you know, and all of the kids knew everybody.” To illustrate, Annie tells a story from her childhood, when she and a friend “cut gymnastics” one day:

We were in sixth grade, we wandered around the city, and lo and behold, we got busted because there was another parent there. She was like, “Wait a minute, it’s Thursday, aren’t you supposed to be in gymnastics? Oh, yes, you are.”

Annie knows these extra sets of eyes and ears are important, and she thinks that it’s not easy to come by anymore. She and her husband, a software engineer, just moved back to the East Coast from the West Coast, and they had the resources to very carefully choose a neighborhood that might provide the “village” effect. They had just moved at the time of the interview, so the jury is still out.

Alea Dunbar is a black mother of six children from the ages of 17 to 5. Like Annie, Alea gives her children some freedom. She and her fiancé recently moved from Michigan to the Southwest in search of a better life. In Alea’s mind, her new neighborhood is safer than her old one, where somebody’s “getting shot every other day, or stabbed...it’s a lot of crime out there.” In her new place, she can “let them go to the park and not have to worry about them ‘cause it’s a low crime rate out here.” Although there are still dangers (she says there was a recent shooting in the park of a neighboring subdivision), she lets her kids “ride their bikes up and down the street.”

Although Alea is grateful for the greater freedom she can give to her children in their new neighborhood, she still feels that a sense of community—that we all

look out for each other—is much harder to find now than in the past. To illustrate her point, Alea discusses a recent incident with her 10-year-old son. He and a friend had made some money selling lemonade and they wanted to go to the store. She let him go and told him to come right back, but he did not return until four hours later, around 8 p.m. He had gone to several other places in addition to the store, and Alea was upset with him for following his friend beyond the permitted location:

Just because his parents say, “Okay, we’re going to let our boy run around the neighborhood”... I don’t. No. What your friend is able to do is not what you’re able to do. His friend, he’s able to do this, honestly because he’s always out here around the neighborhood. I’m like, “No, you’re not able to do that.”

Alea believes this is different than when she was raised. Of course, there is nothing new about negative peer influences, but Alea thinks that communities are weaker and thus adults feel less responsibility for other children. Just like Annie West says above, Alea feels like someone was always watching over her and reporting back to her mother:

Back then I feel like...and it was more close-knit, I think, the community itself. All different communities were more close-knit together so if I see your son over here doing something I’m gonna call you, “Did you know your son was over here?” Nowadays it’s like, “Oh look at that, that’s such and such out there, they bad.” And you know, you have some people that are still calling you know, or grab your kid up, “Hey, you know you aren’t supposed to be...I’m calling your mom,” and, you know, you have some people that still do that. But back then it was like everybody did it; I couldn’t be anywhere without her getting a call, “You know she over here on...” and that’s why I think it was easier back then as to now. It’s harder now because people kinda wanna mind their own business more instead of helping each other out.

There are still “some people that are still calling,” but Alea doesn’t think it creates a strong enough network to effectively keep kids “more positively focused.” In her mind, “if you got a group of people looking

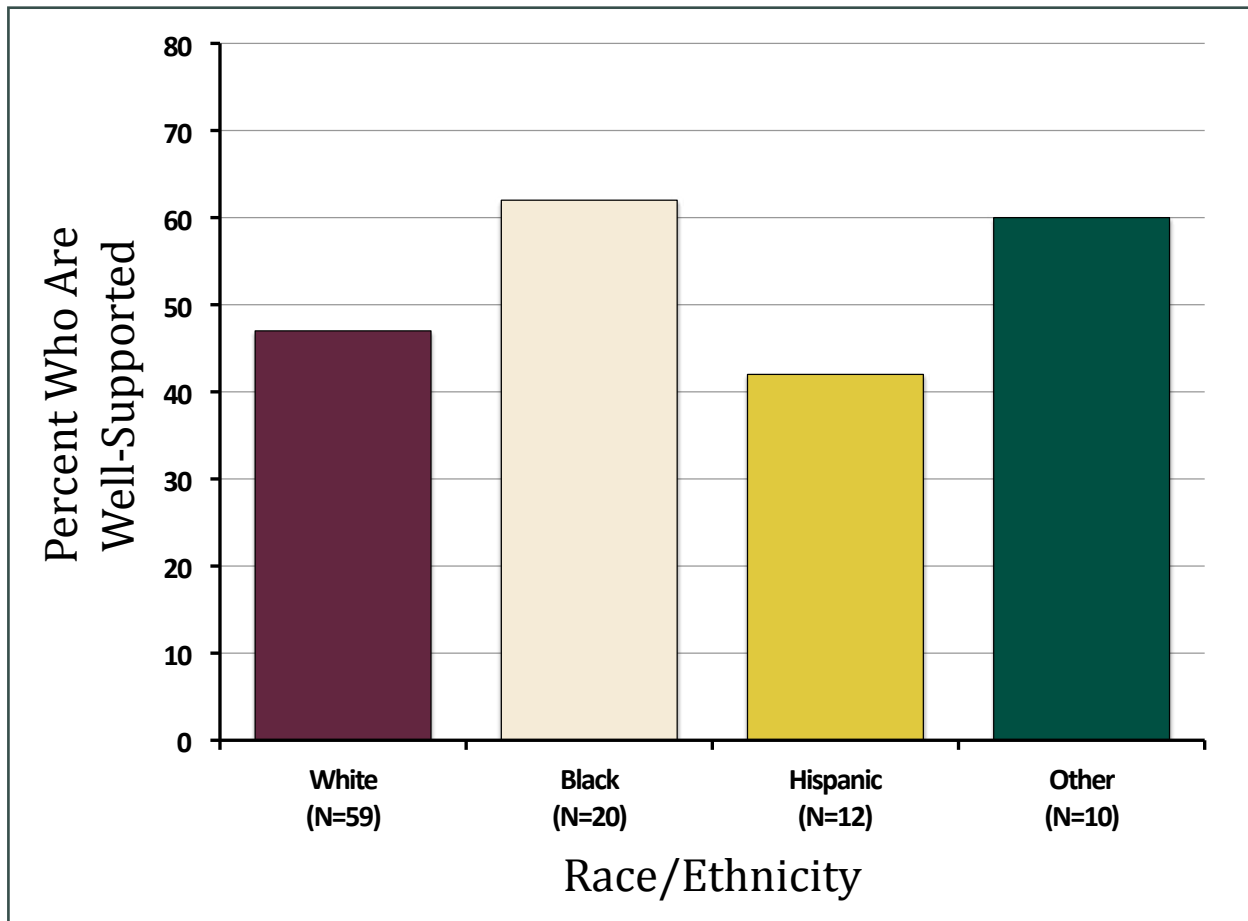
out for you and your kid, then it’s harder for them to do something [bad].” Her perception is that the community no longer has a shared authority and responsibility for its young.

Vestiges of Community Life?

Not all respondents think the “village” concept is completely gone. Some parents, though they are worried about dangers and threats, do attempt to push back against a culture of overprotection. Both Annie West and Alea Dunbar, though limited in various ways, have made choices to try to remake the village ideal. Some parents do feel supported by other adults they can trust, and they give their children more freedom than the majority of parents do. It is difficult to discern patterns among the parents who appear more comfortable giving their children some freedom. A few of these respondents have lower levels of income and education, and prior research has shown that parents from working class or poor backgrounds often give their children more freedom to roam and play outside.²⁶ That was true for several respondents in our study. However, social class differences are not the only factor, as several respondents from working-class or poor backgrounds limit their children’s freedom, like Larrisa Walsh whose daughter’s bicycle was rarely used. Similarly, though many middle-class respondents were fearful of threats and dangers and limited their children’s freedom, some did not. Hannah Schmidt, a white mother of three boys, allows her children to play outside unsupervised and her oldest son walks to and from his junior high school every day. She lives in a suburban development where there are many other children, and she has friends and family in the neighborhood.

While many parents feel like neighbors or other adults can’t be trusted, some do feel supported and not completely alone in the task of raising children. When asked in the survey if they feel like they “go it alone” or if they are well supported in the task of raising children, black and other minorities report greater support than other groups (see Figure 1²⁷). Responses to this question also varied by religious attendance; those who attend a religious service once a week or more report much higher support than those who do not attend at all (see Figure 2). Some minority groups, as well as those with regular religious attendance,

FIGURE 1 — Parental Support by Race/Ethnicity.



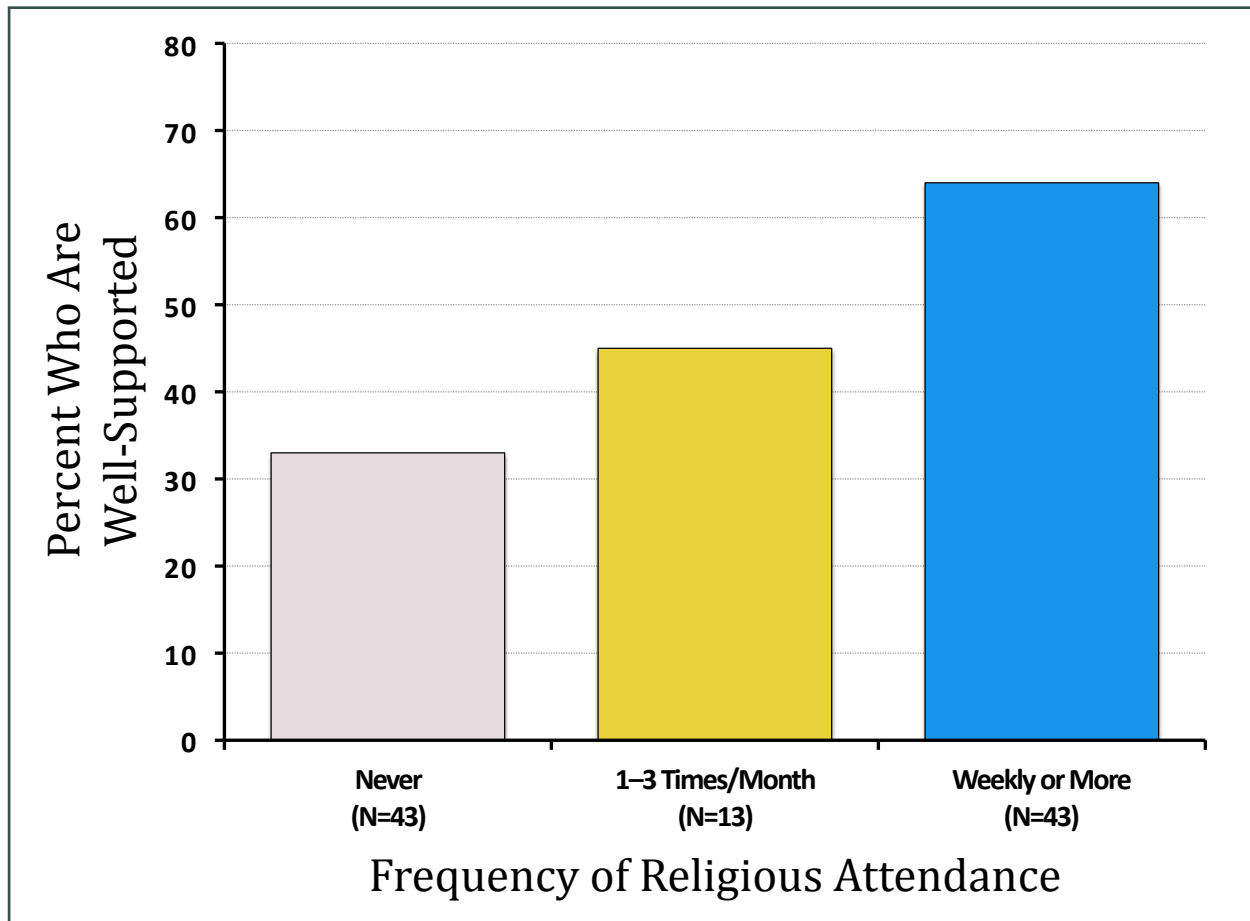
appear to experience more of the “village” idea in terms of support for raising children.

One other group is worth mentioning. Although they were a very small minority (five respondents), parents whose children were involved in martial arts programs consistently articulated that the “master” or teacher shares their same values and offers support in the task of raising children. The master participates in the life of the child as a trusted partner for the parent and respected authority figure for the child. According to these parents, the master provides considerable help and support, especially for the moral formation of the child. The parent and the master/teacher often converse about issues the child is having at home (e.g., not doing homework, not helping out, being disrespectful, etc.), and the master will address it in class. According to these parents, the children respond positively.

Annette Comanski, a white widowed mother of two daughters, says that the taekwondo studio her children attend is “really wonderful about character development, setting goals and structures and having incentives” to help kids be responsible and well-behaved. She says, “It’s also really great community” and other families there were very supportive when her husband was battling cancer.

Seda Kabakjian and her husband, both immigrants from Eastern Europe, signed their two children up for karate and are grateful for the ways the karate master assists them as parents. She says, “If the children are not doing well in school or misbehaving in other ways...they have a lot of respect for [the karate master]. If he says ‘jump,’ they will jump.” If Seda and her husband are having issues with school performance or behavior at home, “we will talk to the master and he

FIGURE 2 — Parental Support by Religious Attendance.



calls them in his office and talks to them. If he says, ‘Stop that,’ then they will stop it.”

These parents seem to enjoy knowing that there is another adult figure who is engaged in their child’s life and working with the parent to point the child in the right direction. For these parents, the master helps to create an element of the village and serves as another trusted adult influence for the child. It is important to note that there are parents who have found vestiges of community life through various means. But these were minority voices in the interview sample. The majority of respondents lament the loss of a trusting community and reluctantly employ strategies that limit their children’s freedom.

Conclusion

Many parents perceive the world to be a more dangerous place, and this fear is closely related to a perception that they can not trust their neighbors. As stated earlier, these are perceptions. In some cases, they align with empirical data; in other cases, they do not. It is true that the streets are more crowded with cars. According to the Federal Highway Administration, from 1987 to 2007, there has been a 62 percent increase in vehicle miles traveled (their measurement for traffic volume). (The years between 2007 and 2012 saw a decrease of three percent.) In 2008, children under 15 accounted for 7 percent of all pedestrian fatalities and 22 percent of all pedestrian injuries in traffic crashes.²⁸

Crime rates in the United States have been flat or declining. According to the Uniform Crime Rate,

violent crime has dropped to 1972 levels, and the murder rate is now lower than it was in 1965. Crimes against children are more difficult to measure. Incidents of “substantiated child maltreatment” are declining. From 1992 to 2010, sexual abuse is down 62 percent, physical abuse down 56 percent, and neglect is down 10 percent.²⁹ Although child abduction rates are complex and difficult to track, they also appear to be in decline in recent decades.³⁰ Perhaps parental perceptions of stranger danger are indeed driven by media reports. Parents seem to know this, but they also allow their fears to create more vigilance and monitoring. Even if the threat of danger is primarily media-driven, parents still lack trust and shared commitments with neighbors and other adults, which are likely minimal requirements for increasing children’s freedom.

While perceptions of danger may not completely match empirical data, the shrinking of children’s domains and outdoor play appear to be real trends. Children’s worlds are both contracting and moving indoors. A recent study empirically demonstrates that children spend most of their time indoors. In a University of California–Los Angeles study of family life in middle-class homes in the Los Angeles area, 90 percent of children’s leisure time is spent indoors at such activities as TV, video games, and

computers.³¹ The geographic space in which children are permitted to travel free of adult supervision also appears to be shrinking. Although still anecdotal, an article in the *British Daily Mail* followed four generations of one family in the town of Sheffield.³² The great-grandfather, as an 8-year-old in 1926, was permitted to walk six miles to a favorite fishing hole. The grandfather, an 8-year-old in 1950, was allowed to walk one mile to play in the woods alone. The mother, an 8-year-old in 1979, could walk half a mile to a swimming hole alone. The son, an 8-year-old in 2007, was allowed to walk by himself to the end of his street, about 300 hundred yards.

While some of these parents’ perceptions appear to be accurate, others do not quite align with reality. But perceptions, wrong or right, can work to create social realities. Parents *perceive* their neighbors cannot be trusted, and they in turn do not trust their neighbors to share their values and to take responsibility for their children. Parents are thus raising children without the “village,” without the networks of shared support and responsibility. This, of course, makes it harder for the parents, but it also significantly changes the experience for the children. For all the freedom parents want to embrace and pass on to their children, they appear significantly limited in their ability to do so.

2

UNLIMITED ACCESS TECHNOLOGY AND THE LIMITS OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Parents are raising children in a culture saturated with technological devices and media forms. Although the interviews did not ask about media or technology directly, the subject came up with a majority of respondents. Media technologies are clearly on the forefront of parents' minds, and for good reason. How do they make sense of these new opportunities and challenges?

Two questions seemed to prompt discussion about media technologies. First, we asked if respondents thought parenting was harder or easier today than for earlier generations. Second, we asked parents about pressures their kids face. (See Appendix B for the Interview Guide.)

Not all parents talk about these changes as concerns; it is not true that *all* parents are “worried” about technological transformations. Some are ambivalent, some see it as a solution, and some even embrace it, like a young single mother who gave her son a cell phone for his first birthday (she did, however, express some regret—“I shouldn’t have done that”). A few parents see technological gadgets—video games and computers—as ways to keep their kids “safe” in their homes, protected from dangers outside the home. Other parents use technology as a disciplinary tool: taking away cell phones, internet privileges, or video games is a popular and useful form of punishment. For some parents, especially those with very young children, the issue just did not come up. Out of the 101 interviews, about 30 respondents either did not talk about media technologies at all or they did not voice any specific concerns.

Many parents have a fairly nuanced view of technological changes, worried about some aspects and grateful for

others. Parents realize that computers and the internet significantly increase children’s educational opportunities and access to information. They are grateful for the convenience and instant contact cell phones offer, especially parents with teenagers. And, of course, parents themselves use and enjoy many of these media technologies.

But on the main, parents express anxieties about the pace and scope of change due to media technologies. While their articulations are not solely negative, over two-thirds (67 percent) of parents express some type of

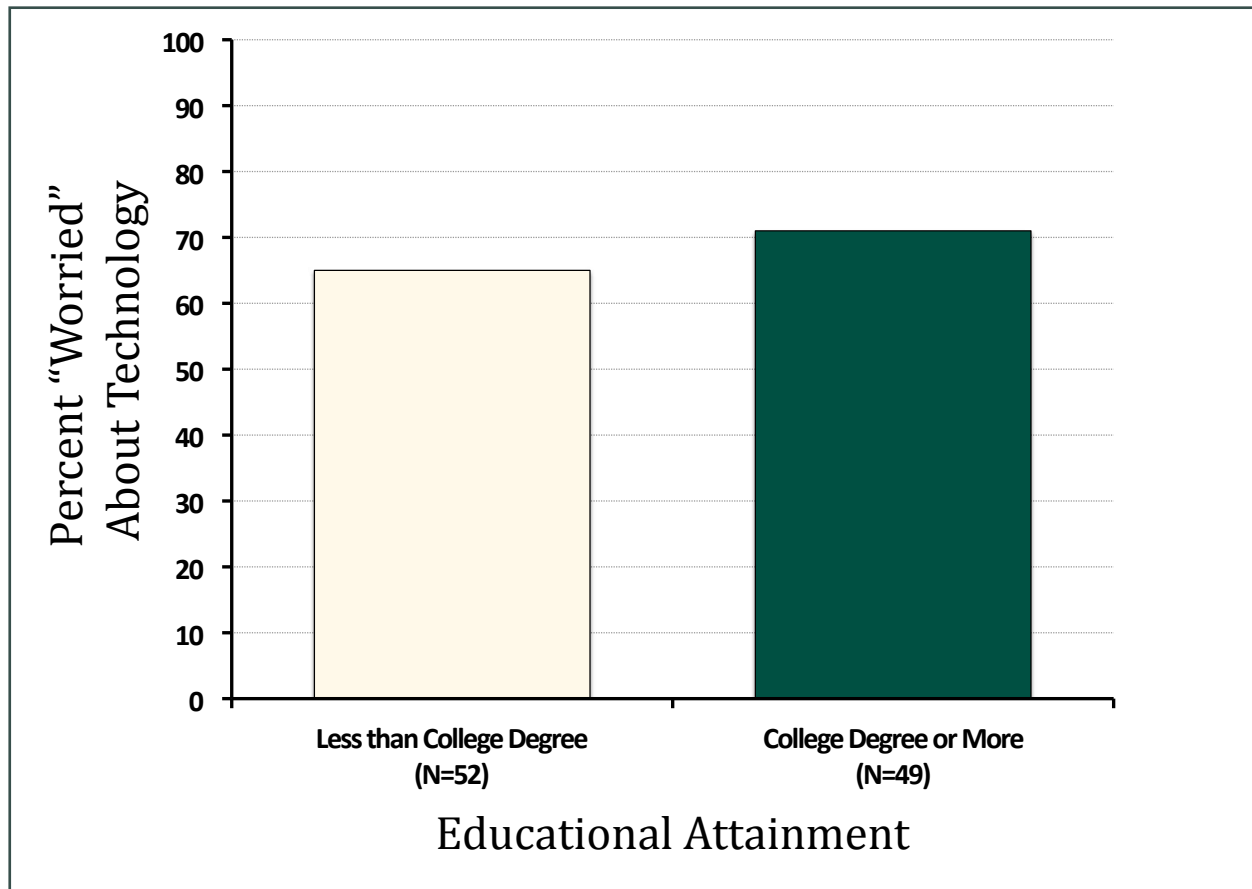
concern about media technologies and their effects on children. This group of “worried” parents is fairly consistent across demographic categories—education, gender, ethnicity, and political affiliation. Parents from a variety of backgrounds express these concerns. A majority of parents with and without college degrees are concerned, as are a majority of

black and white parents (see Figures 3 and 4).³³ While some appear to be framed in nostalgic “it’s not the way it used to be” sentiments, many concerns are targeted and directed towards specific problems that parents see with their children and worries about how media technologies might limit their own influence.

