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Evidence-based policy making

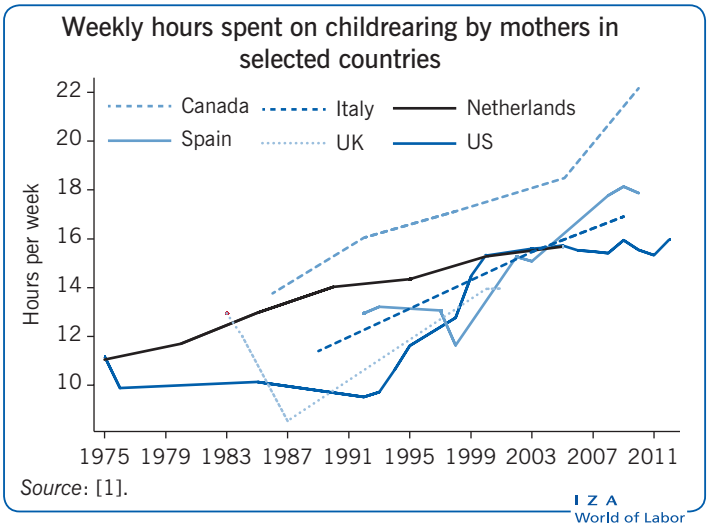
Do rising returns to education justify "helicopter" parenting?

Increased stakes in educational achievement explain why today's anxious parents engage in intensive parenting styles

Keywords: parenting, parenting style, inequality, returns to education

ELEVATOR PITCH

Parents now engage in much more intensive parenting styles compared to a few decades ago. Today's parents supervise their children more closely, spend more time interacting with them, help much more with homework, and place more emphasis on educational achievement. More intensive parenting has also led to more unequal parenting: highly educated parents with high incomes have increased their parenting investments the most, leading to a growing "parenting gap" in society. These trends can contribute to declining social mobility and further exacerbate rising inequality, which raises the question of how policymakers should respond.



KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- The rise in intensive parenting coincided with a period of rising inequality and rising returns to education.
- The largest increase in parenting time is for education-oriented activities such as helping with homework.
- Intensive parenting is particularly widespread in countries with high inequality, whereas in low-inequality countries permissive parenting is still common.
- Intensive parenting styles are associated with higher educational achievement for children and upward social mobility.

Cons

- Parents who push their children hard toward achievement are less able to instill other values such as independence or creativity.
- There are concerns that intensive parenting increases pressure on children and may be associated with anxiety and depression.
- The rise in intensive parenting has resulted in a parenting gap, meaning that parenting investments are unequal across the socio-economic scale.
- At the societal level, intensive parenting and a rising parenting gap can contribute to persistent inequality and low social mobility.

AUTHORS' MAIN MESSAGE

Rising inequality and high returns to education have raised the stakes in parenting, and parents have responded by working hard to prepare their children for an increasingly competitive world. While more intensive parenting can be understood as a rational choice, there are important tradeoffs involved. Today's closely supervised children have less room to develop independence and creativity; the number of adolescents suffering from anxiety and depression has risen; and the rising parenting gap can hinder social mobility. Some of these negative repercussions could be avoided by policies that push back against rising inequality and unequal opportunities.

MOTIVATION

In the news media, stories abound of today's parents making every effort to give their children an advantage. A whole new typology of parenting has developed, from "tiger parents" who mimic the Chinese approach to childrearing, "helicopter" parents who hover over their children ready to intervene at any moment, to "snowplow parents" who remove any obstacle that might get in their children's way. The fact that parenting has changed can be gleaned from time use data. Even though the availability of such data that is comparable over time and across countries is limited, that which is available shows a clear trend. As the Illustration on p. 1 shows, the time parents spend on interacting with their children has risen substantially in many countries, often by 50% or more since the 1970s. The number of children per family has declined during the same period, implying an even larger rise in interactions with each child. In the US, these changes add up to an additional hour and 45 minutes of parent–child interaction every day on top of what was the norm in the 1970s. Education-oriented activities such as helping with homework have risen most quickly, by a factor of 3.5 since 1976 [1].

