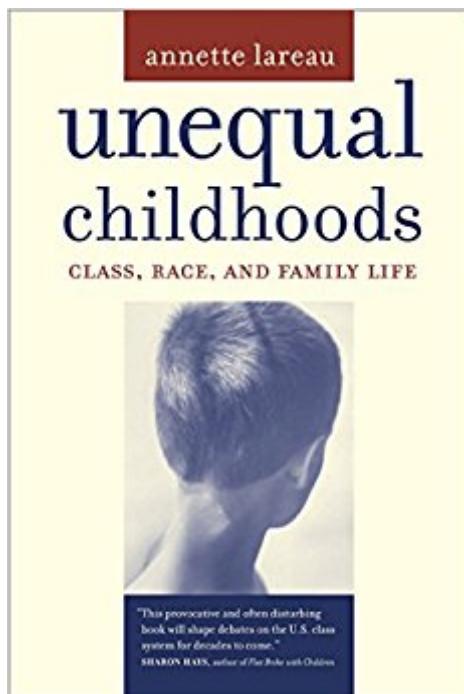


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# Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, And Family Life



## Synopsis

Class does make a difference in the lives and futures of American children. Drawing on in-depth observations of black and white middle-class, working-class, and poor families, *Unequal Childhoods* explores this fact, offering a picture of childhood today. Here are the frenetic families managing their children's hectic schedules of "leisure" activities; and here are families with plenty of time but little economic security. Lareau shows how middle-class parents, whether black or white, engage in a process of "concerted cultivation" designed to draw out children's talents and skills, while working-class and poor families rely on "the accomplishment of natural growth," in which a child's development unfolds spontaneously; as long as basic comfort, food, and shelter are provided. Each of these approaches to childrearing brings its own benefits and its own drawbacks. In identifying and analyzing differences between the two, Lareau demonstrates the power, and limits, of social class in shaping the lives of America's children. The first edition of *Unequal Childhoods* was an instant classic, portraying in riveting detail the unexpected ways in which social class influences parenting in white and African-American families. A decade later, Annette Lareau has revisited the same families and interviewed the original subjects to examine the impact of social class in the transition to adulthood.

## Book Information

Paperback: 343 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; 1 edition (September 11, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520239504

ISBN-13: 978-0520239500

Product Dimensions: 9 x 6.3 x 0.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 110 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #19,800 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Children's Studies #37 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Poverty #52 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Ethnic Studies

## Customer Reviews

This accessible ethnographic study offers valuable insights into contemporary family life in poor, working class and middle class American households. Lareau, an assistant sociology professor at

the University of California, shadowed 12 diverse families for about a month, aiming for "intensive 'naturalistic' observation" of parenting habits and family culture. In detailed case studies, she tells of an affluent suburban family exhausted by jaunts to soccer practice, and of a welfare mother's attempt to sell her furniture to fund a trip to Florida with her AIDS-stricken daughter. She also shows kids of all classes just goofing around. Parenting methods, Lareau argues, vary by class more than by race. In working class and poor households, she says, parents don't bother to reason with whiny offspring and children are expected to find their own recreation rather than relying upon their families to chauffeur them around to lessons and activities. According to Lareau, working class and poor children accept financial limits, seldom talk back, experience far less sibling rivalry and are noticeably free of a sense of entitlement. Middle class children, on the other hand, become adept at ensuring that their selfish needs are met by others and are conversant in social mores such as shaking hands, looking people in the eye and cooperating with others. Both methods of child rearing have advantages and disadvantages, she says: middle class kids may be better prepared for success at school, but they're also likely to be more stressed; and working class and poor kids may have closer family ties, but sometimes miss participating in extracurricular activities. This is a careful and interesting investigation of life in "the land of opportunity" and the "land of inequality." Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"Unequal Childhoods is as exciting to read as it is depressing in its implications." (Four stars)--"The Scotsman"

I've assigned Lareau's original work for several years in a lower-level Race, Class and Gender Sociology course taught for elementary education majors. This is THE book students remember from the course and the one that provides them with the perspective they need to deal with educational issues connected to social class. I highly recommend this second edition as it addresses the ultimate question of what happened to the children and how their life chances varied according to social standing. Excellent read for anyone interested in parental involvement, student achievement, and the mechanisms which we use to navigate the social institution of education with varying degrees of success.

Annette Lareau updates her 2006 book with extra chapters that follow her subjects into adulthood and describe methodological strengths and issues. The core of the book is the same, and retains its finding. The last few chapters explore late teens for the students. The findings that concerted

cultivation exists in the middle class continue through the college application process, with middle class teens receiving help from family and working class teens trying to get help from schools and other institutions. Chapter 14 is a rare and very honest glimpse into how research subjects feel about the research being done about them. Long story short: most do not like it. Dr. Lareau includes quotes and letters describing this, which should serve as a point-to think for student ethnographers. Chapter 15 mathematically models class and time use data from the PSID. Often second edition of books are different from the first edition in very minor ways. That is not true of this edition. I highly recommend it.

Required reading for a sociology class on family and thoroughly enjoyed reading the stories of the people involved in Lareau's research. Concepts on various forms of child rearing are not new and has lead to heated debates as to what constitutes the preferred form. Lareau's research represents contrasting aspects of families, children and expectations across a backdrop of socioeconomic and environmental influences and their effect on the development of children. Add this book to my library.

Relational class issues brought to the forefront. Book seems to repeat itself as it tries to develop a narrative around an ethnographic study. Really makes you reconsider what childhood is and how it is valued. Does not discuss the development of how parenting ideals have changed, just how they are in the present. Will need to be supplemented with statistics about parenthood. Seems to downplay race in a colorblind racist sort of way.

Looking into private family/parenting styles differentiated by class and race, the book reads almost like a series of mini reality TV shows airing on the Discovery or Learning channels with the added advantage of having an academic narrating and guiding you through it all. One advantage of Lareau's lucid style, is the ease with which the book can be read (dare I say enjoyed) by most readers. This book would be useful for parents wishing to compare the impact of different parental approaches or for teachers trying to assess parenting styles/philosophies based on child behavior. Another advantage is that it could also help readers understand adults and how their attitudes, management or decision making styles in the work place are affected by their race, class and upbringing. For instance, anyone trying to understand or perhaps even struggling to work with or manage "Generation Y" (Generation me) individuals, this is an outstanding must-read primer to other books such as "Not Everyone Gets a Trophy". Pages 165-181 and the top of page 245 relating

to Stacey were so accurate that "Stacey" became office code for individuals with a high sense of entitlement coupled with a low to non-existent work ethic or performance level. For instance, 'concerted cultivation' coupled with the presumption that a higher education automatically equates to higher salary sometimes leads to: "I've been told education leads to affluence; I got the education so give me the money, I deserve it!"

This book was part of the reading material for my 400-level Purdue University Sociology course. It has taught me A LOT about the various aspects of family and child-life in the families of different SES in the US. Now, I have passed the book on to my mum as suggested reading, and she too has claimed to have learned a lot about the lives of American families, as well as opening her eyes to other aspects of child-rearing. Once again, this is definitely a book worth the read.

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