The primary concern of this large group of “worried” parents is the unlimited access media technologies have to family life. It is difficult, if not impossible, for parents to monitor and control all of the varied influences that find direct access to children through the continuous waves of technology. The struggle for these parents is one over influence: technologies reduce the strength and legitimacy of parental influence while increasing influences from a host of unknown and often unwanted sources.

“I mean, you can find out anything in the world from your house...That makes it much tougher as a parent to try to keep up.”

FIGURE 3 — Perceptions of Technological Concern by Education.



The Heartless World Attacks the Haven

According to these parents, media technologies are the vehicles through which the “world” and its negative influences invade the private space of the home. The world comes to your living room through the internet; even though parents have worried about technology for generations (the automobile and the telephone for Middletown parents), this is a new and unique parenting challenge.

Alison Potter, whom we met in the last chapter, lives in a densely wooded neighborhood on the suburban fringe of a large city in the northwestern United States. A former journalist who is now writing a mystery novel while taking care of her two teenage children, Alison feels that media technologies have made parenting different than when she was growing up:

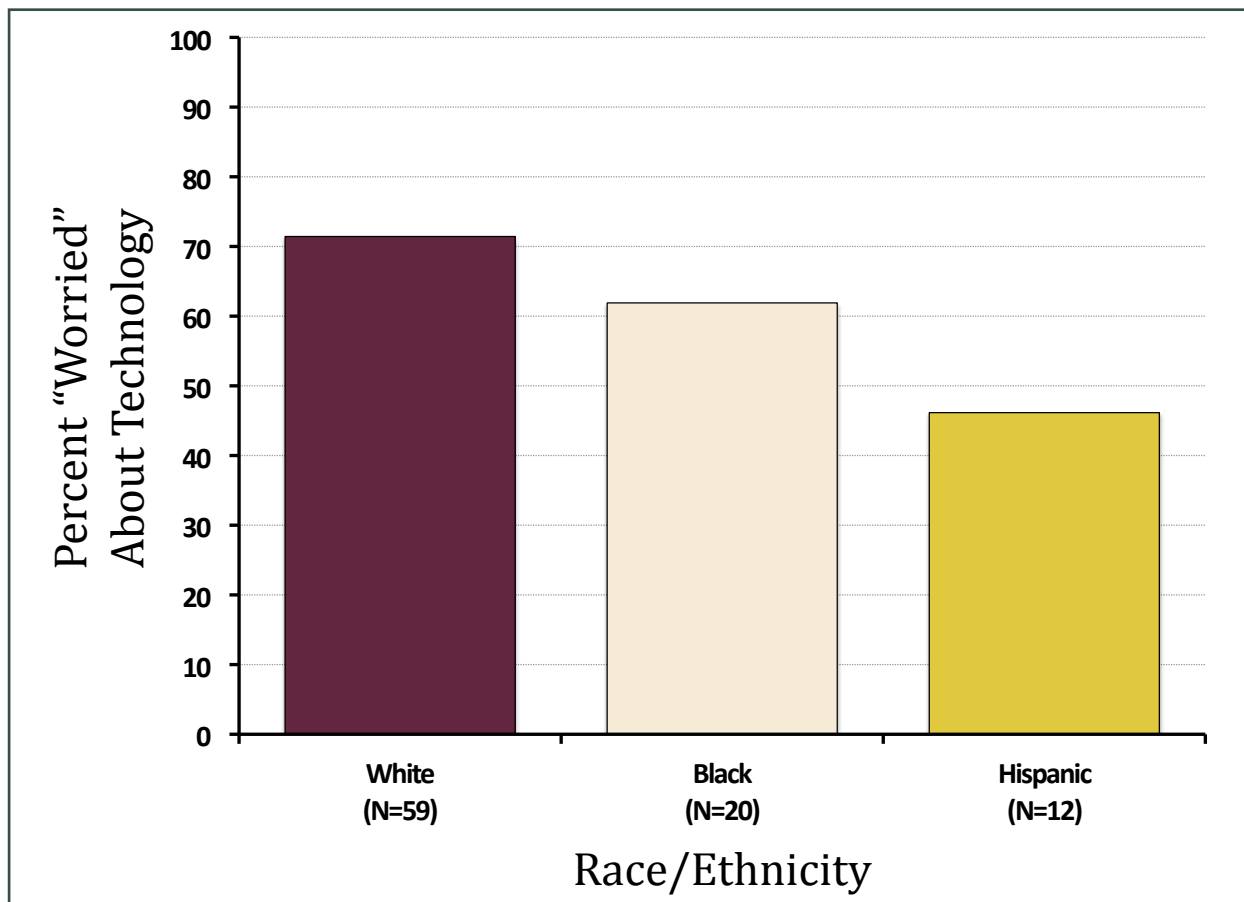
Obviously, the social media is huge. Basically, I mean, you can find out anything in the world from your house where I certainly couldn't do that [as a child]. That makes it much tougher as a parent to try to keep up with that.

How, Alison wonders, can parents “keep up with” unlimited access to “anything in the world” from their own home?

Another mother, Chantel Clothier, articulated the parenting challenge the internet creates with her 13-year-old daughter by having an unknown “world at your fingertips.”

I mean, the internet is vast, much more—it's like the world at your fingertips, so to speak. Because there's a lot about the world that we don't know, you have to be careful going out into it.

FIGURE 4 — Perceptions of Technological Concern by Race/Ethnicity.



For Chantel, a divorced black mother in her forties who is a social worker, the internet brings the world to her daughter and enables her to “go out into it.” The parenting challenge, from Chantel’s vantage point, is the scope and uncertainty of what her daughter can access: there are a lot of unknowns in that world.

The world created by media technologies is uncharted territory that makes it difficult for parents and children to navigate. Vicki Marks, a married working-class black mother of four in a Midwestern city, feels similarly: “there is so much stuff out there that people share nowadays that is just out there for them to do...that kids can get lost and caught up in.” She worries that when kids are “on YouTube—you can see almost anything on there” and she fears her kids will be “impressed by certain things” and be “exposed” to “things that will lead them astray.”

I think I have a harder job than what my parents did because of—because of all the technology and stuff that is out [there]. It’s so much stuff. But now it’s this technology thing, which I like technology...but it’s harder to raise kids because of all the stuff that’s—it’s a lot of stuff. I mean, how can I put this? Like, it’s a lot of stuff going on nowadays than it was back then.

As Vicki says, “it’s a lot of stuff.” The extent and reach of the “stuff” is troubling to her because, though she likes technology—there were several computers and gaming systems laying around her living room—kids can get lost and led astray by it.

Cynthia Schwartz, a white married mother of two teenage girls who works as a medical researcher thinks “there are more influences” today than when she was a child:

I think it's just a bigger world. My mother didn't have to worry about where I was because she knew, she knew if I went to so-and-so's house, she knew them, she knew their parents, she knew how to get there. The internet thing and I don't know, I think there are more influences today.

In her mind, the internet brings a “bigger world” with more influences as compared to her memories of her own childhood, when her mother could rely on a more closed network of knowing relationships. The bigger world of the internet and its influences is much harder to control for Cynthia than a world where your children are in a limited number of places and “control” can be shared with other parents. Put differently, the communication that happens through texting and on Facebook connects peers to each other (and other influences) without necessarily involving parents. It can thus eliminate “closure” in a network of parents, children, and peers. Parents may not know their children’s friends or their parents in ways that Cynthia’s mother did.

The world comes to your living room through the cyber highway, and it comes without parent-controlled traffic lights. As Alison Potter mentions above, trying to keep up with the speed and pervasiveness of these technologies and their influences is challenging.

Teresa Clarke is a married black mother of two young teenagers; she is a former teacher with a master’s degree and her husband works for the teachers’ union in their large Midwestern city. She has a hard time keeping an eye on her children’s technological connections. After describing how things were easier for her mother—the computer “wasn’t a big deal,” the internet didn’t really exist, her mom did not even need to monitor the land line—Teresa explains how challenging it is to monitor technology these days:

Now, it's like the cell phones took over, or the internet, and Facebook, and MySpace. There's so much that you have to try to monitor, and then there's no way. Like Facebook is not. You can't monitor that because I mean—I will—they get a Facebook page and you're watching that

Facebook page. You don't know that they have two or three other Facebook pages that you can't watch. It's like nowhere, there is no way that you can contact Facebook and say, “Listen, if this, you know, comes up, don't allow that to, you know, to happen because another email could be, you know, direct.” It's just so much.

How can Teresa monitor it all? “There’s no way” to watch it all. She may think she is on top of things because she is watching her children’s Facebook page, but she realizes that her kids may have other Facebook pages she doesn’t know about. She doesn’t see Facebook as an ally in her efforts to monitor either.

An Armenian couple that both immigrated to the United States as children feel like their 9-year-old son changes in some way when he has too much exposure to the computer. The mother, who supervises a Head Start program, and the father, who makes electronics, explain:

“There’s so much that you have to try to monitor, and then there’s no way...It’s just so much.”

Father: Often he's been for so long on the computer, if I just let him, I stop liking him. He is totally changed...He's not like not, not my son anymore. He is just totally like—

Interviewer: What is he like?

Mother: Maybe you ask him something, he'll just not respond. We lose him in a way.

Aaron Asch is a white father in his fifties with two adult children and one teenager still at home. He works in procurement in the pharmaceutical industry and uses an Oracle software program; despite his above-average technological capabilities, he still feels like his teenage son’s capabilities with computers and the internet are way beyond not only his control, but also his comprehension:

Aaron: Like I'll say, “Do you want to go see a movie?” He says, “I already watched it.” I'll say, “How did you watch that already?” He says, “I watched it on my computer.” How did you—I mean, is that legal, you know, like what are you doing? He says, “The movie's no good, we're not going.” So—I mean, he just does all those things.

Interviewer: How does he do that?

Aaron: I have no idea, he won't tell me. I have no idea.

Aaron is worried about the legality of his son's actions, but he doesn't have the knowledge or capability to make an accurate determination. Beyond this, he believes it's "scary with children" these days "not only just the Internet, but just the access to information." It's scary because it's difficult to control or even be cognizant of the dangers.

This difficult-to-control access to information, and along with it the media, news, and advertisements, takes on an "in-your-face" quality according to Tara Wade, a married white homeschool mother of two teenage boys. When she was asked how things are different from when she was raised, she mentions the internet. Although there were "bad things that happened" when she was young, news about such events was not "instantaneous and in your face the way it is now." She thinks the 24-hour news cycle creates a steady stream of not just negative news stories, but also advertisements that assault the sensibilities she wants to instill in her sons:

I mean when I was growing up you had the 6:00 news and all those people who watched Walter Cronkite and whoever were the other people...You got your news once a day and you got the newspaper. That was where you got your information or you had your radio, but it wasn't like all this bursts of stuff just coming at you all the time. The ads were not so in your face as the ads are now. Everything is—now it's like sex sells. The ads back then had women, but they were dressed appropriately. Not like now where you look at these ads and you think, "Aahh!"

The onslaught of media messages troubles Tara, and they also led Mercedes Dominguez, a single Hispanic mother, who works a temp job as an office clerk, to decide she did not want a cell phone and cable TV for her 16-year-old daughter. Mercedes told her daughter she would not pay for them. However, her daughter, who works at a local burger joint, uses her own money to pay her monthly Smartphone bills, and she also pays for cable. Although Mercedes did not want to

pay for these things, she did allow her daughter to pay for them.

Mercedes expresses that one of her biggest struggles is the challenge of imparting a sense of morality in the midst of negative influences that she believes come from these media technologies: "moral[s]—and all those values...they're hard to teach." She talks about watching TV with her daughter and asking questions about whether or not this behavior is right or wrong, but Mercedes admits that "it's a struggle for her."

As the comments and articulations of these parents demonstrate, they feel like the technological world that confronts them and their children is different than the world in which they were raised. Of course, we are all prone to somewhat nostalgic memories of our own childhoods, and there were undoubtedly threats and dangers two or three decades ago when these respondents were children. But these parents from a variety of walks of life appear to articulate a palpable anxiety as they discuss raising their children. The great strengths of the internet and technological innovations more generally—increased communications, the speed and scope of information flows—create avenues for unwanted influences to reach children. If the family was ever a haven in a heartless world, the heartless world now has untrammelled access to it.

Seven Parental Concerns about Media Technologies: Losing Control

1. Media technologies normalize patterns and behaviors that parents think are not—or should not be—normal.

Parents from a variety of backgrounds seem to worry that media technologies introduce their children to various relationship dynamics and modesty norms of which the parents do not approve. Of course, there are always a host of culture warriors shaking their fists at Hollywood or the music industry, and this sentiment appeared in some of the interviews. But many parents were less alarmist and more nuanced in their concerns. Although they do not do it consciously or consistently, most parents seek to create an environment in which the values, morals, beliefs, and behaviors that they cherish are the ones the child experiences as normal. The sociologist Peter Berger calls social environments

like these “plausibility structures”—the social reality in which the world as we receive it makes sense to us and is “normal” or legitimate.³⁴ Parents might want to raise children to believe that helping a homeless person on the street is normal and expected, that it is wrong to make fun of someone’s sexual orientation, that shooting someone because they said something that bothered you is not normal, or that hard work is simply expected, not requested.

Jonathan Snelling is a white father of four young children—ages two to eight—whom he and his wife homeschool. After working his way through a local Evangelical Christian college, he found a job as a nurse in a nearby public health clinic that enables him to walk home for lunch in their crowded three-bedroom apartment. He discusses changes in the culture that make parenting different today—“technology is a big one”—and focuses on how media technologies may give his children a warped sense of “normal” family relationships:

When I think of how our culture portrays the parent-child relationship, our kids are going to be given a lot of examples, negative and positive. Since technology can and to some degree has made culture’s message more pervasive, our kids will see examples and then need to make a choice of how they’re going to interact with those family dynamics.

Jonathan doesn’t believe the influences are new; there are simply more of them—and they are more pervasive—than an “even more bygone era when kids only had either examples from other families, or what they saw in their church, or in their family as influences of the choice they had to make of how to interact.” He goes on to explain that after being presented with these examples, his children will have to ask themselves, “Is that how I’m going to interact with my parents?” The effect of this, in Jonathan’s mind, is “they get to decide what’s normal” and they “may not base their normal on what they experience” within their own family, but rather base it on what they see as “normal” from other influences. “They might think their family is weird.”

“It seems like it’s a normal thing but it’s not. I guess they feel that that’s the way life is or that’s the way it’s supposed to be, but that’s not so.”

How children comprehend “normal” family relationships is not the only concern of parents. Mercedes Dominguez, the single Hispanic mother who refused to pay for a cell phone and cable for her 16-year-old daughter, worries that media technologies increase peer pressures by making her daughter think that what she sees on TV is how most people interact and live.

Despite her efforts to mediate what she believes to be negative influences from it, Mercedes thinks that media exposure intensifies peer pressures for her daughter.

Interviewer: There’s always peer pressure, but you said it seems like it’s worse now for your daughter than it was for you?

Mercedes: Yeah, yeah, because there’s so much out there. The media, the internet, television, all that stuff.

Interviewer: How does the internet or the media put pressure on your daughter?

Mercedes: Well, they all like to watch those kind of things, kind of series, especially those reality shows and different things. Kids can do whatever and they go with whoever and it seems like it’s a normal thing but it’s not. I guess they feel that that’s the way life is or that’s the way it’s supposed to be, but that’s not so.

Mercedes suggests that media, specifically reality TV, normalizes behaviors that are not—or should not be—normal. In her mind, it creates a culture of approval—“kids can do whatever and go with whoever”—that pressures her daughter to participate.

Dana DiTrillio, the mother of 12-year-old boy-girl twins who works in the accounting department of a pharmaceutical company 30 hours per week, worries about “casual sex” being normalized through television. She enjoys the sitcom *Friends*, but she says there’s “a lot of casual sex like all the time” in the show and in others like it.

That’s one thing you don’t want them to think is that it’s normal and that’s what I think a lot of

the movies and shows, it just seems like casual sex. That's my biggest reason I don't want them to watch too much of these shows because I don't want them to think that's normal. Maybe it is normal, but the less normal they think it is, I feel like the better for them.

When asked why she thinks it's better for her children to avoid the casual sex norm, Dana explains that "it just leads to harmful behavior and low self-esteem and nothing good" and she doesn't "want them thinking that everyone just hooks up like that." She wants to "shield" them from that as long as she can because the longer she can push it into the future, "it helps them to figure out who they are...every year I feel like we postpone that, they get a stronger sense of who we are and what our values are."

Dana also mentioned two situations in which Facebook created a mechanism to broadcast messages to her kids that she felt were inappropriate. In one case, a friend of her daughter's went on a special thirteenth birthday outing to New York City and the mother had "glamour shots" taken of the daughter with "makeup and hair and clothes." The photos were then posted on Facebook, and Dana felt like it is not healthy to send messages to 12- and 13-year-old girls that they need to be "pretty and modelish and sexy." In a separate situation, her son's friend had a birthday party at the restaurant chain Hooters. The boy posted photos from the evening, including pictures of him with the Hooters waitress on his Facebook page. Glamour shots and photos with Hooters waitresses may not be new phenomena, but Facebook is and it enables them to be instantly accessible and widely distributed. Dana's biggest concern from both situations is the messages that her daughter might internalize: "I don't want my daughter to think it's important to be pretty or wear makeup or be skinny or have great clothes. I feel like that's just setting you up for disaster."

The speed, scope, and content of media technologies' invasion into family life appear to palpably shake the foundations of the plausibility structures that parents

"That's my biggest reason I don't want them to watch too much of these shows because I don't want them to think that's normal. Maybe it is normal, but the less normal they think it is, I feel like the better for them."

implicitly create. This is not necessarily new: parents in the Middletown studies in 1924 complained about the dangers of the "moving pictures" and their effect on young people. This is a chorus that will continue ad infinitum. But these parents seem to feel like there is a pervasive quality of constant access that makes it harder and harder for them to preserve a space away from the media crush within which to construct an alternative plausibility structure.

2. Media technologies prompt children to *grow up too fast.*

Although closely related to the normalization role that media technologies can play, many parents expressed concern that they expose children to things that are not age appropriate or that media technologies accelerate the growing-up process because of what they see and hear. The speed and content of messages are beyond parents' control; even if parents believe something is inappropriate for their child, it is likely the child will be exposed to it anyway.

Thomas Palmer, a white businessman and father of three young teenage daughters, feels like technology gives his children the capacity to do more than he could as a child: "they can push the limits more than we could." Pushing the limits means they have access to more earlier: "they get older so much quicker; they know so much more. I think it all kind of ties around technology."

Teresa Clark, the former teacher, immediately shut down her 14-year-old son's Facebook account when she learned he had signed up without her permission. When asked why she shut it down, she explains:

Because, and I had this conversation with him, it's a lot that's going on on Facebook and he has a young mind that hasn't developed yet. Both of my kids are, they are kid kids, so like they're not little grown individuals on the outside and little kids on the inside. They have been sheltered in this kid stage because they could be. Like they didn't have a reason that they had to grow up early.