While parenting has become more intensive, it has also become more unequal. In the US, parents with a college education have increased their time investments in parenting much more than less-educated parents. Richer parents have strongly increased monetary investments in their children, such as paying for private schools, extra-curricular activities, and tutoring. Meanwhile, families with low or even average incomes have not been able to keep up.

These trends raise questions about the causes and consequences of changed parenting. Many parents worry about the stress that intensive, competitive child-rearing imposes on their families. More unequal parenting leads to concerns about eroding equality of opportunity between children from richer and poorer families and the resulting lack of social mobility. Policymakers need to decide if they should push back against some of these trends, and if so, which policy instruments could be used.

DISCUSSION OF PROS AND CONS

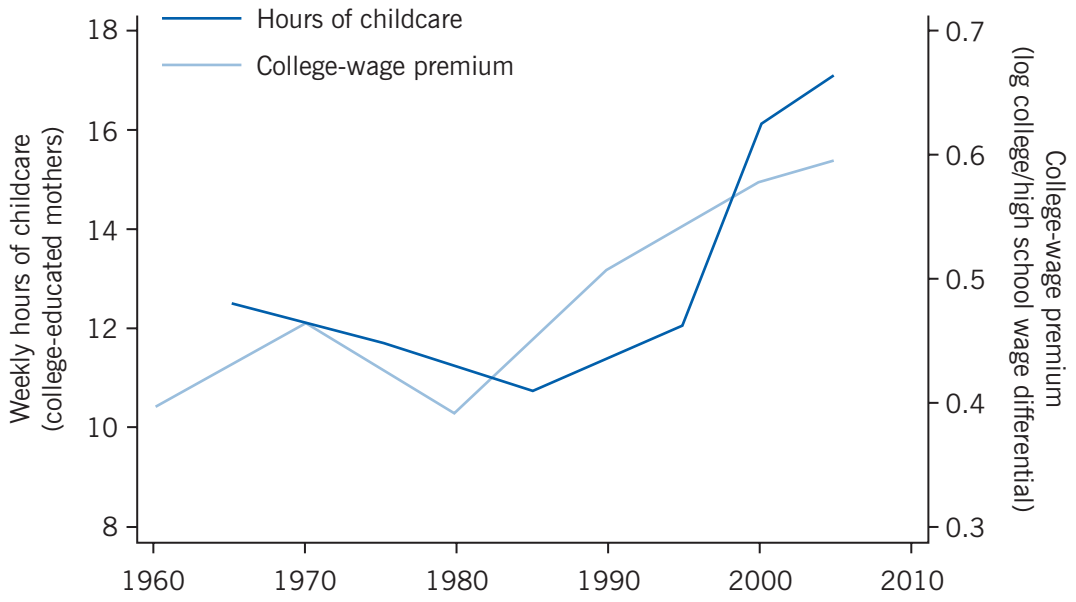
Parallel trends in parenting and inequality

At first sight, it may seem surprising to conjecture that there is a close link between trends in parenting and economic changes. After all, having children is not a primarily economic undertaking, especially in modern times where child labor has disappeared. Yet, research from 2019 on the economics of parenting argues that parents' love and concern for their children does imply that economic conditions matter for parenting choices [1]. Ultimately, parents want their children to be happy and to do well in life, and what it takes to achieve that is in part shaped by economic conditions.

The hypothesis of a link between economic inequality and parenting is supported by the observation that the period of increasingly intensive parenting (see the Illustration on p. 1) in many countries was also a period of sharply rising inequality [2], [3]. In the US, the income ratio between families in the top and bottom 10% of the income distribution more than doubled from 9.1 to 18.9 between 1974 and 2014. While most European countries have lower levels, they also saw inequality rise during the same period.