Nothing has happened. No one's died. I'm not an addict and they have to take care of little kids.

Sheltering her children from Facebook is a way for Teresa to keep them in the “kid stage.” In her mind, their childhood has been absent the tragedies and challenges of many other children, and she wants to keep it that way. She sees Facebook as something that exposes her children to things for which their young minds are not ready.

Alison Potter, the aspiring novelist, did not want her teenage daughter to have a Facebook account, but when her daughter joined the cast of the school play, she came home one day and announced she had an account. The play's directors had enrolled all students involved with the play in Facebook so that they could communicate easily with them. When asked why she did not want her daughter on Facebook, she says, “It's kind of a mine field for most people and especially for teenagers...it's a huge time sink.” She goes on to say that Facebook brings “exposure to a lot of things that you'd just as soon they weren't quite exposed to yet as far as sex, drinking, language, that kind of—whether you're going to date, and what you're going to do if you do that, and how you're going to fit in.” Alison says that many of these pressures have “always been there,” but that it is “accelerated somewhat because of the social media and media in general.”

Alexander Vasquez, a Hispanic father of three younger teenagers who works in sales for a textile company, doesn't allow his kids to have Facebook accounts (he shut down his daughter's once he discovered it). He and his wife have an account to “keep up with family in other states,” but he thinks the “play-by-play” of your life is trivial. He is able to see some of his daughter's friends' pages, and some of the things he saw were “just inappropriate, and I didn't want a 13-year-old exposed to that.” When asked what he saw, he explained:

A 13-year-old posting, “I'm going to have sex with your man,” or “I'm going to sleep with your man,” or “I'll take your man away.” “Where my bitch is at,” things like that...I just didn't want her hanging with those types of people, or communicating with those types of people because what ends up happening, if she's not talking like them, if she's not wearing

the makeup like them, that she might feel like, “Well, wait a minute; I'm out of place. I kind of need to be like them.”

According to parents like these, media technologies lead children to mature faster because of what they are exposed to on TV, the internet, and social media sites.³⁵ Like the normalized behaviors discussed above, early exposure to various ideas and themes present a challenge for parents' successful construction of plausibility structures. Parents lose the ability to control access to appropriate things and thus are less able to define a legitimate moral space for their children.

3. Media technologies increase bullying and encourage “mean” treatment of others.

In recent years, bullying—especially cyber bullying—has received much attention from school anti-bullying campaigns, the news media, and now even documentaries and movies. Indeed, at least one high profile suicide incident apparently linked to bullying occurred and was in the news during our data collection period. Parents make a direct link between media technologies and bullying, and their main concern is that various new mediums—namely, social media and cell phones—facilitate inappropriate interactions between peers. Something about these forms of communication encourages uncivil, negative, mean, and caustic exchanges. Parents feel the technologies also give kids constant access to each other; there is no place to hide. While bullying is not new, a bullied child used to just have to make it through the school day, but could find safety from the enemy when he or she returned home. No such safe place exists anymore.

Kyra Mujadiri immigrated to the United States from Iran as a little girl. She has three children (the oldest is 15) and works as a sales associate for a furniture store in the Midwest. Kyra understands that gossip, rumors, cliques, and the like have always been components of the teenage years, but she feels that these negative social interactions are sharper, faster, and more extensive: “I mean things now days are so accessible...Now you've got—you can text somebody, you can tell somebody, you can throw it on the computer with YouTube and Facebook. I just think it's just more viral now than then.” In her experience as a teenager, “mean girl” interactions were relatively confined and limited by space and physical conversations between people. It might

have been just as ruthless, but she feels it was somewhat controlled. But now, Kyra thinks these things go further quicker and are harder to control: “you got to get on Facebook, you got to get on YouTube, you got to go text everybody, and even by then the true story isn’t there.”

Kyra says her family is so “technology friendly” that it creates one of her “biggest worries,” that “everything is so accessible, and that’s the hardest part.” The accessibility is hard because of “greater bullying”: kids have constant access to each other, so bullying is not limited to school or the playground. Kyra tells of a recent incident in her home. She and her husband were looking through her son’s emails and web browser history to check on his activities (something they do regularly, as do most parents; see below) and they found an email forwarded from a friend and “it was a bullying situation” including a link to a website that was “not a good site.”

They went to school officials and “not only did we as parents learn something, but [the] administration learned something...now days, unless you’re on top of them...you give them an inch and they take a foot.”

I mean, all these kids that I see that are committing suicide because of this bullying. It just brings me to tears because it’s just not right. I mean, “Really, you need to pick on someone for that?” Where before it was a face-to-face confrontation, you went to the school, you hoped for the best. Now, I don’t even know how to explain it, to word it, it’s scary. It really is scary, and I just hope that my kids see something like that and either help them out or if they don’t feel they can, go to an adult and say, “This is what’s going on.” I just hope in us raising them to be good citizens that they really think of what the outcomes for other people are.

Although there have been several high-profile cases in recent years, the numbers of children committing suicide because of bullying are relatively low. In fact,

“It used to be when we were little there was bullying but now they can even reach them in their homes in ways, you know, like through phones and emails and texts and that type of thing, so there’s even more.”

an investigation in the high-profile case of a 10-year-old girl who hanged herself, in the news at the time of these interviews, found no evidence of bullying linked to the suicide. This does not minimize the tragic suicides, and it also does not mean that bullying cases are fabricated. Teresa Clark described a situation at her niece’s school where a girl was stabbed because “there’s a picture of her [with someone else’s] boyfriend on [Facebook].” Whether perceptions or reality, parents feel that the accessibility of technology gives kids a medium for their basest instincts.

Leah Carder, a white mother of three middle-school aged children who works part-time in a pre-school in the Midwest, expressed the increased access as a big challenge:

I think there’s more ways for them to get to each other now with all the electronics and stuff and all that status and all. There’s big problems with bullying. It used to be when we were little there was bullying but now they can even reach them in their homes in ways, you know, like through phones and emails and texts and that type of thing, so there’s even more.

Like other parents, Leah realizes that bullying is not a new social phenomenon among children, but she believes various technological devices increase the avenues through which bullying can occur.

Alexander Vasquez, the Hispanic father of three teenagers, has tried to take a proactive approach to cyber bullying. He recently showed a movie to his kids on the topic:

I played the movie for them and I kept telling them, “Remember, remember, I told you. See, this is why you don’t need a Facebook account, for that same reason. You’re still very young. You’re very vulnerable. Someone in your school can just come and create all these rumors about you and it makes you want to do something to take your life.”

The suicide cases come up again, and Alexander mentions another recent situation when a 12- or 13-year-old took his own life. He tries to use these situations to direct his children: “So it’s like those things that kind of just stick to me and I kind of tell them, ‘This is the reality, this is what’s going on.’ The internet is such a powerful tool, and it can do good, and it can do so much bad.”

Facebook and texting seem to be the primary mediums through which bullying occurs, and they can facilitate mean, uncivil interactions. A black mother described something her teenage daughter showed her: “There was something going on online that she was showing us the back and forth on somebody’s Facebook, I’m like, how do these kids do stuff like that? . . . These kids are just vicious; they’re mean. I just don’t get it.”

Kara Dobbins, a white single mother of a teenage daughter, also explained that high school girls being “mean” to each other was a “cultural phenomenon” she did not get. Her daughter had never been bullied, but she told her mother that one of her friends had endured it: “she has a friend who was subjected to some pretty malicious stuff online.” Kara asked her daughter about it, and the daughter responded, “Oh yeah, it happens. People can be really mean and gossip is ugly and because of technology, it’s like rapid and widespread.”

Whether media technologies increase bullying or whether they lead to more childhood deaths is beyond the realm of this study. But it is clear that parents worry about the ways technology increases access and facilitates interactions unchecked and enforced by adult norms. It opens a space where children can be free to say what they want about who they want with little fear of sanction or shame that otherwise might hold them in check. It is a space where adult monitoring and control is difficult, and some children appear to take advantage of this freedom. One is mindful of the young children on the island in William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies*, a place of freedom absent adult supervision and regulation that led to destruction and tyranny.

4. Media technologies are “too much to keep up with.”

One of the greatest challenges parents express, which lies just beneath the surface of the previous three, is

staying up to speed with their children’s activities in the technological and virtual worlds. The speed at which new technologies emerge is impressive, and as soon as parents feel they have learned one thing, something else comes along. But the online world has few boundaries, and even though most parents want to stay informed, they realize that they are fighting a losing battle, especially if they have older children, and monitoring everything completely is impossible.

For Chantel Clothier, the single mother with a 13-year-old daughter, media technologies are a constant source of new things she needs to learn about. She wants to stay on top of things and to be a well-informed parent, and this means a lot of work. She doesn’t know much about Twitter, but she anticipates her daughter’s interest in it as she goes to high school, so Chantel is committed to doing some reconnaissance about it.

Chantel: I’m not a Twitter fan, but I need to learn a little bit more about Twitter. I know she has a friend who she, like, she will follow on Twitter, but she doesn’t have a Twitter account either. Again, I need to learn a little bit more about that.

Interviewer: How will you learn? You’ll read about it?

Chantel: Read about it, talk to—actually interestingly enough because I have clients, many of my clients are teenagers. I talk to them about it. I ask them about it.

Joel Davis, the father of two younger children who installs audio-visual equipment, feels like “you gotta watch” the technology, but you simply can’t do it all.

The number of channels there are and the internet and everything else where, you know. You have to watch your kids in ways that you didn’t before because, you know, I do my best to reasonably block things on the computer where you can’t do everything. You gotta watch that.

Sometimes, when parents think they are ahead of the curve regarding monitoring, their children can do an “end-around” and figure out ways to avoid the controls. Thomas Palmer, who felt that kids can “push the limits” more with technology these days, had a situation with

his ninth-grade daughter where they wanted to “cut off texts” because she was communicating too frequently with a particular boy they did not like. But “technology hasn’t gone that far” and they were not able to restrict only her line and not the rest of the lines on the family plan. So they monitored her texts to him via their phone bill online, but that did not work too well:

What happened with that?... Because she knew we were watching it on the AT&T account, she switched over to messaging through an app, never said so much, but we could tell.

Parents who wish to monitor media technologies because of the content that might normalize behaviors they deem inappropriate, or because of how children treat each other through these mediums, have significant difficulty keeping up with the various options. Here too the speed and the extent of the technologies prove too much.

5. Media technologies change or distract from family time, relationships, and communication.

One might expect for the reverse to be true, that technology strengthens communication between family members. Many parents were glad to be connected to their children, especially teenagers, via the cell phone; it brings a certain sense of safety. In addition to this benefit, many parents also discussed the ways technologies are altering family life in one way or another. Some parents felt these were negative changes and others were more ambivalent.

Charlotte Shepherd’s 17-year-old daughter had a relatively typical high school experience: the boy she wanted to go to Homecoming with asked someone else instead. Although such experiences seem trite for adults, they can be devastating dramas for a high schooler. Charlotte’s daughter handled it like many others: she came home in tears and went straight to her room. Charlotte had found out about the heartbreak from another daughter and went to give her daughter a hug, but her daughter did not want to talk about it. Later in the evening, as Charlotte sat on the couch in the living room, she got a text message—from her

daughter, in her upstairs bedroom. Her daughter proceeded to have a highly emotional conversation with Charlotte about her broken heart. “She didn’t want to talk to me. But we had a full-blown conversation right there!” Charlotte did not seem sure what to make of this. Was the quality of their relationship enriched or cheapened? Did the technology enable her to connect with her daughter in ways she wouldn’t have otherwise? Or was technology depersonalizing highly emotional conversations that should take place face-to-face? Charlotte did seem to realize that this was different, and she is in uncharted territory.

Cynthia Roderick, a white mother of four in her late thirties, thinks technology now “interferes” with family life in ways it did not when she was a child.

We didn’t have game systems. I mean we had Atari, but that wasn’t something my family had growing up. We couldn’t afford it, but we didn’t have all the distractions like internet and video games and movies that we could bring home and watch. We had more family time, per se, as opposed to now, which we’ve got all the electronic distractions and stuff like that.

When she was asked what these technologies distract from, Cynthia quickly responds, “From family bonding time.” She feels that you can’t really be together as a family when you watch TV or play a video game because “your focus is on the TV, not each other.”

For Mercedes Dominguez, the office clerk, technology “nowadays” is “a little bit fast.” She believes it enables kids to get “into their own little world” or “little cubby” and close off the family.

Mercedes: They just into their own little world with their, they’re always with their iPods and their phones and things and it’s like they’re in their own little cubby. Always calling and talking... Everyone has their own phone and their own things and toys and games.

Interviewer: What do you think kids lose when they have their own phone and can kind of create their own world?

“You have to watch your kids in ways that you didn’t before.”

Mercedes: They lose communication with families. I mean, they do talk with their friends, but just the way they do it, that I guess is normal for them. They're always typing on their little phones, texting and all of that stuff. Why don't you just call? No they would rather type, type...

Not all parents expressed concern about losing family connections and relationships to technology, but many did. And others could articulate situations and circumstances that they knew to be very different, but they were not quite sure what that meant.

6. Media technologies inhibit outside play and engagement with the natural world.

Various media technologies offer children forms of entertainment, and much of children's free time, or play time, is spent with these devices. Many parents express concern that, though perhaps not bad in and of themselves, these devices may have ill effects because they keep children from other forms of play, especially outdoors. This may simply be a lament that children do not play the same games or in the same ways as parents remember playing themselves. But the concern goes deeper than that too. Parents struggle to know what might be lost in the more limited engagement their children have with the natural world.³⁶

Joel Davis feels the strain of technological options that limit kids' imagination and active play. He mentions needing to watch "how they spend their time and whether they get enough exercise and are involved in media" and feels guilty that "the whole time we've been here," the kids are "downstairs watching TV or playing videogames." Joel feels like, though he did have some very basic handheld video games as a child, his options were limited: "we had three channels; kid programming was only a couple hours a day." So he had to do something else:

Go outside, read a book, play with a toy...there was a lot more time to do the kinds of things that is kind of generally accepted are better for you, whether it's physical exercise or you know, using your brain in a, in a more, in a less passive way...You're not sitting there watching TV, you're not, you know, you're actually playing, using your imagination, you're reading a

book, you're using your Legos or Erector Set to build something, doing something, you know. I think it's harder to try to make children today behave like that because there's too many things to do that are more attractive and more fun or instant gratification but actually less gratifying long term.

Technological devices and mediums create distractions from physical or imaginative play. Joel appears disappointed in this state of affairs, but he doesn't seem to do a lot to get his children out of this dilemma and in fact may facilitate it.

Judy Pitcher, a black mother of three whom we met in the last chapter, says that her children are outside very little. This seems a bit intentional on her part, however. She feels that her neighborhood is unsafe, and she prefers to keep her children indoors where she can monitor them. When asked about the plethora of technological devices lying about the living room (computers, video game consoles, TV), Judy responds:

It's taken over my entire house, and instead of—I think that's a general for this generation. Kids don't go out and play like they used to. I don't see nobody playing jacks, jumping rope, hopscotch. What happened to all of that? They're all into video games. We have a Wii, a PlayStation, a Xbox. They all have those little iPod devices. They all have a Netbook, so they have everything to try to make them as comfortable as possible.

Judy uses these technologies to "make them as comfortable as possible" precisely so they will not feel the need or desire to go outside and interact with others. She doesn't trust her neighbors and utilizes media technologies to entertain her children and keep them happy indoors.

John Booth, a software developer, and his wife homeschool their three young children. They have limits on media technologies—less than an hour a day—and encourage participation with people their children "can see and touch." Because their school days are mainly filled with exposure to just the immediate family, John and his wife like the children to interact with other kids in the neighborhood, rather than technology:

They have other things that they do with their time, so they don't feel that sense of, "I don't have anything to do. Why don't I just go turn on the TV?" We just find it's more productive to have them outside playing and being active, or interacting with other kids because their school day is just us. We like to have them, whether it's playing with neighborhood kids, family, or friends, we like to have them interacting with people that they can see and touch.

Other parents echo this desire to resist technological devices and encourage more direct, active, outdoor play. Rachel Stillwell, a single white mother of two young children, says:

I like to see my children be active. It's a great way to live. I don't want my children to rely on TV or computer games, or anything else. I want them to rely on the simplest things, like playing ball outside...so I want them to learn the basics of life, getting outside and being active, and being into sports, or activities and stuff like that, because not only is it good for them in general, but it's also good for them health-wise, you know what I mean?

Bibek Ganguli, an immigrant from India, also suggests that media technologies—they enjoy them and use them often—can be “bad if you don't force [the kids] to go out and play outside.” He says he and his wife try to limit screen time because “those are the toys that I'm usually more afraid of, but I don't mind if they want another puzzle.” He thinks that too much screen time means his kids “lose the concept of playing games and kind of keeping yourself busy with play acting.” Bibek prefers the toys and games that help his kids use their “imagination versus being zombied out on the Wii or something.”

7. Media technologies create challenges for kids to distinguish between the real and the virtual.

Beyond just negative content or lack of exercise, some parents express concerns that media technologies have deeper effects on their children that go to the core of how they experience reality itself. Parents are concerned that high levels of screen time begin to make it difficult for children to distinguish between the “real”

world of physical places, things, and people and the virtual world of video games and Facebook “friends.” This concern is an underlying assumption of the one above—that lack of physical interaction with the world has negative effects—but a smaller number of parents took this next step and suggested that technologies may challenge perceived reality itself. Parents who articulate concerns beyond the content of media technologies—that the form and structure of technology itself might create problems for their children—are in the minority. But a few parents do express this deeper, perhaps more fundamental, concern.

Chantel Clothier says that the internet is “the world at your fingertips,” but she adds that you're learning about the world virtually, instead through actual physical presence. She thinks that this gives you an “illusion” of what and who people are:

I mean for like my generation, when you went out into the world, you weren't talking about the internet. You were talking about actually getting physically on a bus, train, plane, wherever, to go to wherever. This is more it's actually brought to you, but again, there's still so many things that you cannot see that you're not aware of. You kind of get an illusion of what people are or who people are.

Chantel's work as a social worker and therapist has taught her that “what people present to you most of the time is not really what it is,” so she realizes we are often roleplaying even when we are physically present. Yet she still feels that media technologies facilitate deeper illusions of reality:

But again, because you're looking at the computer screen, you're kind of having this virtual thing going on, there's a lot you can't know. It'll give the illusion of, oh, this person's okay and this person is this...It isn't until you actually come into physical contact with them do you get the real story.

She offers an example of this with her 12-year-old daughter. Chantel has a Facebook account—her daughter does not have her own, but shares Chantel's—and she has intentionally limited her Facebook friends to relatives and local friends, “people she actually knows.” She explains that she watches kids with

Facebook and “they got a million friends—come on, who has a million friends?” She wants to say to these kids:

These are not all your friends. You don't know all of these people and you don't know what they're going to put out there.

Dave Edmonds was a technician in the Navy for 20 years, bounced around jobs at places like Lowe's, and then moved to security in a local casino. He is currently working maintenance at the local state university, but he is also enrolled full-time in school where he is studying “smart grids,” a form of alternative energy. (His wife does maintenance work at the local airport.) He has more “technological know-how” than the average parent, and he utilizes these skills with his 14-year-old son, who by all accounts is fully wired.

Dave's son is an only child, and Dave thinks he has problems with “intercommunication.” He explains that this means “he's more selfish, he don't share or anything.” When asked more about this, Dave says his son “doesn't have no exposure to live in—more in an extended family, and I think that's a lot of problems.” This was a big enough concern for Dave and his wife that they decided to volunteer for temporary foster care, taking in foster kids for short weekend or week-long visits just to expose their son to other kids. When we pursued this further with Dave, he suggested that his son's time on the internet might contribute to the problem.

Interviewer: So how about—we know he's in school with other kids, and he's playing with other kids. Does he seem to get along fine in those situations?

Dave: Well, the interaction today, of course, is the internet. Real interaction I don't think really exists, anymore, so that makes it tough.

Interviewer: So he's on the internet a lot?

Dave: Yeah, he's probably on way too much.

Interviewer: What kind of stuff does he do on the internet?

Dave: He does his Facebooking, Xbox Live, 90 percent of the time.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. And then see, so with Facebook and I guess Xbox Live, he's just always communicating with other people on the internet?

Dave: Right, and it's a hard challenge to [help] him to understand what's real and what's not real.

“It's a hard challenge to [help] him to understand what's real and what's not real.”

Dave admits that his son is on the internet “way too much” and he feels like the interactions his son has on Facebook and Xbox Live are not “real,” thus creating challenges for his son in understanding “what's real and what's not real.” Dave says his son mainly interacts online with strangers in far off places, not with friends from school or people he knows. He offered a couple of recent examples of the real and not real divide. In one case, someone with whom the son was

playing online via Xbox—some “guy” whom the son did not know—claimed to have “hacked into his system.” The son was “really upset and was convinced this guy had gotten in.” Dave assured his son that no one could hack into his accounts on Xbox, but the son was still very worried and upset. Dave suggested his

son was having a hard time figuring out what could actually happen via the system, “what's real and what's fake.” Dave concluded: “So I think that's the biggest challenge I have, even with the foster kids that come in. They don't seem to know the difference between the two. They take face value of anybody that comes up on the internet.”

The other example of this real vs. virtual issue Dave discussed was some teasing his son received at school (he talked about bullying, and a recent suicide at his son's school, but he did not think his son was being bullied). His son has a speech impediment and is occasionally teased at school. When asked how he handles this with his son, Dave says he can't just say “toughen up.”

Dave: I can't do that anymore. I mean sticks-and-stones-break-your-bones thing don't work with these kids. They take things so seriously, where I didn't take things very seriously.

Interviewer: And you think that's because?

Dave: I think it's that reality line. It has to be that reality line. They don't know the difference between the virtual—because they spend so much time in it, and I probably should limit it more, but I'm not here to limit it, and not all the time he can go out and play, but even if he goes out and plays, that's what they're doing.

Dave seems to think this is a big problem, and he thinks he “probably should limit it more,” but he seems resigned that there is not much he can do about it. He is not around enough (he’s a full-time student while working full-time) and even if he makes his son “go out and play,” he feels like that would not keep his son away from it.

Conclusion

Media technologies appear to create significant challenges for many parents; there is no inherited body of knowledge upon which they can draw. In colloquial language, there’s no app for that. Parents believe

that media technologies’ effects on children are not good—manners, treatment of others, stilted imaginations, relaxed norms, virtual realities—but they are not sure if they can control it. This seems to be the underlying concern: media technologies have unlimited access to the home environment. Many parents experience this access as a threat because it limits their own ability to control the home environment and create a moral space that is consistent with their own commitments. They lose control and a host of other influences gain instant and constant contact with their children. Parents realize their own power to construct and maintain plausibility structures for their children is significantly hindered, if not destroyed, by media technologies. This reduces the strength and legitimacy of parental influences and introduces a host of other influences that parents do not necessarily approve of. And, although parents attempt to find ways to monitor and control these influences, the general feeling is one of defeat. Parents, importantly, seem resigned to these changes and somewhat hopeless in the face of them. The extensive reach of media technologies limits parental influence, and parents feel their ability to impose limits on media technologies is beyond their reach.

3

FROM OBEDIENCE TO AUTONOMY? “THINKING FOR YOURSELF” AS THE INTERNALIZATION OF PARENTAL MORALITY

American parents want independent children. Parents have consistently expressed this for almost a century. The Middletown study showed a change in the most preferred qualities parents desire for their children, as compared to parents from earlier generations. Parents in Middletown in 1924 (especially middle-class parents) expressed discomfort with “strict obedience” and placed a higher value on qualities like independence, frankness, and tolerance. Parent-child relations, according to this research, changed remarkably during this period, with an increased emphasis on qualities linked to the autonomy of the child, from the earlier emphasis placed on obedience to institutional and adult authority. Since 1986 the General Social Survey has asked, “What is most important for a child to learn to prepare him or her for life?” Respondents have ranked “to think for him or herself” as their top priority by far for over 25 years (the other choices are to help others, to obey, to work hard, and to be well liked or popular). Sociologist Duane Alwin uses this and other data to demonstrate the steady decline of obedience as a desired quality for children in polling data through much of the twentieth century.³⁷ This body of research—from the 1920s to the present—demonstrates American parents firmly believe in the ideals of independence and autonomy, and they believe they need to pass on these ideals to their children, over and against obedience to authority. So the story, according to these studies, is “from obedience to autonomy.”

Psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell have recently used this “from obedience to autonomy” narrative in *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*. In a chapter entitled “Raising Royalty,” Twenge and Campbell cite this survey data as evidence “that we have become too indulgent, that we praise children too much, and that we treat our children almost like royalty.”³⁸ For them, the focus on autonomy has led

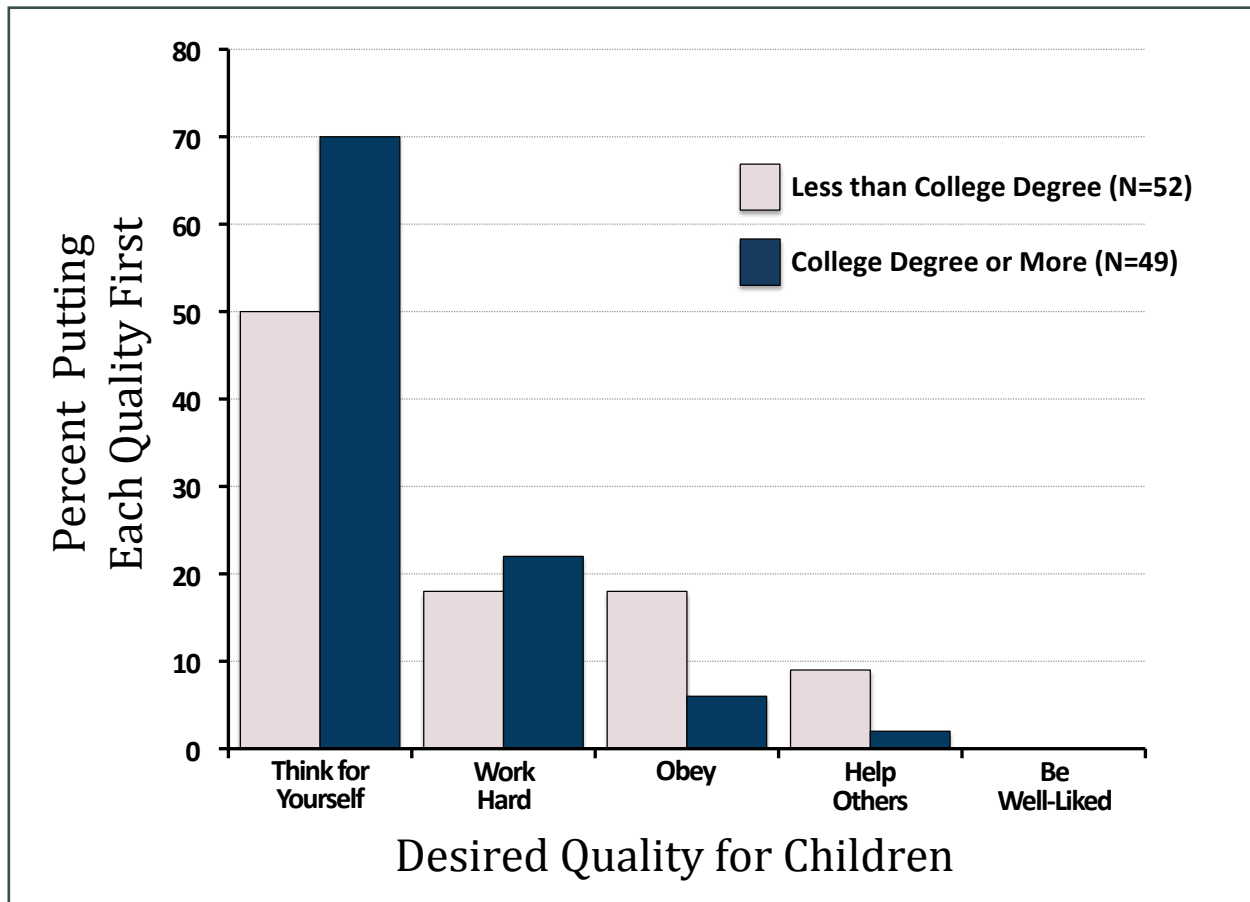
to an “epidemic” of spoiled children. Similarly, psychologist Dan Kindlon’s *Too Much of a Good Thing* argues that parents’ interest in autonomy has led them to be too indulgent with their children.³⁹ The idea in this popular literature is fairly simple: American parents now value independence and autonomy more than obedience, and this leads to entitled, self-centered children.

In our interviews, we asked the same question from the General Social Survey (respondents put five cards in order of preference). Our findings continue the trend: 60 percent of the interview sample put “thinking for yourself” as the most important quality children need to be prepared for life (another 20 percent rank it second). Only 10 percent list obedience first.

The majority of all parents in the interview sample, regardless of education level, rank “thinking for yourself” as the most desired quality for their children; it is, by far, the highest ranking choice for all parents. However, parents with a college degree or higher are more likely than less educated parents to rank “think for yourself” first (see Figure 5).⁴⁰

In other words, although the majority of all parents value thinking for yourself, a higher value of thinking for yourself is correlated with higher levels of education. Lower levels of education lead respondents to more frequently rank obedience and helping others as top-desired qualities in their children. This is consistent with a century of research on desired traits in children: in general, highly educated people value autonomy in their children more, and while people with lower levels of education still value autonomy, they tend to value obedience more than those with higher education levels. Autonomy, independence, and critical thinking are all (theoretically) valued and rewarded in educational structures, and those who

FIGURE 5 — Top Desired Quality for Their Children by Education.



have been successful in these structures desire the same qualities for success for their own children. However, when it comes to how parents understand “thinking for yourself”—what different parents mean by that phrase—the educational differences did not reveal consistent patterns.

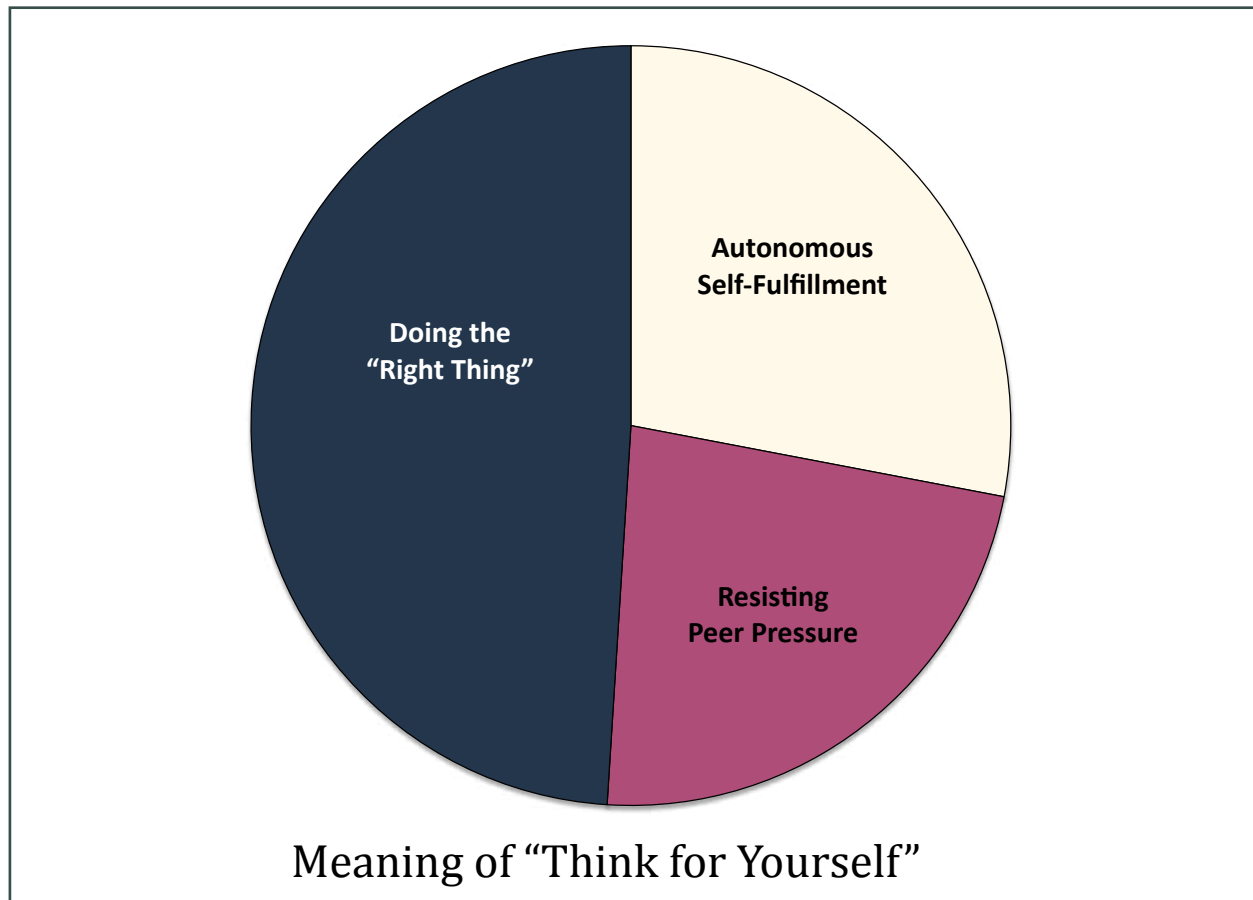
The remarkable trend is the pervasive appeal of “thinking for yourself” as a desired quality for children. The historical “obedience to autonomy” narrative argues that a massive shift took place in the last century away from understanding parents as authority figures (demanding obedience and imparting knowledge and behaviors) to a more child-centered parenting focus, where the goal is autonomous, independent free thinkers and the by-product is, at least according to the research cited above, entitled narcissists. Unlike past surveys, we were able to ask what, precisely,

“thinking for yourself” means to these parents in order to understand why it is valued so highly.

As we unpacked the “thinking for yourself” idea with parents, it is clear that many parents seem to support the obedience to autonomy narrative, or variants of it. For these parents (28 percent of the sample—see Figure 6⁴¹), the “think for yourself” ideal is an autonomous, fulfillment-seeking, “do-whatever-you-want” approach. They hold an ideal of American individualism understood as expressing yourself and being happy. The child-as-individual should be the arbiter of what this is and how to achieve it.

But many other parents seem to have a different understanding of “thinking for yourself.” These parents use more overtly moral language when discussing thinking for yourself: they talk about making “good

FIGURE 6 — Meaning of “Think for Yourself.”



decisions” or “bad choices” and for this group of parents, the child-as-individual is not the final arbiter of good and bad or right and wrong. To varying degrees, these parents, though not always articulate about it, have some sense of an external standard to which their children should conform. “Thinking for yourself” is how these parents express their desire for their children to make good choices and do what is right.

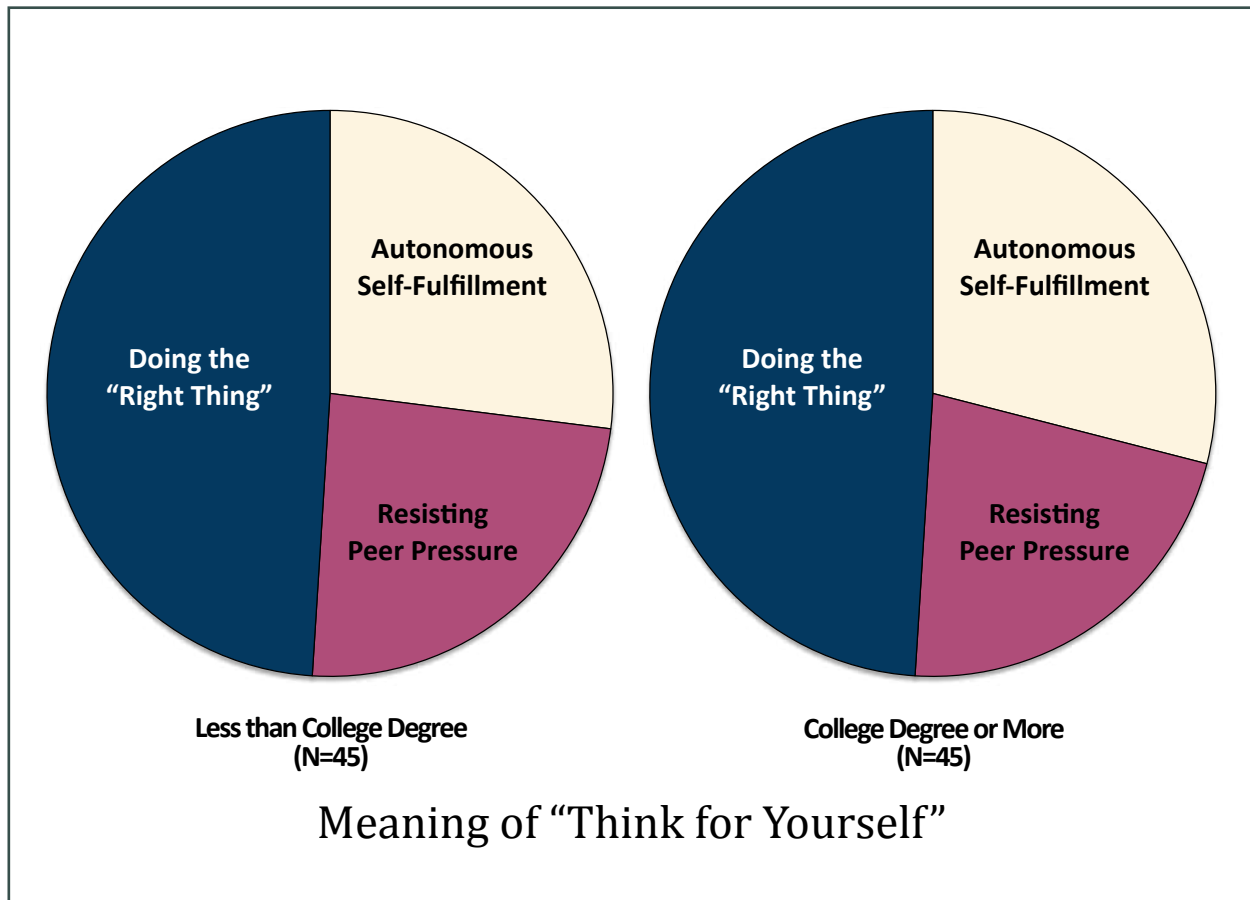
This larger group of parents (72 percent) falls into two related but slightly different categories. For one group (23 percent), “thinking for yourself” means resisting peer pressure, not following the herd, and not following certain things that parents judge to be negative influences. Although it is implicit in the resisting peer pressure view, many other parents (49 percent) make explicit the belief that thinking for yourself is a form of doing the right thing—the “right thing” as usually

determined by the parent. This general pattern is consistent across levels of education (see Figure 7). In this sense, “thinking for yourself,” for many parents, seems to suggest more of an internalization of parental morality than it does a conventional understanding of autonomy and independence. While parents highly value the thinking for yourself ideal, many articulate it as something closer to obedience than the historical narrative suggests.

Thinking for Yourself as Self-Fulfillment

A minority of parents support the narrative outlined above and express thinking for yourself as a component of self-fulfillment or a pursuit of happiness apart from dependence on anyone else. Caroline Staples, a married white mother of one who has a college degree

FIGURE 7 — Meaning of “Think for Yourself” by Education.



and works as a customer analyst for a large financial services firm, thinks it’s important to think for yourself “because I think to be successful you have to have a sense of yourself and figure out what makes you happy and be able to follow that. And I think that comes out of thinking for yourself.” For Caroline, having a “sense of yourself,” figuring out “what makes you happy,” and doing it are all part of thinking for yourself.

For Thomas Palmer, the businessman and father of three we met in chapter two, thinking for yourself is important because it’s “respected in the workplace.” But beyond success at the office, thinking for yourself represents a kind of independent thought that enables self-definition, or self-creation, to make things how you want them to be, independent from anyone else’s influence.

You don’t want to be dependent on anyone. The world’s a crazy place, so you have to be able to exist on your own. I think that’s it. That defines yourself. If you can think for yourself, you can define what you’re all about and how you want to be.

Thomas emphasizes defining the terms of your own life, without reference or dependence on others to define them for you. Angelina Gargula, a divorced Hispanic mother of four who does clerical work at a car dealership, says that thinking for yourself is “being their own person and [having] their own opinions, their own identity.” For her, this actually means minimizing her own influence as a parent: “They need to learn for themselves and not have me guiding them their whole life.”

Martin Kern, a married black father of an 11-year-old daughter and three other stepchildren, values thinking for yourself because it prevents dependence on others. Martin, who never finished college and works as a floor technician at a local university, wants his children to make “enough decisions on their own, so where they can think when they go out in the world, to think for themselves and not depend on somebody else.”