For parents worried about their child's school achievement, returns to college education are a particularly important indicator of inequality. In the US, the wages of college graduates increased by about 40% relative to those of high school graduates during the same decades [1]. While in the 1960s and 1970s a high school degree still held the promise of stable employment and a safe middle-class existence, today's parents have some reason to view high achievement in education as the only safe path to success for their children. Over time, there is a close association between changes in the college wage premium and the intensity of parenting, especially among highly educated parents (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Returns to college education and childcare time use by college-educated mothers in the US



Source: Doepke, M., and F. Zilibotti. *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019 [1].

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Inequality and parenting across countries

Of course, parallel trends in parenting investments and inequality do not prove that there is a causal link between the two. The evidence for the importance of economic conditions in parenting get stronger when variation over time and across countries are jointly considered.

While detailed time use data are available only for a limited set of countries, the intensity of parenting can also be measured using the World Values Survey, which is carried out over multiple waves in a large set of countries. Respondents are asked what values they consider the most important in bringing up a child. Among the possible values are "hard work," which indicates intensive parenting, and "imagination" and "independence," which suggest a more permissive parenting style.

Parenting styles

Developmental psychologists distinguish between four main parenting styles, namely: authoritarian parenting, authoritative parenting, permissive parenting, and neglectful parenting. Here the authoritarian and authoritative approaches can be characterized as the "intensive" parenting styles, with parents being more demanding and attempting to influence their children either though an emphasis on obedience (authoritarian parenting), or, more common today, by investing time and effort in pushing their children toward achievement and aiming to shape their values and aspirations (authoritative parenting). In a society characterized by stark economic inequality and high returns to education, parents may perceive that their children's future depends crucially on educational achievement and on outcompeting others; such belief is likely to result in intensive, achievement-oriented parenting. In contrast, if inequality is low and if there are many paths to a secure and happy existence, parents can afford to relax more, resulting in more permissive parenting.

Source: Baumrind, D. "Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior." *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 75:1 (1967): 43–88; Maccoby, E. E., and J. A. Martin. "Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction." In: Mussen, P. H., and E. M. Hetherington (eds). *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 4. Socialization, Personality, and Social Development*. New York: Wiley, 1983.

As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of respondents who agree with intensive parenting is highly correlated with the level of economic inequality in the country (here measured by the Gini coefficient). In low-inequality Sweden, only 11% of parents emphasize hard work, compared to 45% in the UK and almost two-thirds in the highly unequal US.

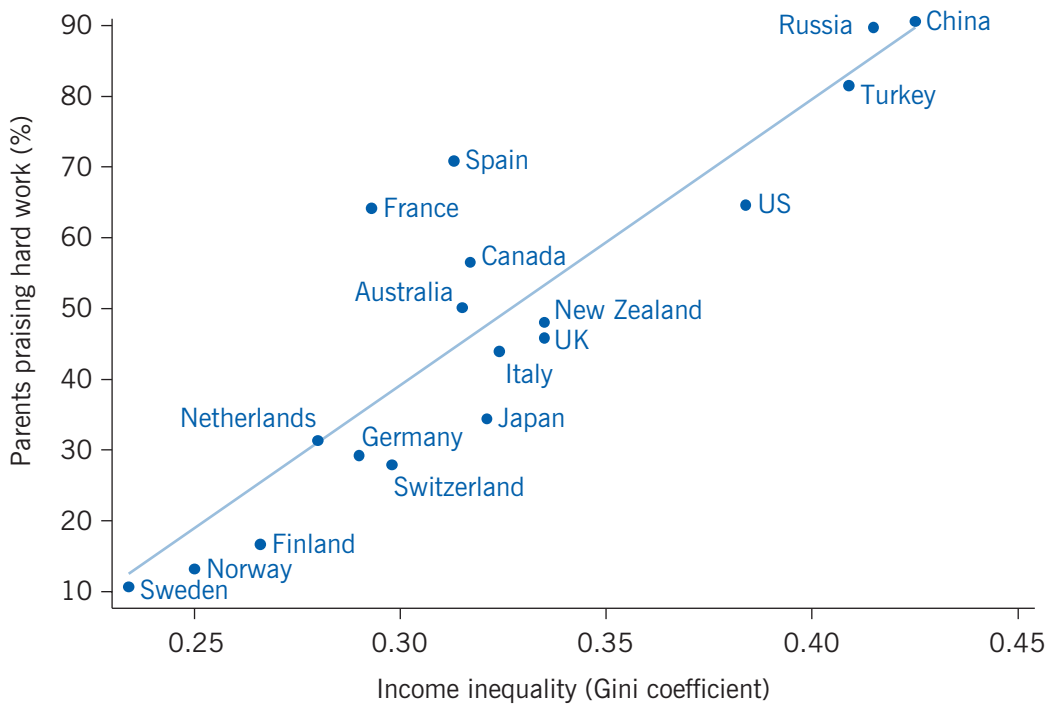
More importantly, the same relationship is confirmed in empirical models that use data from multiple waves of the World Values Survey and include country and time fixed effects while also controlling for individual characteristics. These regressions confirm a strong association between inequality and intensive parenting, with a similarly strong relationship as in the simple cross section of countries [4]. Countries experience increasingly intensive parenting during periods of rising inequality. In Spain and Turkey, in contrast, inequality has decreased over the last few decades, and parents have become more relaxed.

The impact of intensive parenting on child achievement

Rising inequality and rising returns to education provide today's parents cause to worry about their children's educational accomplishments. For intensive parenting to be a rational response to this concern, it should be the case that intensive parenting does actually increase children's educational success.

This is an issue that is difficult to get definitive empirical evidence on, because experimental variation in parenting is generally not available and researchers have to rely on observational data. What is more, intensive parenting comprises a variety of strategies and activities, which may have different impacts that are hard to disentangle.

Figure 2. Income inequality is positively correlated to the share of parents valuing hard work in children



Note: A Gini coefficient of 0 indicates "perfect equality" while a Gini coefficient of 1 indicates "perfect *in*equality."

Source: Doepke, M., and F. Zilibotti. *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019 [1].

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Despite these caveats, existing evidence is consistent with the notion that intensive parents on average accomplish what they set out to do, namely push their children toward achievement. One piece of evidence comes from the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA study tests the knowledge of 15-year-old students in multiple subjects in a large set of countries. For 11 countries, the data also provide information on parenting style, which makes it possible to distinguish parents who engage in intensive parenting from those that do not. The data confirm that children of intensive parents perform significantly better across all subjects included in the study.

However, the correlation between parenting and children's school formation does not necessarily imply a causal relationship between the two. For example, well-educated parents whose children are already more likely to do well in school may also be more likely to engage in intensive parenting. Similarly, parents may react with more intensive parenting if their children should turn out to be particularly talented. Some of these concerns can be addressed by including additional controls in the empirical specification; the PISA results continue to hold after including country fixed effects and controlling for parental characteristics such as their income and level of education [1].

Longer-term effects of intensive parenting can be examined using the NLSY97 study, which follows a cohort of American children through adolescence and their adult lives. The children of parents who engage in intensive parenting (here specifically the

"authoritative" parenting style) are more likely to complete school and to earn college and higher degrees. The effects are particularly strong for post-graduate education: an authoritative mother is 40% more likely to see her child earn a PhD or a professional degree than a permissive mother [1]. Once again, the direction of the effect is unchanged after controlling for a range of parental characteristics, such as level of education.

In the UK, the impact of intensive parenting can be examined using the British Household Panel Survey. Focusing on the effect of parenting on upward social mobility, that is, the probability that a child ends up in a higher social class than the parent, findings show that the intensive "authoritative" parenting style is associated with an increase in upward social mobility of close to 30% [1]. Because the results for social mobility hold the social background of parents constant, potential concerns about identifying causal effects are lessened in this setting. All these results support the notion that intensive parenting can have a substantial impact on children's outcomes in terms of educational accomplishments and career success.