For Ginny Brendan, a married white stay-at-home mother with two younger children and no college degree, thinking for yourself is a form of resisting peer pressure (something that is very common and detailed below), but resisting for the sake of individual choice and self-interest. She wants her children to “make decisions for what they feel they need in their life.” To think for yourself is making choices not influenced by others, but based on the children’s own desires: “I think it’s important for them to be able to think for themselves and say, “This is what I want.”” For Ginny, if her children are thinking for themselves, they are following their own desires, wherever they might lead.

Mike Castana, who has a degree in oceanography but chose to be a fireman because of the “family ethos” of a fire department, also thinks that happiness comes from “carv[ing] your own path” in life. For Mike, a married white father of two boys, thinking for yourself is doing what you want to do, without being influenced by others:

I don't think you can be very happy in life if you don't sort of carve your own path, to some extent. I think if you're just sort of doing what you're told throughout life, you end up sort of not where you want to be. If you don't go where you want to go, how can you end up where you want to end up?

In order to instill this ideal in his children, Mike says, “They get a lot of choices—they get a tremendous amount of options.” This means that “if there’s ballet and jazz band and a math class and chess club, they get to decide which one they want to be in.” Importantly, Mike says he doesn’t “put a

lot of weight on it—I don’t try to influence their opinions.” For Mike, thinking for yourself is making decisions without the parents’ influence, a process Mike believes will lead to happiness.

Kelsey George, a white woman in her early twenties, recently got married before finishing college and now stays at home with a 1-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old stepson. Thinking for yourself is most important for Kelsey because she believes that is how kids will do “what’s right for them.” When she is asked about where that sense of “right for them” comes from, she replies: “Well, not necessarily what’s right, but like what works for them.” In Kelsey’s mind, thinking for yourself means finding what works for you and then doing it.

Lisa Spellings shares this general sentiment. Lisa is a white mother of two young children with a college degree who had a successful career in business consulting before choosing to stay home with her kids. She says she believes that thinking for yourself is making your own decisions: “I think the most interesting people are the ones that follow their own dreams and heart’s desires and whatever.” She says she would “love my children to be like that.” She goes on to explain that thinking for yourself is not conforming: “I don’t want them to conform to something they don’t want.”

For these parents, “thinking for yourself” is highly valued because they want their children to be independent, to pursue their own dreams, and to do what they want. In this sense, thinking for yourself does have an element of self-fulfillment. These parents are less interested in their children obeying them or in passing on a set of patterns, values, and behaviors that the parents have deemed important and necessary (at least not explicitly). For them, thinking for yourself is more about the kind of autonomy and freedom envisioned in the obedience to autonomy narrative.

While this perspective is clearly held by some parents, many parents have a different understanding of thinking for yourself.

“If you can think for yourself, you can define what you’re all about and how you want to be.”

Thinking for Yourself: “Don’t Follow the Herd”

For many other parents, thinking for yourself appeared to be more complicated than the fulfillment of the child’s desires. One father, Scott Mumford, a married white civil engineer with two young boys, felt like there were a number of interpretive possibilities: “Well this one ‘to think for himself or herself’ is that to mean ‘to think independently’ or ‘to think selfishly about their own needs?’ [Because] that’s a big difference [as to] where I put that then.” For him, if thinking for yourself means selfishly thinking about your own needs, he would rank it low on his list, but if it means thinking “independently,” he would rank it at the top. This independent thinking, for many parents, means resisting peer pressure and not following the herd.

When Patti Kendall, a white married former social worker who now stays home to assist two adopted special-needs children, explains what she means by thinking for yourself, she uses the sheep analogy: “I don’t want them to be sheep, you know. It’s like you don’t—just because everybody else is doing this doesn’t mean you have to.”

The sheep and herd images came up frequently as many parents explained thinking for yourself as resisting certain forms of peer pressure. Deborah Fleming, who teaches community college biology courses part time and has two young children, says it like this: “I just don’t want him to be, or either one of them to be kind of sheep or where they are just following along with the crowd.” She goes on to explain that she wants her children to “be able to reason through situations and see what the best solution is” and she says that “politics today” drives her thinking on this: “This is what the party believes, and it doesn’t seem like there’s a whole lot of room for—I felt it more when Bush was president because we are Democrats living in a very Republican state.” Deborah sees thinking for yourself as avoiding “groupthink” and not buying in to what everyone else says and does.

Many parents continued this theme of understanding thinking for yourself as resisting peer pressure. Larissa Walsh, a black single mother whom we met in chapter one, sees thinking for yourself as not being influenced to do the wrong thing:

[If they’re thinking for themselves,] then they won’t be influenced to do dumb stuff. I always tell...I tell my daughter right now, be a leader, not a follower, I don’t care what those kids do, those aren’t my kids. But you better be a leader, you don’t have a choice.

For Larissa, thinking for yourself is being a leader, not a follower, and that means avoiding “dumb stuff” that other kids might do.

Ginger Phillips has a high school degree and is a white mother of three boys whose family has suffered considerable financial hardship over the last few years. Her husband is unemployed and she works part-time at a senior center, delivering meals and providing home healthcare. Ginger sees thinking for yourself as making good decisions and not succumbing to peer pressures:

To think for himself. Again, you’re out there in the world. When you’re out there, you’re all by yourself and you need to make good decisions. You need to think for yourself and not do what the kid next to you is saying, “Come on, Nick. Come on, Nick.”

When Ginger’s sons are thinking for themselves, they are making “good decisions,” in her judgment, as opposed to listening to the influences of others. Although she’s in a very different context than Ginger, Janet Harris values thinking for yourself for similar reasons. Janet is a black divorced mother with a high school degree who lives in a large public housing complex in a large city. She is currently unemployed and has one teenage daughter still at home and three adult children who have moved out. For her, thinking for yourself is “knowing right from wrong” and making the right decisions when your peers are not:

If you know wrong from right, you a good person...If you think for yourself, if you know somebody going out here to rob somebody and they in your little clique, your little friends, I don’t care how they’re all jawing—you all come back. You think for yourself. If you know they going somewhere to break the law or going to try to double team some other girl, then you say okay, “I’ll see all you all later.” Don’t go with them. Think for yourself.

Stepping out independently from your peers is also how Chanelle Rogers articulates thinking for yourself. Chanelle is a recently married black mother of two young boys who is finishing her nursing degree. She wants her sons to “always be a leader, not a follower.” She then goes on to give a specific account of thinking for yourself as resisting peer pressures in school. One of her sons has done very well in school, and she wants that to continue as he gets older. She hopes he doesn’t start to think that being smart is unpopular:

You know all the other black boys and stuff that maybe get into a lot of trouble... You know other kids in general that just get into a lot of trouble when he got to dumb himself down in order to fit in with them. I don't want that to happen. I want him to know that he can still be smart and do the same thing that everybody else do. You don't have to be a certain way in order to hang with a certain group—the wrong group of people ain't people that you should hang with anyway. Be your own person.

“Be your own person,” for Chanelle, means resisting negative influences that might lead her sons into bad choices. Similarly, Teresa Clarke, whom we met in chapter two, knows that her teenage son is not thinking for himself when he is doing the wrong thing, or at least the wrong thing from her perspective.

I know that he's not thinking for himself because I always have to tell him, “Reggie, get off the phone and do your homework,” or “This is not talk-time now. It's not listen-to-the-music time now. It's time to focus on doing what you need to do” because not only that, they have chores to do around the house. They have to do that first as well.

For Teresa, her son is thinking for himself when he is doing the things that she thinks he should be doing. If he is not thinking for himself, in Teresa’s judgment, he is making poor decisions.

Many of these comments suggest that implicit in the “resisting peer pressure” explanation of thinking for

yourself is an assumption that children should be making good choices if they are thinking independently. To resist peer pressure, for these parents, means their children avoid bad choices; peer influence is negative and misguided and leads children to do the wrong thing. For these parents, thinking for yourself carries an assumption, though often implicit, of doing the right thing based on some standard beyond the child’s desires.

“If you know they going somewhere to break the law or going to try to double team some other girl, then you say okay, ‘I’ll see all you all later.’ Don’t go with them. Think for yourself.”

Thinking for Yourself and Doing the “Right Thing”

Many parents value thinking for yourself and go one step further than resisting peer pressure, explicitly articulating it as doing the right thing. Parents, of course, usually determine “good choices” and the “right thing.” These parents see their own influence—their own values, beliefs, and moral perspectives—as important to pass on to their children, yet they still highly value “thinking for yourself.” For them, to think for yourself is to do the right thing, and the right thing is whatever the parents have taught the child.

Mariah Payne is a single black mother of two sons, one in college and another who is in third grade. She has worked for almost 20 years as a nurse at the children’s hospital in her city. Like many of the parents above, Mariah explains thinking for yourself as not following the crowd, but she adds that it is about weighing whether something is right or wrong:

Well, I want them to be independent thinkers. I don't want them to be following behind the crowd or because somebody says it's okay for me to do it that you do it. I want you to think for yourself. You think about whether it's right or wrong.

Mariah explains that her kids acquire a sense of right and wrong from “my teachings.” If her children are thinking for themselves, they have appropriated a moral framework from their mother and used it to be “independent thinkers” in specific situations.

Mary Stevenson explains thinking for yourself as making decisions based on the values she and her husband have taught their children. Mary is a white married mother of two boys; she works full-time in the offices of the Catholic archdiocese in her city. Her husband homeschools their children and works as a massage therapist on evenings and weekends. Mary says:

To me, teaching my child to think for himself is trying to get him to be able to approach a situation, to process what's going on, and to make a decision based on values that we have taught him. As opposed to responding to peer pressure and saying, "Even though I know that's wrong, I'm going to do it anyway because I don't want to be laughed at, or I don't want to be teased, or I don't want to be whatever."

Mary values thinking for yourself, and in her mind, it means that her children will make the right decisions based on what she and her husband have taught them.

Alea Dunbar, whom we met in chapter one, has six children and recently moved from Michigan to the Southwest in search of a better life. When Alea explains how she understands "thinking for yourself," she says:

Just because somebody else is doing something doesn't mean, "Oh, I'm gonna just follow this person." No, think for yourself. At least come back home. Think and say, "Let me go back home and ask my mom if it's okay," you know.

In her mind, if her son thinks for himself, he recognizes poor decisions and comes home to seek his mother's advice and permission. Thinking for himself should lead him "back home" to be influenced by his mother.

Heather Muck, whom we met in chapter one, juxtaposes "to think for him or herself" against blind obedience. If her children think for themselves, they know "it's okay to not obey" if it's not something they should do. Then she goes on to define "what they should do" as following the guidance of the Bible. So thinking for yourself is obeying the Bible, not

"blindly obeying" those who would have them do wrong things:

Heather: I don't want them to just obey blindly. I want them to know the reasons, and if it's not something they should do, to not obey. To know that it's okay to not obey. That's why I put that first.

Interviewer: How do they know what they should do?

Heather: Based off of what we have taught them and what the Bible says because hopefully, our goal is if we're teaching them right from wrong and they know what the Bible says is right from wrong, then they can figure out for themselves whether something is right or wrong and then if it's the right thing to do, then they need "to obey."

For Heather, thinking for yourself is making good judgments about right and wrong and basing those good judgments on the Bible. She appropriates the language of thinking for yourself into her understanding of following the guidance and moral paths of her religious faith.

"To me, teaching my child to think for himself is trying to get him to be able to approach a situation, to process what's going on, and to make a decision based on values that we have taught him."

Abby Tyndale, whom we met in chapter one, left a career in the music industry to stay home. Abby explains thinking for yourself like this: "To me that means, don't do the status quo because it's the status quo. Do what you think is right. You know, don't just follow orders blindly."

As Abby explains more about what is "right," she points out that she and her husband are not religious, so they "don't rely on anyone else for faith or morals." Instead, they have their "own moral code." She and her husband, now in their forties, were the first generation to grow up with "Sesame Street and PBS" television, and Abby explains their moral code as "very PBS":

It's that we're very accepting of everybody and decisions they want to make. Just don't—I don't care what you do—I don't care what you

do in your sex life, as long as you're not hurting kids or animals, I do not care.

If Abby's daughter is thinking for herself, she will not just do the status quo because it is the status quo; rather, she will "do what you think is right." For Abby, a sense of what is right will come from the Sesame Street or PBS morality code. Abby says that the balance between doing what is right and following the crowd is a challenge for her daughter: "I think it's hard for her because she wants to follow the crowd." When asked if she has seen this pressure yet, Abby says that her daughter feels it with clothing issues.

There was like somebody's dad totally caved and took her to Juicy Couture, I think it is—I don't know. It's kind of risqué for young, like tween clothes. Like it's a mall store, and she's like, "Mommy, can I have cute clothes?" I was like, "Well, you know." We talked about it, and I said, "You know what, I don't—you should never be ashamed of your body," and we use real anatomical words, which was another thing. But you know, I said, "But I think that, you know, it's best to cover up. You don't want to just show everybody everything." And she was like, "You know, you're right, Mommy." She needs to protect herself. It's not a good idea to, you know, wear a crop top.

In this instance, in Abby's mind, thinking for yourself means doing what's right, and that means her 7-year-old maintaining a degree of modesty. Abby's "moral code" gets passed on to her daughter in this way and is a part of her daughter learning to think for herself.

Aaron Asch is the father we met in chapter two who works in procurement for a pharmaceutical company. For him, thinking for yourself is resisting peer pressure and having the "intestinal fortitude" to say no to something you should not do:

To me it means to have critical analysis of situations, like you're in a situation with a peer group, and they're doing something, and you think, "Do I want to do this? Is it the right thing to do? Do I have the intestinal fortitude to say no?"... You should be able to think for

yourself and say, "Okay, there's a reason why I think this is wrong, or actually I think this is not right." If it's right or wrong, they definitely shouldn't do wrong.

When Aaron was asked about the basis for the right and wrong judgments he wants his children to make, he says, "Well, I think again that falls onto that belief that you instilled in your children." The beliefs and values that he instills in his children become the criteria for thinking for yourself and doing the right thing.

Florette Thompson, the nurse's aide whom we met in chapter one, explains "thinking for yourself" as knowing the difference between right and wrong:

Well, she needs to know right from wrong. As long as you know right from wrong—I'm not gonna say you're not gonna make a mistake—but you know, you know what you're getting into... And if you choose to make that wrong decision, then that's on you, but you know right from wrong.

When asked how her children learn right from wrong, Florette gives a list of authorities: "She learned it from me, she learned it from her aunts, she learned it from church, I mean, read the Bible, the Bible tell you right from wrong." Florette explains that she knows her older daughter is thinking for herself because she is now "in college, hasn't gotten into any problems, doesn't have a child." In other words, Florette sees evidence of her daughter thinking for herself because she is following what Florette, and other adult authority figures, perceive to be a straight and narrow path. For her younger son, thinking for himself would mean he's "going to school to learn... not going there to clown" and "give respect, yes ma'am, no ma'am, yes sir, no sir." She wants her children to think for themselves, and if they are doing this, it appears they will be obedient children.

Suzanne Coleman is a married white mother of two young children. She works evenings at a call center and her husband is in law school full-time. She explains why thinking for yourself is important:

I want them to be independent and I want them to be able to be individual thinkers. I

don't want them to just go with whatever is the most popular thing, 'cause a lot of times that's usually not the right direction anyway.

In order to help her kids think for themselves and go in the “right direction,” Suzanne uses role-playing games:

We're putting her in role-plays and saying, "Okay, what's a better choice here? You know you're always going to have a choice, so are you going to choose to do it this way or this way or this way? You've got to figure out what's the right thing to do."

Suzanne thinks that these role-playing exercises will help her children think for themselves and “figure out what's the right thing to do” in a given situation.

Bill Denton, a white father of two with a high school degree who works minimal hours as an on-call, expedited freight truck driver, explains that thinking for yourself is his top priority, but he clarifies that he's not against obeying: “now I'm not talking in an aspect of not obeying authority, that's why I had to really think hard about obeying.” In his mind, independent thinking is not contrary to obeying. Bill wants his children “think for themselves, do what's right” and that means that they come to him with questions or problems, rather than being “swayed and led by other people”:

And if that means they have to give up certain things or being in this group or that group, then so be it. They'll be a better person for it down the road. But I want them to be able to be independent thinkers, not be swayed by that age group.

Sally Brink is a white mother of three teenagers who works as a housekeeper in a local motel. For her, thinking for yourself means “you don't do something just because somebody else does it. You think and you do what's best and what's right.” When she was asked how her children know “what's best and what's right,” she says: “I guess it's the morals and values that they've got from us. You know, how we raised them.”

Riley Stampson, a married white mother of four (only one is still at home) with no college degree, works as a freelance court reporter. She sees thinking for yourself as resisting the “culture” that “has it wrong” and the

“TV and stuff that goes on at school,” so you have to “think for yourself.” She tries to teach this thinking for yourself by talking to her children as much as possible. She says, “You talk about a lot of things,” so that they know how to resist the negative influences of the “culture.” For Riley, thinking for yourself is about submitting to her guidance rather than the influences of others.

Paul Lukes is a married black father of an 11-year-old son; he does not have a college degree and works as an appointment scheduler in a physician's office. Paul says that if his son “thinks for himself, he's going to realize that from the values we taught him that this certain thing isn't the right thing to do.” He mentions teaching his son “the way he should be taught biblically that ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto yourself.’” Clearly for Paul, his son thinking for himself is closely tied to doing what his parents think is best for him. Paul gives an example of wanting his son to be more active this summer, so they gave him several choices (soccer, basketball, or baseball): “So it gives him the idea that he is thinking for himself by choosing one of those where he's actually doing what we want him to do by getting him out.”

Gabriel Trulio, a Hispanic father we met in chapter one, doesn't use the term “doing the right” thing, but for him, thinking for yourself sounds a lot like integrity:

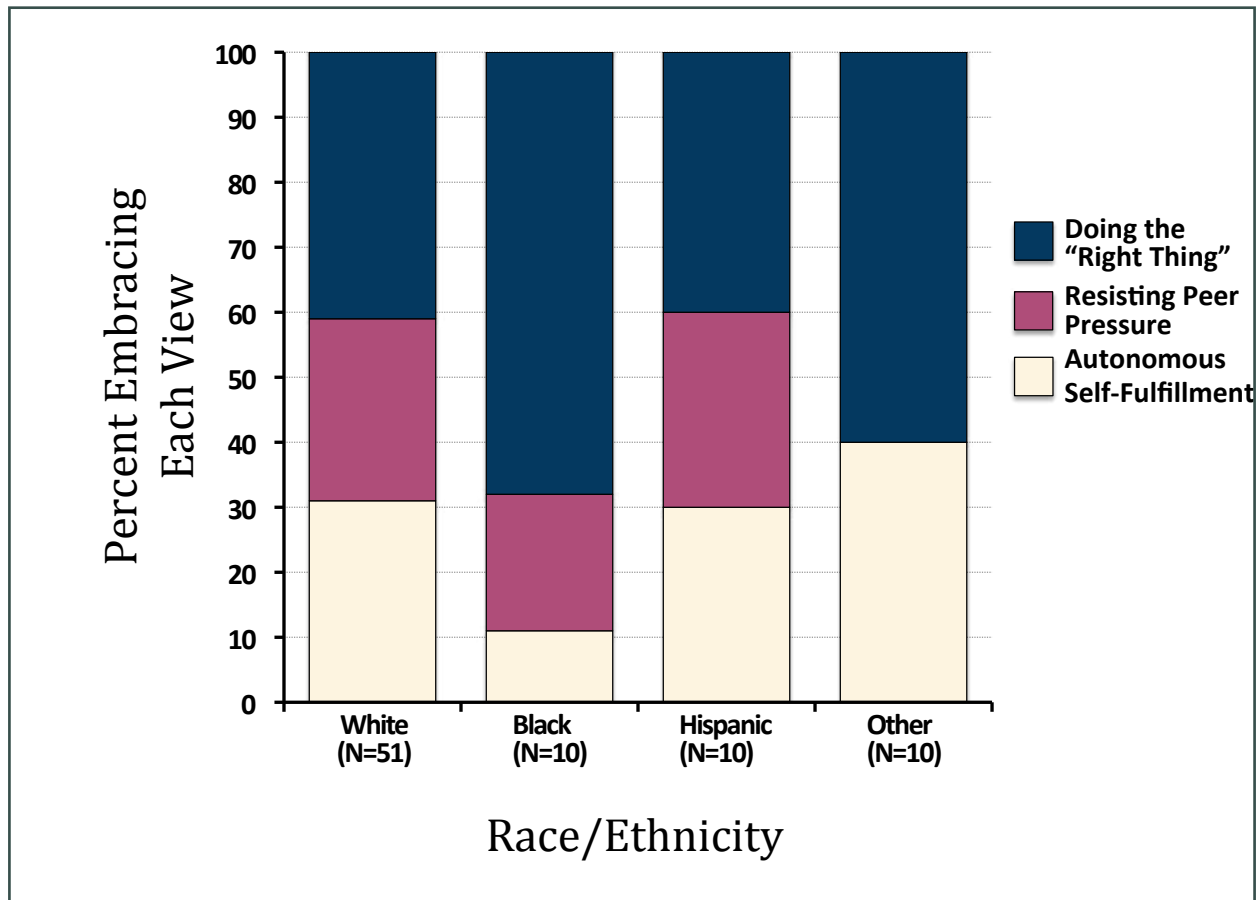
You know who you are and to know what you believe and the principles that you have and, and you know you have the power just to analyze that and to, to experience that and just not to change or morph because of what other people think or what other situations comes to your life.