Tradeoffs in parenting

The evidence discussed so far suggests that the rise in intensive parenting in recent decades can be understood, at least in part, as a rational response to rising returns to education. Today, children's future opportunities depend much more on their educational accomplishments than for earlier generations; it should thus be no surprise that parents try to adjust to this changed world.

However, as economists well know, there are tradeoffs in life. Spending time and money on intensive parenting strategies leaves less time and money for everything else. One consequence, much discussed in the media, is that for many, parenting has become a more stressful activity. The strain of parenting is reflected in time use data; while time use on childcare has strongly increased, married women's leisure time has declined by more than five hours per week from 1975 to 2015 [5].

There are also tradeoffs in terms of how parents spend their time with children and what values they emphasize. Parents who focus on helping their children with homework and driving them to various extracurricular activities and classes have less time for free play. Likewise, parents who focus on instilling the value of hard work and diligence in their children have less room to also emphasize creativity and self-discovery.

These tradeoffs are evident in the data from the World Value Surveys. In countries where a large share of parents emphasize the value of hard work, many fewer emphasize the value of independence and imagination. In low-inequality Sweden, close to 60% of parents list imagination among the most important values for raising children; less than a third of parents in the high-inequality US do the same [1]. Independence in children is highly valued by more than 80% of Swedish and more than 90% of Norwegian parents. In the US, this number is below 60%.

In addition to being desirable values in their own right, a loss of opportunity for developing independence and creativity could ultimately also have economic consequences for children. In a rapidly changing economic environment, parents may not always know which skills will be most valuable in the future workplace. For example, if much of the

demand for mathematics and coding skills currently emphasized by intensive parenting eventually ends up being displaced by artificial intelligence, the children of today's intensive parents may lose out to others who are more flexible and creative. The highest returns of all usually go to entrepreneurs; creativity and independence are considered essential skills for starting and succeeding with one's own business.

Adolescents' mental health

Beyond a loss of independence and room for self-discovery, an even more worrying possibility is that the pressures of intensive parenting and a more competitive economic environment can affect children's and adolescents' mental health. A number of studies show that rates of depressive symptoms have recently risen in adolescents in the US [6]. Likewise, among college students, there has been a substantial rise in anxiety disorders [7].

The role of academic pressure and intensive parenting in explaining these trends is not clear cut, and there are other potentially important factors such as the concurrent rise in social media use by adolescents during the same period. However, there is mounting evidence supporting a link between pressures placed on children and mental health.

For example, South Korea is a country with a particularly intensive parenting culture and a competitive education system characterized by high stakes testing. South Korea also has an unusually high suicide rate among adolescents, and academic stress turns out to be a primary risk factor [8]. An empirical link between academic-related stress and mental health outcomes can be observed among students in secondary and tertiary education in a large number of countries [9].

The rising parenting gap and the future of social mobility

For society at large, a concerning development is that in addition to parenting become more intensive, a "parenting gap" between families at different ends of the socio-economic scale has widened in recent decades.

In the US, the increase in time use for childcare has been much larger among parents with a college education compared to less-educated parents [10]. Some aspects of intensive parenting, such as tutoring and extra-curricular classes and activities, also require money in addition to parents' time. As overall income inequality has risen, it is no surprise that well-off families have increased their parenting investments at a particularly rapid rate. In both percentage and absolute terms, families in the top 10% of the income distribution have increased their financial investments in their children much more than others [11]. For families in the bottom quarter of the income distribution, real spending on children has actually declined.

The growing parenting gap suggests that inequality will continue to rise and social mobility will decline compared to the situation today. Parental education has long been one of the best predictors of children's success in school. Relatedly, children of wealthy parents already have many advantages, such as access to high-quality preschools, private K-12 schools, tutoring, and extracurricular activities.

The bottom line is that the parenting gap creates unequal starting conditions for today's children. It all adds up to a vicious cycle where inequality leads to competitive parenting, which further exacerbates inequality for the next generation. There is substantial evidence that social mobility today is already considerably lower than a few generations ago [12], and the parenting gap is likely to accelerate this trend.

LIMITATIONS AND GAPS

Research on the economics of parenting is still in its early stages. Much of the empirical research has to rely on observational data, because experimentally varying parenting decisions is usually infeasible. There are also limitations to data availability; measures of parenting styles are still crude and often not measured consistently across different data sets, and measures for children's outcomes are often limited to variables that are easy to measure, such as educational test scores and grades. Another challenge is that relevant outcomes (namely children's outcomes over their entire lifetime) are realized over a very long time period, which makes data gathering difficult and implies that relatively few promising data sources are available.

Future research on the economics of parenting will benefit from further investments in data gathering and wider use of administrative data that is already available. What would be particularly useful is more frequent and detailed time use data, which provides the best evidence on what parents actually do, combined with surveys of children's activities, skills, health, and peer connections. Also important would be broader efforts to invest in long-term panel data, to be able to connect parenting and childhood conditions to adult outcomes.

SUMMARY AND POLICY ADVICE

There is strong evidence that changing economic conditions, in particular rising returns to education, are a major driving force behind the rising intensity of parenting observed in many countries in recent decades.

At the level of individual families, there is nothing wrong with parents doing the best they can to prepare children for the world that awaits them. Still, what makes sense for the individual may have negative repercussions for society at large. If parenting turns into an arms race with parents working harder and harder to make sure their family stays ahead of others, everyone may end up worse off. In the economic jargon, intensive parenting can cause externalities by creating a more competitive environment for everybody.

Potential repercussions for mental health are harder to quantify, but certainly should be of concern. Most importantly, intensive parenting also leads to rising parenting gaps, with potentially detrimental effects for the future evolution of economic inequality and social mobility.

What, if anything, can be done? Just preaching to parents to behave differently is unlikely to be effective—after all, parents' behavior can be understood as a perfectly rational response to a changed world. But the evidence does suggest that policymakers can have a large impact. Parents respond to the incentives they receive from the economic environment they face. If policymakers change this environment, parenting will respond.

The policies that are likely to reduce the desire for high-pressure parenting are those that create a less competition-based environment for children. Wide availability of and support for high-quality daycare and preschool would contribute to creating more equal starting conditions for children and reduce the parenting gap in the crucial early years. More equal support for public schools in different socio-economic neighborhoods would push back against residential segregation by income. Curricula that place more emphasis on creativity, social skills, and teamwork rather than individual skills and competition would lower competitive pressures in school while building other valuable skills. Investments in vocational training and apprenticeship programs and support for public colleges and universities would help provide a wider range of options for adolescents to continue their education and would reduce competition for the limited number of slots at the few elite universities. Changes to the tax and transfer system that address income inequality outright could also contribute.

To be sure, all of these policy choices involve tradeoffs. Public resources are limited, and broader support for early childhood education and more investments in public education would require higher levels of taxation. More progressive taxation would reduce incentives for accumulating human capital, thus potentially increasing educational inequality while lowering after-tax inequality. Reduced competitive pressure in education may also discourage the creation of top-end human capital that supports innovation and economic growth. Still, while there is no free lunch, some of the proposed policies such as expanded investments in early-childhood education have been shown to have economic returns, implying that they will largely pay for themselves.

Policies like the ones described here are already in place in many countries that are currently characterized by more permissive parenting styles and more relaxed childhoods. With the right institutions and policies in place, parents face a different set of incentives, and the parenting culture will adjust.

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Competing interests

The IZA World of Labor project is committed to the IZA Code of Conduct. The authors declare to have observed the principles outlined in the code.

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