For Gabriel, “knowing what you believe and the principles that you have” come from your family:

First [they come] from their house, what they have seen in us as parents and the way we have conducted our lives here in the house and that we, you know if we are real and know what we say, I think the kids can see it.

It is worth noting that a majority of black and “Other” (including Asian and multi-ethnic) minority parents,

FIGURE 8 — Meaning of “Think for Yourself” by Race/Ethnicity.



as well as a majority of highly religious parents, articulate thinking for yourself in this way (see Figures 8 and 9). For these parents, “thinking for yourself” is not a narcissistic quest for fulfillment; in fact, they suggest it is the opposite. At least as valued and articulated by these parents, thinking for yourself is about *not* doing things the parents judge to be wrong, and it is about *doing* things the parents judge to be right. Within this framework, thinking for yourself sounds a lot like obedience and conformity.

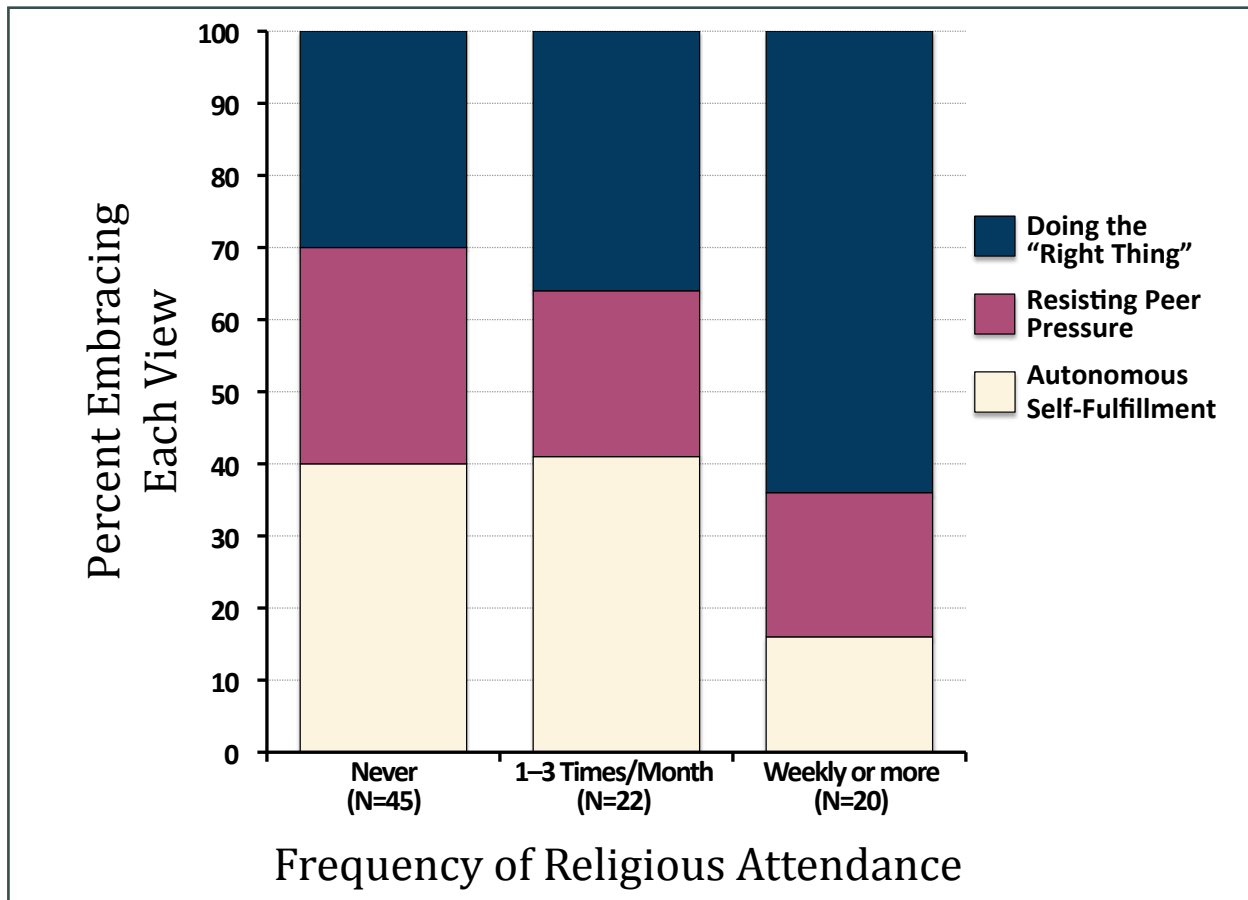
Conclusion

American parents clearly hold to an ideal of autonomy: they want to raise children who are independent and who think for themselves. But several scholars have suggested that this ideal may

be more myth than reality. The sociologist Markella Rutherford argues that parents desire autonomy and freedom, but give their children “independence” in meaningless tasks like what to eat or what clothes to wear. They are constantly controlling and supervising most activities, so children have very little freedom in anything of substance.⁴² Anthropologists Elinor Ochs and Carolina Izquierdo show that as compared to children raised in Peru and Samoa, American children are much less responsible and independent, especially when it comes to household tasks.⁴³ This research suggests that American parents hold cultural ideals of independence and autonomy, yet utilize practices that promote dependency.

These interviews suggest that the ideal of autonomy that most parents hold may not actually be autonomy,

FIGURE 9 — Meaning of “Think for Yourself” by Religious Attendance.



at least not as conventionally understood in the American context. Parents seem compelled to prioritize “thinking for yourself.” They naturally look to this language to capture their desired qualities, and they believe that this skill, or character trait, will help their children navigate an uncertain world. Yet many parents articulate thinking for yourself in moral language of right and wrong and even as internalizing parental moral frameworks. Parents do not appear to want children who are independent of the parent’s own moral system, autonomous from the parent’s sense of right and wrong. They *want* their children to do the right thing, which, presumably, is not narcissistic self-indulgence. Parents seem to have a moral sense that is reflected in the way they talk about desired qualities for their children, and they want their children to grasp this moral sense. They want to impart specific knowledge and behavior that their children will

follow. Some might call that obedience or even conformity. Yet parents feel compelled to use the language of autonomy that connotes, at least in the popular imagination, a kind of expressive individualism, distancing themselves from the language of obedience and authority. This is a symptom of their ambivalence and discomfort with moral authority. Parents value a kind of cultural myth of individualism deeply rooted in a modern American view of the world, but they still want their children to know right from wrong and to internalize the parents’ own morality.

4

FROM DISCIPLINE TO INFLUENCE? THE RISE OF COMMUNICATION AND INTIMACY

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the United States shifted from an agrarian society to a more industrial one, the perception of the child and the child's role in society was radically transformed. Historically, children were important contributors to the household economy, performing essential tasks around the farm. During the industrial era, children initially worked in factories, which allowed them to contribute to the family income in a way analogous to their economic contribution on the family farm. However, an onslaught of child-labor laws eventually limited children's ability to work and by the 1930s "economic participation of children had dwindled dramatically."⁴⁴ Proponents of child labor laws argued that "true parental love could only exist if the child was defined exclusively as an object of sentimentality and not as an agent of production."⁴⁵ This notion, buttressed by the need for a new role for children, caught on and, consequently, as children decreased in economic value, they increased in sentimental value, which gave rise to notions of the "priceless" and "vulnerable" child.⁴⁶ Children, therefore, moved from being economic assets to being emotional assets.

As families lost their primary economic responsibilities, they acquired new burdens and expectations, as historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg observed: "the middle-class family was assigned primary responsibility for fulfilling the emotional and psychological needs of its members."⁴⁷ Mintz and Kellogg argue that this need for emotional fulfillment extends to various aspects of family life, including the parent-child relationship. They note that, as the child took on more and more sentimental value, child psychology developed to reflect and reinforce these changes. Psychologists began to place a greater emphasis on "theories of psychological development, which stressed the gradual unfolding of a child's personality" and argued that the child should "be seen as an active and feeling individual in need of respect

and love as well as discipline." This resulted in a distinct change in childrearing, as strict discipline gave way to "a more humanistic and empathetic approach."⁴⁸ As the child became "priceless," the child-parent relationship took on a new shape and, ultimately, had less to do with the authority of the parent than the sentimental worth of the child and the development of the child's personality.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the sentimental value of the child has continued to grow significantly. Although we did not ask specifically about emotional closeness in the interviews, parents discussed communication and intimacy frequently, more than any other topic not asked about directly. Clearly, parents place a high degree of value and importance on communicating and developing a close relationship with their children, generally evidenced by the parents' desire to talk openly and frequently with their children and by their expression of love and affection toward their children.⁴⁹ This is most often contrasted with their own parents, who they say were less communicative and did not value close relationships nearly as much. Parents want to move beyond a regime of discipline that they see as distant and uncommunicative. They think closer, more open, and intimate relationships are a better alternative than the strict or authoritarian arrangements of their parents.

James Donner's approach to communication is fairly typical. He works at Wal-Mart and is a married black father of three sons (two were born when James was in high school and do not live with him). He joined the Navy out of high school, turning down a Division I college basketball scholarship because he had to provide for his two children at the time. James says the hardest part of raising kids is "teaching them right from wrong," and he says he does this differently than his parents did:

It's, it's more, instead of whipping, more talking. Sitting down with him, talking with him about a lot of stuff that he doing, stuff like that you know...when I grew up and messed up you got disciplined, you don't get disciplined [now].

He says that with his own son, he'd "rather sit down and talk with him than raise my voice with him." James thinks that when they sit down and talk "man to man," his son "respect[s] that more" and they "can communicate better about it." Instead of "whipping" and yelling, James chooses to talk with his son about right and wrong, seeking to exert his influence by communicating and maintaining a close relationship:

We talk to him a lot about a lot of stuff going on. 'Cause this town's so small, a lot of kids get into trouble now so we talk to him about choosing the right friends and stuff like that, that get into the wrong crowd and you get into trouble too...[we] talk about everything. Drugs, sex, like I say, choosing the right people to hang with, stuff like that.

When James contrasts his own parenting style to that of his parents, he sees the communication he shares with his son as an alternative to the harsher forms of discipline he experienced as a child. This is, in part, about respect—gaining the respect of his son and, presumably, demonstrating respect for his son. He realizes that instilling moral frameworks into his child is not an easy task, but he believes his more communicative approach is a better alternative.

Why this is a better alternative is a little less clear. Parents are a bit less articulate about this. It is clear that they experience strong cultural norms that create a dominant set of expectations: they feel like they are *supposed* to communicate and be intimate with their kids. This cultural expectation makes perfect sense given the historical literature cited above—the construction of "childhood" as a domain of innocence and vulnerability; industrial and post-industrial economic changes; children as priceless, vulnerable, emotional assets; and the general rise of more therapeutic relationships. And clearly parents gain emotional gratification from children (see below). But, as James's comments suggest, it is also the case that parents value communication and intimacy for other reasons. They see their role as teaching moral

standards, instilling values, and directing and forming children—but rather than the disciplinary practices of their own parents, parents in this study believe close relationships may be the means towards these ends. They do not appear, however, to have a language to talk about this or an inherited sense of how to do this and why it matters. Communication and intimacy, which are usually contrasted with stricter forms of discipline, appear to be a softer means of accomplishing the same desired ends.⁵⁰

The Obligation for Communication and Intimacy

Parents feel pressure and obligation from strong social norms to be close to their children and to communicate with them, and they feel guilty if they do not do it well. Most parents, however, are not exactly sure why. They feel it is very important and better than the alternative, but they cannot articulate how, or even if, their children benefit in some way.

Paul Davey, a white father in his mid-thirties, received a medical discharge from the Army after being wounded in training. He is now taking college classes and is the primary caregiver for his three children; his wife works a night shift at the local Costco. He stresses the importance of communicating with his children, especially because he feels that "both my parents didn't talk to me enough about things." On the one hand, Paul is relatively articulate about why he thinks this is important, suggesting that it reflects a certain degree of respect he has for his children:

If I try to explain things to them so that they understand that I'm trying to show them the respect that—"Look, you guys are not grown-ups, but you're not complete imbeciles, you should be able to understand what I'm telling you and this is why I'm telling it to you." I just—again—it's a sign of respect. I never understood why my dad would just yell and scream at me that I had to go do something.

In this sense, he suggests that his communication with his children shows respect for them that his father's style did not. But, as Paul continues to explain the value he places on communication, he also acknowledges a strong cultural norm suggesting, "you're just

supposed to do it.” He says, “I feel it’s important; communication is important, that’s what everybody stresses. That’s what Oprah, the psychologists, and everyone else says, ‘Communication is important.’” Paul experiences expectations for close, communicative relationships with his children, and at least part of that expectation comes from “Oprah” and “psychologists”—a network of experts that offer guidelines to parents.

Many parents express this idea that communication is important; it’s what you’re supposed to do with your kids.

Felicia Pringle is a black single mother in her twenties with two young children who works part-time in the food services. She feels like her relationship with her own mother lacked any real communication, and she wants her own children to be able to come to talk to her:

With my mom, she was really never around, so, you know, we didn’t communicate a lot and we didn’t have a bond, so what I would do differently is, you know, is talk to my children, be close with them, build up a mother-child relationship with them.

Felicia is very happy that her children do come to talk to her frequently. When asked why that was important to her, and if she thinks her kids will benefit from this communication in a way that she did not, she responds:

I think it will benefit them a lot. I think it will show them that...communication’s the key, right? In order for people to understand, you have to communicate, so, that’s it.

Felicia believes “communication is the key,” but she’s not exactly sure why this is the case.

Steve Caldwell is a married, white father of three in his late thirties who owns a lawn mowing company. When he reflects on his relationship with his own parents, he says they were not close: “I guess there wasn’t

a lot of closeness there, a lot of—I wouldn’t even—I don’t know, love maybe.” Steve describes his own relationship with his kids similarly, saying there’s not a lot of “closeness, like I’m not a huggy-touchy, you know, I-don’t-tell-them-I-love-them-as-much-as-I-should-type person.” He goes on to say, “We’re not close like we should be.” Steve feels some imperative to be close and feels like he doesn’t quite measure up on this front. There are other parents that “are a lot closer with their children than I am with mine, like hugging them all the time and kissing them.” Steve can’t say exactly why he thinks he should do this more:

I just think it’s probably good for them. Like I said, when I was young, it wasn’t like that type of relationship with my parents, but I just think it probably makes them feel loved, I guess would be my thing.

Steve thinks his kids might feel more loved if he were closer to them, showing his affection and communicating more. He does not necessarily feel like he missed out as a child, but he does think it might be better if he were closer to his own kids.

Dana DiTrillio is the mother of pre-teen twins whom we met in chapter two. Like Steve, she feels like she should be closer to her kids so that she can communicate with them more. Her own parents did not communicate with her very much, and she wishes she would be able to do it more with her children: “that’s one definite thing I totally lack and need to do better.” Dana realizes her twins, who are 12 years old, are at an age where she should be discussing the issue of sex, but she can’t seem to do it:

It would be so much better for all of us if we talked more about it. I do think of that often. I think consciously, how can I get myself more comfortable with open communication? That’s a big weakness for me.

When asked about why she feels like it’s a weakness, or what would improve if the lines of communication were more open, Dana is not quite sure:

“I feel it’s important; communication is important, that’s what everybody stresses. That’s what Oprah, the psychologists, and everyone else says, ‘Communication is important.’”

I just feel like common knowledge. I do read a lot. Common knowledge and conventional wisdom is talk to your kids and be open. I don't know what they get out of it because I didn't have that and I feel like I did okay (laughter), but I know people say you should talk freely. I'm sure that's a good idea, but I don't know what you get out of it. What do you get out of it? I don't know. It's a great question. I don't know. What do you think?

Common knowledge and conventional wisdom suggest you should be open with your kids; Dana feels this strongly enough to be guilty about not communicating. When she was asked if she would do anything differently with her children if she could start all over again, she quickly states she would “solve this communication issue: That’s one thing I would have remedied. I would have opened the line of communication earlier.” She even feels like maybe she should have had “therapy or something for someone to tell me how I can get comfortable talking to my kids more.”

Cynthia Schwartz is the mother of two older teenagers we met in chapter two. Like Dana, her own parents were not communicative with her as a child: “there just wasn’t a whole lot of discussion in my house; you didn’t talk about things.” Cynthia says she’s “made an effort to keep channels open with my kids and just talk about things in the open, life, and other people if that’s important and how I’m feeling.” She never knew how her parents were feeling or what they thought about things. When asked about how her less communicative relationship with her parents affected her, Cynthia says:

I guess it made them, somewhat more distant. I think...I don't know...did it affect my relationship with them? Maybe not, I don't know, maybe not directly, but certainly affected the way I interacted with people. I wasn't sure what was okay to talk about and what wasn't. I don't know...I just wanted a more open—a more open relationship with my kids.

“I know people say you should talk freely. I’m sure that’s a good idea, but I don’t know what you get out of it. What do you get out of it?”

Cynthia thinks her closed relationship with her parents affected how she interacted with other people, though she is not quite sure. She can’t say why exactly, but she knows she wants a more open relationship for her own children.

Angelina Gargula, whom we met in chapter three, is a Hispanic single mother of four in her thirties who does clerical work at a car dealership. She had her first child—now 19—when she was a teenager and expresses regret that she did “not pay so much attention” to him, mostly leaving his grandmother to raise him. She regrets that she does not have a close relationship with him. She

says she tries harder with her other children now “cause I know my shortcomings or my mistakes.” When asked what she does differently now than she did with her older child, Angelina says: “I’m just there more. That’s the biggest thing. You just have to be there for them and not be out and gone and doing your own thing.” She knows that to “be there” for her kids will create the intimacy she lacks with her oldest child.

For these respondents, the obligation to have a close and intimate relationship with their children is a central factor in being a good parent.

Intimacy Offers Emotional Rewards for Parents

As noted above, parents place a high value on communication and intimacy with their children, even if they are not exactly sure what its benefits are. But parents themselves seem to gain emotional rewards and enhanced self-esteem from communication and intimacy with their children. When parents were asked what the best thing about having children was, many of them discuss the intimacy they have with their children as the most rewarding.

Jonathan Snelling, the nurse with four kids and one on the way whom we met in chapter two, says the joy, intimacy, and affection his children show him is the greatest part of parenthood:

I think one of the best things that comes to mind when I think of that question is the joy that they bring. I wouldn't have known this or be able to articulate until it happens, but coming home from work and having your children run up to you with arms open wide and say, "Daddy's home!" There's just something about that that's joyful.

Because he feels very close to his children, Jonathan says that "receiving that kind of love and affection unrequested, unrehearsed, un-demanded is very much a joy."

Single mothers especially express this sentiment. Felicia Pringle, the single mother who works in food services, says that the best thing about having children is "them coming to you for certain things, and the love that they give." She explains that her daughter writes her a lot of notes that say, "I love you Mommy" and puts them under her door. Felicia appreciates these gestures of intimacy:

Especially when they carry the little pictures and notes that they write and leave for you, 'cause my kids, they're really sentimental. It really makes me proud because I know that my kids, they love me and they care about me and I'm important to them.

Angelina Gargula says that her children are her "soul mates." She explains that she has a boyfriend, but he does not live with her, which is a conscious decision on her part. She wants to "live just with [my kids] because I have to concentrate on them." She says that she doesn't really have a mate, and her kids serve that role for her: "They're like my soul mates, I guess, my friends in some ways instead of family, so I think that's the best thing." The relationship she has with her children fulfills and substitutes for a relationship with an intimate partner.

Martha Jenkins is a white single mother in her twenties who works part-time for an early childhood learning center. She has two young children with different fathers and is in school full-time while working.

When asked about the best thing about having kids, she simply says, "Everything":

Their unconditional love and you can have a really crappy day and come home and they don't even know it and just give you a big hug and it melts your heart and makes everything better."

Clearly parents gain emotional rewards from close relationships with their children.

Communication as a Tool for Influence and Formation

Jonathan Snelling, the nurse, expresses the importance of communication and close relationship with his children in terms of opening up lines of influence. He seeks to develop close relationships with each of his kids:

[We're] trying to foster, especially as they grow into between teenage years, being—having the desire that they would turn to us if they had questions or concerns. Getting to know them too. Realizing they have a personality that's going to form apart from what we do or teach because they're their own people, and so they're going to make choices. Not that they are already knowable because they're still formulating that, and we can very much influence that, but growing to know them. Not be friends with our kids because I don't think that's the right parent-child relationship.

"It really makes me proud because I know that my kids, they love me and they care about me and I'm important to them."

Jonathan wants to get to know his kids because they are each forming a personality "apart from what we do or teach," but he also believes that he can influence his children's choices if he has a close relationship with them. He's careful to point out that he wants to be close and communicate with his kids, but not to "be friends" with them.

Teresa Clarke, the married former teacher with two teenagers whom we met in chapter two, offers several examples of how close relationships and open lines of communication can lead to this kind of influence. She has a "fantastic relationship" with her two children,

but she also realizes that they may “loathe me sometimes” because she is the parent and the disciplinarian in the house. Teresa explains that a “young lady was coming to school high” on drugs and she took the opportunity to talk to her son about it because “I don’t want [him] ever to use.” When asked what approach she took with him to discuss it, she says:

An open [approach]. “Is that something you’re interested in?” If it’s yes, “Why?” If it’s no, “Why?” It’s always why? Whether it’s, “Yes, good. Ooh, no hoo-hah. Why? Why are you interested in it? Would you like more information about it? Can we do some research on the goods and the bads of it?” That’s what we do.

She says that she does this a lot. When her son asked her, “Ma, can you get AIDS from kissing?” she did some “research” with him on it.

“Let’s find some research. Let’s look at what happens when we have sex unprotected” because it’s not my choice whether he is going to have sex. The pressure one day is he’s going to get up and he’s going to have some sex. “I want you to be well informed the day that you choose to have sex.” Of course, he didn’t want to talk about sex with his mother, but he hates when I pull out the pictures of gonorrhoea, syphilis, and herpes, and we go down a list of what’s curable and what’s not. He doesn’t like that, but he listens...

Teresa says that she has these kinds of discussions with her children because she thinks that “they won’t have to so much lean toward their friends for advice.” She wants the lines of communication open so that her children will come to her with these questions.

Felicia Pringle, the single mother who works part-time in food services, hopes that her daughter will continue to talk to her, especially as she reaches the teenage years: “I hope she can, you know, come to me and talk to me about certain things, like boys and stuff like that.” Felicia was pregnant at 14 and had two children before she turned 18; she hopes her daughter will avoid the decisions that led to that outcome:

I didn’t go to my mom about that stuff and I want [my daughter] to come to me and talk to me. Had I been able to, probably, I’m not

going to say that I wouldn’t have you know, had children. You’re gonna do what you want to do, but I think that would help me.

Although she realizes nothing is certain, Felicia thinks that if she talks to her daughter and has a closer relationship than she did to her own mother, her daughter may be better off. Felicia says she wouldn’t trade her kids for anything, but the pressures and strains of being a teenage mother are not something she wishes on her daughter. She thinks communication might be helpful in guiding her daughter in a different direction.

Caroline Staples, whom we met in chapter three, works as a customer analyst for a large financial services firm. Caroline’s son is only five years old, but she thinks he is “lucky because he has two older parents who give him a lot of attention and we talk to him all the time.” This constant attention and communication is a way for Caroline to guide and direct her son’s choices. When asked whether parents decide what’s best for kids or if kids can decide on their own, she responds:

I think parents have to have input into that because I think part of growing up is figuring out things and you need to have some guidance because some choices that are the right choices are not necessarily the easy choices. It’s a lot easier to some extent, short-term, to not go to school, and not do your homework, and not work, but it’s not going to do you any good long-term.

For Caroline, this input into her son’s long-term good takes the form of directing him towards going to college. She graduated from an elite New England liberal arts college, and college is “absolutely” an expectation for her 5-year-old son. She says she takes him to visit her niece who is attending a nearby Ivy League school, and when Caroline is on campus with her son, she says to him, “Well, you could go to school here.” For her, frequent communication and attention is a way to guide him toward the “right choices,” like going to a good college.

Claudia Baez is a married Hispanic mother in her mid-thirties with 6 children from the ages of 2 to 19. Claudia used to be a caseworker for a county child

services agency but now stays home. When she was growing up in Panama, she says that she felt “always scared, and always nervous” because she was afraid of her parents. She says that she and her brother never really got into trouble, but “I can honestly say it was based out of pure fear.” She thinks that “it would have been nice if that would have been instilled in us without the fear, and just the respect and just the knowledge.” Claudia believes her parents didn’t “put knowledge into us; they just put fear, and that kind of makes you nervous and scared.” She contrasts her own relationship with her kids and says, “I’m glad that my kids can just talk” without being afraid.

Sometimes their friends will be like, “You told your mom that?” And they’re like, “Yeah, why not? It’s my mom.” So I like that. It’s an open door policy, talking about anything. It really doesn’t matter.

Claudia likes that her kids are comfortable talking to her about anything. She uses these close relationships to influence her children’s behavior. She thinks her kids will probably still “do stupid things, but at least I can say I taught you why, I didn’t just tell you, I taught you, I showed you.” When her daughter was 15 years old, Claudia noticed she was “tired every day with bags under her eyes...losing weight.” Claudia thought she was doing drugs. Rather than getting angry or violent, as her parents might have done, Claudia went on the internet and printed photographs of people who were doing drugs. She showed them to her daughter and said, “This is what meth does to you.” It turned out her daughter was not on drugs but was having issues with a “jerk boyfriend.” But Claudia thinks her open lines of communication enabled her to discuss the situation with her daughter: “but things like that, my parents never showed me, never taught me why. ‘Just don’t do it because I said so and that’s it.’”

Karla Spooner is a white divorced mother in her mid-twenties, with two young children, who used to work at Subway and is now a full-time student (online) for an “administrative professional” degree. Growing up, Karla says she “felt like it was hard to talk to my parents about things that I was feeling or that I was going

through because I was afraid of how upset they would be; there [were] always like punishments.” She says that she wants to do things differently with her kids:

Karla: I guess with my kids I would prefer that they be more open with me about feelings that they have or things like that without the fear of how I might react to it.

Interviewer: How do you think your kids might benefit from being able to communicate with you more than you did with your mom?

Karla: Because I think that maybe it might make a change to the way they behave.

Karla’s interest in communicating and being “open about feelings” with her children is ultimately about changing their behavior. She gives a recent example with her son. Her 8-year-old son brought something home from school that he had taken out of another student’s backpack. Karla asked him where it came from and he “upfront told me that he had taken it.” She talked to him about why it’s wrong to take things that do not belong to you and he had to bring it back, talk to the guidance counselor and the principal, and apologize. She believes the open lines of communication she has established with him led to his honesty and opened the door for her to discuss it with him:

But where if that were to have been something that I would have done and I had been honest with my parents about it, there would have been strong discipline and punishment for it where I would have been afraid to be honest. Then it would have been something that I would have continued doing because there have been situations like that. At least now I know that if my children feel like they can be honest with me about things, how they’re feeling, or what they’re doing, then we can find ways to steer around it and change the behavior rather than it continuing because they’re afraid to talk.

Karla believes her parents’ form of discipline would have caused her to be dishonest about a situation like

“My parents didn’t put knowledge into us; they just put fear, and that kind of makes you nervous and scared.”

this, thus continuing the behavior. The closer relationship she shares with her son, she believes, enables her to address these issues, give him a “learning experience,” and change the behavior.

Jennifer Wren is an Asian American married mother of two teenage sons. She formerly worked in the software industry but now mainly stays home and substitute teaches on occasion. She is heavily involved in her sons’ lives and says they are very close and talk about everything. Jennifer even says she attends school dances with her older son—“he really doesn’t mind”—and she says that she substitute teaches at their school so she can keep track of what is going on there. She explains that she wants to “keep the open relationship” with them. In her mind, open lines of communication are important, especially with her older son:

I want him to come to me. I don't want him to go to his friends for advice, or other parents. It's not their decision. It's my husband and I, you know, we want him to come to us and feel comfortable. And he does, that's why he doesn't care when I go to the dances or all his activities.

Jennifer is a very involved mother and she sees her involvement as a way to be in constant communication and contact with her sons. This is ultimately a way for her to protect her kids and guide them in the right direction. For instance, she says that “my parents and I never discussed sex,” but it was addressed in the fourth grade in her son’s school, and neighborhood kids had “already told him about sex websites,” so she jumped right in to discuss it with him:

And I don't want something to happen because I didn't talk to him about it. Because if something happens, like drugs, or sex, or whatever, it's not because we didn't discuss it. It must be because the situation happened, for whatever reason, I can't even tell you, but it's not because we didn't discuss it.

“At least now I know that if my children feel like they can be honest with me about things, how they’re feeling, or what they’re doing, then we can find ways to steer around it and change the behavior.”

Jennifer’s comment places a great deal of pressure on her as the parent. She seems to suggest that all of the responsibility for teaching her child right and wrong falls on her. She cannot, and does not, rely on other institutions to support her in this task.

Robert Webber is a white, married father of three who worked in accounting, then stayed at home for several years, and now works night shift, doing security for a bio-tech lab. Robert says his kids have always been able to talk to him. He says, “They talk about things that—even my daughter, that generally you don’t talk to your dad about.” This includes sex and “the pill.”

Robert doesn’t “play the hypocrite,” by which he means he is open about the mistakes he made in his past. He believes that this enables his children to come to him for guidance. He offers an example with his son who told Robert he wanted to be in the Infantry in the Army instead of going to college. Robert thought this was a foolish move because “you’re going to come out four years from now, assuming you don’t like what you’re doing, in the same position you’re in right now.” Robert thought the Army, at least in the Infantry, would not be a good career move. He was trying to persuade his son to join the Navy, where Robert thought he might gain more usable job skills for the future. In the end, Robert says his message was heard: “because he does listen to me, and he does respect what I say. He may not always agree with it, at first, but it’s always been that way. They will listen.”

Scott Mumford is a white married father of two young boys, ages five and seven, who works as a civil engineer. He says that there are times when he feels he is being strict and he sees his father in himself. He then says, “Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem to be working on them, which is frustrating.” He goes on to explain:

Well, you know, I'll tell them to do something and like I tell them eight, nine, ten times before they listen. Gosh, when I did it, if it got to the second time, I was in trouble. So why isn't that working? I don't know. I wish I had the answer to that.

When asked if he disciplines his children differently than he was disciplined as a child, Scott says, “I don’t think you’re allowed to discipline kids these days the way I was disciplined, [but] I also wouldn’t want to.” In describing how his approach is different, he says, “I try to show my affection to my kids outwardly towards them more so than I remember my parents showing to me.”

Many parents see communication and intimacy as a strategy for “better” influence and direction for their child. Although often contrasted with certain forms of discipline used by their parents, “open lines of communication” are used toward the same end: leading children in the direction the parents think they should go.

Conclusion

In the minds of the parents in this study, communication and intimacy are highly valued elements of a good relationship with a child, and parents see them as a major difference from their own upbringing. Parents experience a strong cultural expectation to have a close and communicative relationship with their kids; most feel they have a duty and responsibility to be close and think it’s genuinely a good thing, but they are not sure exactly why.

This shows the power of culture in its most dominant form—unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumptions that act upon us almost like instinct or intuition. It is a natural response; we do it even if we are unsure why. This dominant culture of parenting has been evolving for some time. Parents in Middletown in 1924 expressed that no one wanted to be thought of as the stern and severe parent, that they wanted to be less authoritative, and that they placed a lower value on strict obedience than their own parents. Alexis de Tocqueville, as early as 1840, observed that “as mores and laws become more democratic,” the parent-child relationship becomes “more intimate and sweeter,” “rule and authority” weaken, and “confidence and affection” increase.⁵¹ But the roots of such a culture go back even further, to an Enlightenment narrative that constructed ideals of individual liberty and complicated the notion of received authority.

Although contemporary American parents see themselves as doing something different than their parents

and are not exactly sure why they value it, they appear to use communication and intimacy as a strategy to lead children in the direction they should go—more precisely, as a different way to *talk* about what used to be referred to as “discipline.” It is the language of nurturing therapy with the intentions of authoritative discipline. In some ways, communication and intimacy thus become a softer means to the same ends. But perhaps “discipline” is not the right word to describe how parents use communication and intimacy. Parents are ambivalent about the authority that discipline requires. Yet they still see their role as teaching moral standards, instilling values, and directing their children; communication and intimacy, as discussed by parents in this study, thus reflects a shift from discipline to influence, a softer form of control.

What does this tell us about contemporary parenting? Parents have to shape and form children—socialization demands it—and they now use methods to do so that are culturally acceptable and reflect important shifts in our understanding of authority. Soft forms of influence make parents feel better about their position of authority—it does not feel like they are self-consciously the ones in charge dictating demands. It makes them feel better about themselves—indeed, communication and intimacy bring significant emotional gratification to parents. It is quite possible that this is indeed a “better” alternative to strict discipline—perhaps it shows respect for persons in much more substantive ways—but its efficacy and qualitative distinctions are beyond the scope of this project to judge. The point here is that the shift from discipline to softer influence is both very different (in means) and very similar (in desired ends) to former strategies. These changes are both a cause and a symptom of our shifting notions of authority.

Parents’ desire for communication and intimacy, on the one hand, and their simultaneous, if unconscious, need to be the authority figure for their children, on the other, pull in opposite directions. Late-modern parents struggle to make sense of the tensions.

CONCLUSION

THE PARADOXES OF PARENTING IN LATE-MODERNITY

Raising children in twenty-first century America is not an easy task. It never really has been. Many of the challenges late-modern parents face are not new and are the result of long-term cultural and historical transformations. But these processes are intensifying in ways that put late-modern parents unknowingly in the middle of contradictions and paradoxes that they experience as novel and unique. Of the many tensions implicit in how parents talk about their task, two stood out in these interviews: the paradox of autonomy and the paradox of authority.

The Paradox of Autonomy

The tension between, on the one hand, parents' desires for their children's autonomy and, on the other, the felt need for constant supervision and control of their children was one of the central contradictions in these interviews. Clearly parents have internalized ideas of individual freedom and project them onto their visions of the good person they want their children to become. The language of independence is pervasive. But it is also clear that parents still intuit the need to influence, form, and mold their children into the kind of people parents think they should be. How does one socialize—that is, deliberately form—a child to be an independent and autonomous person?

This tension is evident in parental uncertainties about media technologies: parents are threatened by the onslaught of technology precisely because it weakens and delegitimizes their own influence. Ironically, technology, which opens up remarkable spaces and contexts for children to be free from adult supervision and control, is seen as a significant threat to parents who otherwise celebrate freedom and independence.

Similarly, parents want their children to be independent thinkers, but children are given very little freedom and responsibility because parents are worried about external dangers and threats. The more autonomy and independent thinking their children gain—which parents want—the more actual freedom children should experience—which parents do not want. In order to have what parents want—independent-thinking kids—they would have to grant what they don't want—freedoms and exposure to external dangers.

The protective instincts in parents, given perceptions of a culture of fear and significant lack of trust outside the home, restrict children's domains in remarkable—and unprecedented—ways. While autonomy is the ideal, parental practices in the face of perceived dangers thus unknowingly create dependency. This is, in part, an indictment of a culture of overprotection that undermines parents' best interests and goals. The social historian Hugh Cunningham, noting these paradoxical tensions, observes: "adults portray the world external to the home as full of danger, and seek correspondingly to protect their children by denying them autonomy." The paradox of autonomy leaves parents restricting the very thing they desire most. Cunningham goes on to connect this irony to shifts in our collective understandings of authority: "at the same time, [parents'] confidence in their own authority has been weakened by a variety of factors—commercial, legal, psychological—which make it difficult to carry out that protection as they would wish to."⁵² This question of authority frames the second paradox.

The Paradox of Authority

Parent-child relationships—still and always—are by necessity about some degree of influence, control, and

conformity. Parents today are much less comfortable with the authority these relationships require and thus use more culturally acceptable language to talk about their relationships with their children. Yet, even as they employ a language of emotional closeness as well as intimacy, autonomy, independence, and self-fulfillment, they seem to be appropriating that language to describe the necessary parental task of shaping and forming their children into the kind of people that parents think they should be. Late-modern parents thus resort to softer forms of discipline and authority, but the goal remains conformity.

This could be merely a different means to the same ends—a softer and warmer parenting style to match the culture of late-modernity. But it is also worth examining what gets lost in this gradual shift in the language parents use to talk about raising their children. Parents want “good” kids, and they know they have a primary responsibility to make them good. But they are not sure what “good” means, and they are not confident they can name it. Parents have a moral sense without a thick moral vocabulary. They want their children to develop character, virtue, and what Aristotle called “*phronesis*,” or practical wisdom, but the language of therapeutic individualism does not give them the resources to name it. Of course there is nothing wrong with freedom, independence, and emotional intimacy, and indeed these may be better parenting priorities and strategies than earlier ones. But it begs the question: can parents achieve what they want—character and virtue—without a moral language to name it or the tools to practice it?

Throughout all of the interviews—3,500 pages of transcripts—the words “character” and “virtue” were only used a total of 26 times by 12 different respondents (by way of contrast, the word “independent” and variations of it were used 173 times by 60 respondents). We intentionally did not ask about character directly because we wanted to see if it would emerge

organically. Parents clearly cared about the character of their children, but instead of using words like “character” or “virtue,” they used descriptive words like “good heart,” “nice,” “self-respect,” and “self-reliance.” Are these words adequate substitutes for “character,” “virtue,” “humility,” “patience,” “wisdom,” or “courage”? That is difficult to measure, but words and language do convey meaning and ultimately shape human perceptions of reality. The words we use have the power to create the worlds we inhabit and the very legitimacy and plausibility of our social realities. This is especially true in the context of socializing the young. The words parents now employ, like the parental priorities and strategies discussed above, connote softer, more individualistic, and therapeutic meanings. We might think of them as less commanding or authoritative. The tension—or paradox—lies in the gap between the authority required to do what parents say they want—to form their children into the right kinds of people—and the language they use to describe it.

It is understandable that parents have moved away from a language of character and virtue. Such a language requires common meanings and shared understandings about the “good” and the authority of a coherent culture within which communities and families can form the young. Of course, it is precisely this authority that has gradually eroded over the last several centuries as our understandings of individual freedoms and liberties have expanded. And, while much has been achieved by these expanded notions of freedom, they present new challenges for socializing the young. As philosopher Richard Rorty once quipped, “I cannot imagine a culture which socializes its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization.”⁵³ This is the environment in which late-modern parents find themselves. Parents need the authority required to form their children, but they question the very authority they need to accomplish their task.

APPENDIX A METHODS AND SAMPLE

The sample for the 101 interviews was selected from the larger survey sample conducted with Knowledge Networks. The final question of the survey asked if respondents would be willing to participate in a follow-up, in-person, 90-minute interview in their home (they were informed of a \$50 incentive to complete the interview). Approximately 1,259 answered yes to this question.

From this list of respondents, we looked for regions of geographic density in different parts of the country. We identified geographic areas with sufficient numbers of willing participants and selected eight metropolitan areas that offered regional variation (Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Seattle). In addition to these eight sites, ten interviews were conducted on the telephone, which enabled a cost-effective way to interview individuals in hard-to-reach rural areas around the country. Although the sample could not be completely representative, as much as we were able, we wanted it to resemble the survey sample on key demographic variables. After our regions were selected, we began the process of building a purposive sample to include representation for race and ethnicity, income and education, gender, family structure, etc. As the data collection process progressed, we adjusted our target interviews to include under-represented groups in the growing sample. (See Table A.1 for complete sample demographics.)

Interviews took place between November 2011 and March 2012 and were conducted by two interviewers, both members of the *Culture of American Families Project* research team. Interviews were conducted in respondents' homes, with the exception of the 10 telephone interviews and 3 other interviews conducted in cafes or offices at the request of the respondent. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in a conversational

style. Interviewers generally followed the questionnaire (see Appendix B), but allowed for the respondent's comments and answers to redirect the conversation as needed. Immediately following an interview, interviewers took notes describing the respondent's home, neighborhood, and other details.

All interviews were recorded and audio files were transcribed. The transcribed interviews and field notes were coded using the Dedoose software program for data analysis and interpretation, generally following a grounded theory approach, in which a theoretical interpretation is constructed through data collection and analysis.⁵⁴ This method allows for codes and themes to be created responsively, emerging from and grounded in the data itself, rather than an externally imposed framework. A team of coders met regularly, re-evaluating the coding scheme, merging and adding codes as needed, and discussing emerging themes and patterns. The content for each of the chapters in this report represent key general themes that emerged from the data through this process.

Table A.1 — *Culture of American Families* Interview Demographics

	N	Percent
Race		
White (Non-Hispanic)	59	58
Black (Non-Hispanic)	20	20
Hispanic	12	12
Other & 2+ Races	10	10
Gender		
Female	70	69
Male	31	31
Age		
18–34 years	23	23
35–44 years	39	39
45 and older	39	39
Marital Status		
Single, never married	9	9
Living together	6	6
Married	70	69
Divorced/Separated	14	14
Widow	2	2
Number of Children		
One child	11	11
Two children	45	45
Three or more children	45	45
Education		
High school or less	14	14
Some college/tech.	38	37
Four-year degree or more	49	48
Household Income		
Less than \$25,000	18	18
\$25,000–\$49,999	21	21
\$50,000–\$74,999	25	25
\$75,000–\$99,999	16	16
\$100,000 or more	21	21
Region of Residence		
Northeast	24	24
Midwest	28	28
South	17	17
West	32	32
Political Party		
Democrat	44	44
Independent/No preference	36	36
Republican	21	21
Religious Preference		
Evangelical Protestant	24	24
Mainline Protestant	23	23
Catholic	17	17
Other	17	17
Nothing in particular	20	20
Total	101	100

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Thank you very much again for agreeing to do this interview with us as a follow-up from the Knowledge Networks survey you recently completed. As I think you know, we are a research team from the University of Virginia conducting a national study of American parents to try to better understand their outlooks, priorities, and practices for raising their children.

I am going to ask you a lot of different questions about how you see your role as a parent and your hopes and fears for your kid(s). The interview will be recorded so we can have an accurate account of what was said. Remember that all of your answers are totally confidential. There will be no way to link your name with the audio file of this interview. And you can also skip any question that you do not want to answer.

Personal Experiences

To begin, tell me a little about yourself: Where are you from? Married? Working?—that kind of thing.

- a. Current marital status: Are you married? Is your spouse also employed? If so, what does he/she do?
- b. Prompt if employed outside the home: About how many hours do you work each week? What is the nature of your work? Do you work for yourself or someone else? Where do you do this work—at home or away from home? Do you enjoy it? Would you prefer something else?
- c. Prompt if unemployed: Are you actively looking for work? What did you do in your last regular job? If retired: What did you do in your last regular job?

Tell me a little about your children/child.

- a. Just get enough information to conduct the interview: number of kids, ages, school, living arrangements.

- b. If the interviewee offers some interesting information, make a note and follow up later in the interview.

[If married or living with a partner] *Is one of you the primary caregiver for the children or do you share that equally?*

- a. Are there others who sometimes help with the kids? Grandparents? Other relatives or friends? Paid babysitters? Big brother or big sister? Are there any other family members living here?
- b. If appropriate: Who takes care of the kids while you are at work?
- c. If appropriate: Does the father/mother of your children share in any childcare duties?

How about other people who regularly interact with your children, such as friends, extended family, teachers, and so on?

- a. Probe: teachers, coaches, stepparents, extended family, ministers, mentors, etc.
- b. What about neighbors? Do your kids interact with any adults from the neighborhood?
- c. How well do you know these other adults? Do you talk to them about your children?

Parental Experiences and Expectations for Self

Now I would like to talk a little about your experiences with being a parent. Let's begin with your own childhood. When you think about your childhood, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the way that your parents raised you?

- a. [IF NECESSARY] Clarify who precisely raised them—two parents, one parent, grandparent, other?
- b. [IF NECESSARY] Ask them to speak to both good and bad aspects of their experience. What were some of the difficulties you faced? What were some good outcomes? Probe any issues that appear particularly salient or arouse strong emotion.

- c. Do you think you can tell me why your parents did things this way? What was important to them about how they wanted you to turn out? What qualities do you think they wanted you to have?

Let me ask you about raising kids then (when you grew up) vs. raising kids now. If you compare yourself as a parent to the way you were brought up, in what ways do you do things differently? In what ways the same?

- a. Were your parents more strict or less? Put more emphasis on obedience? Expressed negative emotions more freely? Was the household routine more structured? Were your parents less emotionally close to you? Less communicative? Were they more involved with friends or involvements outside the home? Did their expectations for you differ from the expectations you have for your children? Gender differences (i.e., value somewhat different traits in boys and girls)?

Were you raised in a religious tradition of any kind?

- a. [If so] Was this important to how you were raised?
 b. Are you still involved with this religious tradition? A different one?
 c. Does it influence the way you are raising your children now?
 d. What about a cultural or racial or ethnic tradition?

Do you think parents today have an easier or harder time raising kids than parents of other generations?

- a. Probe: In what ways? If not offered or if interviewee stuck, ask about work, stay-at-home mother, school differences, demands from schools or other institutions, consumerism, technology? Able to move about the neighborhood more freely, challenges from technology? Any gender differences?

I'm going to give you five cards. If you had to choose, which thing on these cards would you pick as the most important for a child to learn to prepare him/her for life? [Give the interviewee the five cards, with the previous statement, and ask them to rank order from most important to least important]

- To Obey
- To Be Well-Liked or Popular
- To Think for Himself or Herself
- To Work Hard
- To Help Others When They Need Help

- a. Why do you put them in this order? Probe their reasoning.

No list is perfect. If you could add anything to this list, what would you want to add? And where would you rank it with respect to the other five? [Note: Repeat the follow-up for several cards if they want to add them. Plant no ideas at all about what might be missing, so that the ideas originate completely with the respondent.]

Do you sometimes feel that time demands interfere with being a good parent?

- a. If yes, ask them to elaborate.

What would you say is the best thing about having children?

- a. Probe: Satisfaction? Emotional closeness? Feeling loved/needed? Pride (in child's accomplishments)? Status? Identity?
 b. Has having children led you to revise what you look for or want out of life?

Children can be a handful. What would you say are your biggest struggles?

- a. Probe. Push for specifics, examples, etc. If not offered, ask about consumerist behaviour.

Let me give you a hypothetical situation: If you were a fly on the wall and you heard your oldest child talking to a friend, and he/she was talking about you and describing you as a parent, what do you think they might say?

- a. [Only if necessary] Emphasize that this is a hypothetical and not a question about something they actually overheard.
 b. Ask for both compliments and complaints.
 c. Probe what the parent sees as the meaning of the compliment/complaint. Is either a source of pride or regret? Or does the comment merely reflect the fact that the child doesn't understand what is good for them?

Has there ever been a time when your child wanted to quit something and you wanted him/her to stay with it? What did you do? Why?

What about the flip side: has there ever been a time when your child wanted to stay with something and you didn't want him/her to?

Are there any activities that your family does together on a regular basis?

- a. [We're looking for "rituals" here] Probe: meals, television shows, video games, board games, visits to certain places/people, vacations, religious services, shopping, etc.

Think for a minute about other parents—these could be parents you know, or parents you have heard about, or parents you have observed. What kind of things do you see other parents doing that you might question or that you don't admire or respect?

- a. [If stuck] Ask: Are there things you've seen other parents do with their children that you disapprove of?
 b. Probe the basis for the judgment: Is it qualities of the parents? Specific parental practices? Is it qualities of the children or problems they are having?
 c. Try to get specific examples.

What about the flip side: Can you think of parents that you know or have heard about or observed that you consider to be parents whom you admire or respect? Are there things you've seen other parents do that you might want to emulate or copy?

- a. [If stuck] If the interviewee can't endorse any other parents in a general sense, just ask them to think of something specific, such as the quality of relationships with their children, or the proactive way they manage their children, or even the temperament in handling their children, etc.
 b. Probe the basis for the judgment: Is it qualities of the parents? Specific parental practices? Is it qualities of the children or children's accomplishments?
 c. Try to get specific examples.

Some people think kids face a lot of pressures these days. Do you think kids face a lot of pressures? What are the pressures?

What about parents? Do you think you face a lot of pressures as a parent? Tell me about them.

Morality and Discipline

Let me ask you about discipline at home. When your child misbehaves, what are the specific things that you do to try to correct the behavior or get your child to do what you want him/her to do?

- a. Can you give me any specific examples?
 b. Probe: "traditional" forms—punishment and reward? Strategies of control? What's the end goal of the discipline? Conformity to some standard?
 c. Probe for why this particular form of discipline—why communication? Why/not physical punishment? Yelling? Etc.
 d. Are there any rules in your house that are "non-negotiable" with your kids? Can you think of any rules in your house—things your kids know they must follow?
 Probe: what's the purpose of these rules? Why don't you have any rules?

Are you able to think of a specific situation when your child was unsure of what was right or wrong? Can you tell me about it?

- a. How did he/she decide what to do? Did you help him/her through this or talk to him/her about it afterwards? What did you say?

Here's another hypothetical situation: Imagine a distant relative died and left you \$100,000. What would you do with the money?

Parental Expectations for Children

Next, let's talk about some of the things you want for your kids. Let's begin with your children's education. Are you general happy with the school your children attend?

- a. Briefly probe.
 b. If resources were not an issue, would you send them to a different school? What kind? Why?

Are you involved in your children's schoolwork?

- a. Probe: Highly involved? Tutoring or other interventions for school success? Summer school or educational camps? Contact with teachers? Volunteer at school? Check homework assignments or grades online?

I want to follow up on a question we asked on our survey that you completed. We ask you to register your relative agreement or disagreement, ranging from 1 to 7 with the following statement [hand card]:

“I invest much effort in providing opportunities that will give my children a competitive advantage down the road.”

My question here is: what is your answer to this question and why?

- a. The statement will be on a card that you hand to the person.
- b. It doesn't matter whether or not they remember how they answered on the survey.
- c. Probe: What are the opportunities that you provide, if any? Why? Get a sense of their priorities.

Next I have a question about specific responsibilities your children might have. Are there specific jobs or tasks around the house that your children are expected to do?

- a. Probe: [If so] What types of chores? Do they clean, watching siblings, food shop, yard work, etc.? Is getting the kids to do this work a struggle? Do you place standards on this work or are you just glad they do something? Are they compensated or rewarded in some way?
- b. [If not] Why not?
- c. [If not already discussed] Would you say they're responsible for their own school work or are you pretty involved in helping them get it done and keeping them on track?
- d. [If kids are old enough] Do your children have jobs or other responsibilities (volunteering, etc.) outside of the house?
[If younger children] When your kids get older, do you think they will have jobs or other responsibilities outside the home?

Thinking about the future. What sort of relationship do you hope to have with your children when they are older?

- a. Do you feel you have that sort of relationship now?
- b. Would you want your child living with you as an adult?
- c. At what point would you say they “become adults”?

Earlier I asked you to imagine what your child might say to a friend about you. Let's turn it around, if you overheard another adult talking about your child, what would you most like to hear them say?

- a. [Only if necessary] Emphasize that this is a hypothetical and not a question about something they actually overheard. Also, the question is what they would want to hear about their child, not about them.
- b. They may list several things. Probe and even ask them to prioritize and explain their reasoning.

What would you most not want to hear the other adult say?

We all make mistakes and some things don't work out as we might have expected or planned. If you could begin again with your [oldest] child, is there anything you would do differently?

- a. [Only if stuck] Thinking over the past year, what was the largest point of disagreement?

Wrap-Up & Interview Effect

That's all of our questions. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me. Do you have any other thoughts or feelings that came up for you during the interview that we have not talked about yet?

Closing: Okay, thank you very much again for taking the time to talk with me. I appreciate you sharing your perspective. Remember that everything you've said is completely confidential; no identifying information will be linked to the recording or the transcript of this conversation. Thanks again for taking the time to meet with me. 50,000 points will be added to your account with Knowledge Networks.

Endnotes

- ¹ Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: Penguin, 2011).
- ² Pamela Druckerman, *Bringing Up Bébé* (New York: Penguin, 2012).
- ³ Madeline Levine, *Teach Your Children Well* (New York: Harper, 2012) and *The Price of Privilege* (New York: Harper, 2008).
- ⁴ Sandra Aamodt and Sam Wang, *Welcome to Your Child's Brain: How the Mind Grows from Conception to College* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).
- ⁵ Bryan Caplan, *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); see also "The Economists Guide to Parenting" from the Freakonomics blog: <<http://www.freakonomics.com/2011/08/17/new-freakonomics-radio-podcast-the-economists-guide-to-parenting/>>.
- ⁶ The "Facebook parenting" video is available here: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB3UEpZm0eE>> (accessed August 22, 2012).
- ⁷ Kate Pickert, "Are You Mom Enough?" *Time* (May 21, 2012); Anne-Marie Slaughter "Why Women Still Can't Have it All," *The Atlantic* (July/August 2012).
- ⁸ This desire is also evident from the survey data. Parents rated "honest and truthful" and "persons of strong moral character" as the two highest aspirations for their children's future. For more information, see *Culture of American Family: A National Survey*: iasc-culture.org/caf.
- ⁹ All names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.
- ¹⁰ James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good and Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 11.
- ¹¹ Robert S. Lynd and Hellen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929) 132–133, 135, 140.
- ¹² Quotes in this paragraph from Lynd and Lynd 136 and 143.
- ¹³ Lynd and Lynd 151.
- ¹⁴ See Ann Hulbert's *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children* (New York: Knopf, 2003). See also Markella Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required* (Piscataway: Rutgers, 2011), especially chapter one.
- ¹⁵ John Demos, "Oedipus and America: Historical Perspectives on the Reception of Psychoanalysis in the United States," *Inventing the Psychological*, eds. Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
- ¹⁶ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1989), chapter 6.
- ¹⁷ All quotations in this paragraph from Lynd and Lynd 144.
- ¹⁸ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995); Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- ¹⁹ Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris, eds., *Detraditionalization* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996).
- ²⁰ Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) 65.
- ²¹ Heelas, Lash, and Morris 2.
- ²² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2000) 7.
- ²³ This report introduces general and overarching themes from the data; additional detail, nuance, and sorting will come with further research and subsequent publications.
- ²⁴ William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Knopf, 1928) 572.
- ²⁵ Not all parents expressed concerns about stranger danger and neighbor distrust, but the majority (60 respondents) did articulate these anxieties.
- ²⁶ See Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). She calls the parenting strategies of the poor and the working class the "accomplishment of natural growth" and points to the greater freedom for play and exploration their children experience.
- ²⁷ These two figures (1 and 2) are based on responses given by the Interview Sample to a question on the survey, not based on a question from the interview itself. For more information about the survey findings about support networks see Carl Desportes Bowman, *Culture of American Families: A National Survey*: iasc-culture.org/caf.
- ²⁸ "2008 Traffic Safety Facts," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: <<http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811163.PDF>> (accessed July 27, 2012).
- ²⁹ A substantiated case of maltreatment "means a case that has been reported to a child protection agency, investigated and deemed to have occurred according to a 'preponderance of evidence.'" "Updated Trends in Child Maltreatment, 2010," David Finkelhor, Lisa Jones, and Anne Shattuck, Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV203_Updatedpercent20trendspercent202010percent20FINAL_12-19-11.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2012).

- ³⁰ See “National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,” U.S. Department of Justice (October 2002): <<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/206179.pdf>>. See also “Non-Family Abducted Children: National Estimates and Characteristics” (October 2002): <<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/196467.pdf>> (accessed September 28, 2012).
- ³¹ Jeanne E. Arnold, Anthony P. Graesch, Enzo Ragazzini, and Elinor Ochs, *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century* (Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012).
- ³² David Derbyshire, “How Children Lost the Right to Roam in Four Generations,” *The Daily Mail*: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-462091/How-children-lost-right-roam-generations.html#ixzz21r33eaJI>> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- ³³ It should be noted that media consumption is much higher among minority children (about 4 ½ more hours per day). See “Media Use Among White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian American Children”: <<http://web5.soc.northwestern.edu/cmhd/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/SOCconfReportSingleFinal-1.pdf>> (accessed August 21, 2012).
- ³⁴ See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967).
- ³⁵ Some scholars have pointed out that kids are both getting older and younger (see Rutherford and Mintz): older because of media exposure discussed here, but younger because of increased dependence on parents until later ages.
- ³⁶ A recent study traces isolation from the natural world in children’s picture books as well. See J. Allen Williams Jr, Christopher Podeschi, Nathan Palmer, Phillip Schwadel, and Deanna Meyler, “The Human-Environment Dialog in Award-Winning Children’s Picture Books,” *Sociological Inquiry* 82 (2012): 145–159.
- ³⁷ Duane Alwin, “From Obedience to Autonomy: Changes in Traits Desired in Children, 1924-1978,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 32 (1988): 33–52.
- ³⁸ Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009) 76.
- ³⁹ Dan Kindlon, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age* (New York: Hyperion, 2001).
- ⁴⁰ The number one ranking “think for yourself” drops to 42 percent if only those with a high school diploma are included, though it is still the top choice, with “working hard” at 30 percent.
- ⁴¹ This percentage, and those in Figure 6, is from the total interview sample, not just the 60 percent that ranked “thinking for yourself” as the top priority. All parents, not only those who ranked it number one, were asked what “thinking for yourself” meant, so these percentages included parents who ranked it lower on their list. This excludes 12 respondents that did not say enough about it to be categorized or that did not see it as important enough to discuss.
- ⁴² Markella Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required: Private Freedom and Public Constraints for Parents and Children* (Piscataway: Rutgers, 2011). Rutherford notes that children are given “choices” in relatively meaningless tasks, such as what clothes to wear or which cereal to eat for breakfast.
- ⁴³ Elinor Ochs and Carolina Izqueirdo, “Responsibility in Childhood: Three Developmental Trajectories,” *ETHOS* 37.4 (2009): 391–413. The anthropological literature uses the term “American dependency conflict” to describe the way American parents desire autonomy and independence over and against dependence or even interdependence, but their practices undermine their desires and create dependency to greater degrees than more traditional societies. See Beatrice Whiting, “The Dependency Hang-Up and Experiments in Alternative Lifestyles,” *Major Social Issues: A Multidisciplinary View*, eds. Yinger and Cutler (New York: Free Press, 1978) and Thomas Weisner, “The American Dependency Conflict: Continuities and Discontinuities in Behaviors and Values of Countercultural Parents and their Children,” *ETHOS* 29.3 (2002): 271–279.
- ⁴⁴ Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 59.
- ⁴⁵ Zelizer 72.
- ⁴⁶ Peter Stearns argues that America’s “less entrenched sense of hierarchy [and] more deeply engrained sense of democracy among the society at large” may have played a role in this change. See Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2003) 12, 13.
- ⁴⁷ Mintz and Kellogg 107.
- ⁴⁸ Mintz and Kellogg 123.
- ⁴⁹ A total of 77 respondents articulated desires for communication and intimacy in these ways. For many of the remaining parents, the topic simply did not come up in the interview or this kind of intimacy did not seem important to them. One parent (a first generation immigrant from Latin America) expressed that he was NOT as close to his children as he had been to his own parents.
- ⁵⁰ Annette Lareau (*Unequal Childhoods* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011]) and Margaret Nelson (*Parenting Out of Control* [New York: New York University Press, 2010]) both point to the way communication is used by parents as a strategy to influence children towards particular ends (“concerted cultivation” for Lareau and “strategies of control” for Nelson). According to Lareau and Nelson, middle and upper-middle class parents employ these strategies for the reproduction of social-class status. As will be evident in this chapter, parents from all social classes highly value communication and intimacy, suggesting that more than only social class divisions is behind these strategies.
- ⁵¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, part 3, chapter 8, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 561. Tocqueville was somewhat ambivalent about the losses or gains of these changes: “I do not know if, all in all, society loses by this change; but I am brought to believe that the individual gains by it.”
- ⁵² Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Harlow: Person Longman, 2005) 205.

⁵³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 87.

⁵⁴ See Barney Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Piscataway: Aldine Transaction, 1967) and Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006).

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