November 2017

The Time to Love: Ideologies of "Good" Parenting at a Family Service Organization in the Southeastern United States

Anna Davidson Abella
University of South Florida, aldavidso@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, Sociology Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Scholar Commons Citation
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/6991

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
The Time to Love: Ideologies of “Good” Parenting at a Family Service Organization in the Southeastern United States

by

Anna Davidson Abella

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Anthropology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Rebecca Zarger, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman, Ph.D
Tara Deubel, Ph.D.
Laurel Graham, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Miller, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
November 9, 2017

Keywords: social reproduction, attachment, ethnography, neoliberal, women and work

Copyright © 2017, Anna Davidson Abella
Dedication

This work is dedicated to parents of young children everywhere who are grappling with how to best raise their children while facing personal, structural, or economic challenges at the same time. May our society grow to be one that genuinely supports all families so that parents, caregivers, and children all have what they need to be content and fulfilled.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge several people who have provided much needed support to me throughout the past six and a half years. First, I want to thank my husband, Gabe, who not only supported my preposterous plan to begin a PhD program while I was pregnant with our first child, but who was proactive in helping me find the time and space to study, research, and write throughout the whole process. My sister, Lee, was instrumental in encouraging me at each step, especially when I thought I would quit early on. Both Gabe and Lee, who work full-time jobs during the day, have flexed their schedules numerous times to fill gaps in childcare that I otherwise would have provided so that I could take an afternoon class, go to a meeting, or do interviews in the middle of the day. My young children were (mostly) patient and understanding at times when I had to work in front of them instead of playing with them. Juggling family, school, and work was never easy, but it was possible because I had such a strong support system.

I have been fortunate to be able to walk alongside my sister, Catie, in my parenting journey and to learn from her and share experiences with her as I studied and lived in the world of parenting while our girls were all little. I have my parents to thank for raising my sisters and me in a way that allowed us to be independent and free to pursue whatever we wished, but still remain rooted in family. I should thank my extended family, as well, for being so considerate of my need to spend time doing research or writing during every family get-together and vacation over the past several years. Finally the late nights of secluding myself and staying up to study are over. All of my family has been nothing but encouraging, and I know I am so fortunate to have the kind of unconditional support they have offered in this and any other endeavor I’ve embarked on.
There are also several people whose academic (and sometimes personal) guidance has been instrumental to my success in the program. Although I started out as an English major, that path abruptly shifted the day I took my seat in Dr. Kevin Yelvington’s undergraduate Cultural Anthropology class at USF. After listening to him for only half the class, I knew I had found the missing link to my previous course of study—the focus on any and all things human. I decided to change my major that very day. I have him to thank for inspiring me to choose anthropology as my career and for being a mentor to me all these years. I have also found tremendous support in my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Zarger—from letting me bring my baby and toddler to her office for meetings, to advocating for me and challenging me to produce my best work. Likewise, all of my committee members have contributed, each in their own way, to helping me see blind spots or providing important critiques of my proposals and drafts so that I could ultimately create a well-rounded and compelling dissertation. I consider them all role models who have shaped my ideas about being a professional researcher.

Finally, I express my sincere gratitude to the parents and staff members who allowed me to come into their homes and workplaces to talk about parenting—especially since this topic can feel personal for parents. The insights of all of the parents and staff are extremely valuable and I feel strongly that, by discussing their ideas about parenting and the way organizations interact with families, they have contributed to a larger dialogue about ideologies and social practices that is necessary to understand from multiple perspectives.
Table of Contents

List of Tables .................................................................................................................................................. iii
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................................... iv
Abstract ............................................................................................................................................................ v

Chapter One: Viewing Cultural Values through a Parenting Lens ................................................................. 1
   The Impact of Family Changes on Social Life During the Twentieth Century .............................................. 6
   Attachment Theory and Its Impact on the “Ideal” Parent ............................................................................. 9
   Women and Work: An Unresolved Quandary ............................................................................................. 11
   Intensive Parenting .................................................................................................................................... 14
   Family Service Organizations: A Response to National Movements ..................................................... 16
   Situating Nurturing Minds ....................................................................................................................... 18

Chapter Two: The Emergence of an Anthropology of Parenting ................................................................. 22
   Early Ethnographies: The Theoretical Value of Studying Childrearing .................................................... 25
   Mothers, Work, and Feminist Perspectives .................................................................................................. 31
   Practice Theory and Its Lasting Impact ..................................................................................................... 34
   Reproduction Theory: A Twist on Socialization ....................................................................................... 38
   Concerted Cultivation–New Insights ........................................................................................................ 41
   The Current State of Anthropology and Parenting .................................................................................. 46

Chapter Three: Planning an Ethnography of Parenting .............................................................................. 50
   Ethnography and Parenting Studies: A Continuance .............................................................................. 51
   An Evolving Methodology ...................................................................................................................... 53
   Data Analysis: Revealing Patterns through Process .................................................................................. 62
   Ethical Considerations of Critiquing “Good” Work .................................................................................. 64
   Positionality and Personal Involvement .................................................................................................... 65
   My Identity as a White, Educated Mother ................................................................................................. 67
   The Irony of Studying Parenting and Time ............................................................................................... 71
   Getting the Story Right ............................................................................................................................ 73

Chapter Four: Structural Influences on Parenting Ideology ..................................................................... 74
   From Child Abuse Intervention to Prevention ............................................................................................ 75
   New Directions: Early Child Development ............................................................................................... 78
   Being “On Track” ...................................................................................................................................... 81
   Reasonable Expectations and Positive Parenting ..................................................................................... 89
   “Universal Access” and Redefining Risk .................................................................................................... 94
   Parenting In Time ..................................................................................................................................... 102
   “Someone Please Give Us an Answer” ..................................................................................................... 105

Chapter Five: Defining a “Good” Parent ...................................................................................................... 109
   Who Are the Participants? ....................................................................................................................... 111
   Time Is Love ............................................................................................................................................ 119
Development is Everything and Everything is Development ........................................124
Embracing Secure Attachment....................................................................................128
Missing Voices.........................................................................................................135
Good Parenting Leads to Good People....................................................................140

Chapter Six: Deconstructing and Reimagining Parenting ........................................142
Reflecting on Attachment........................................................................................148
Implications for Parents Without Time......................................................................153
Advocacy for Structural Change............................................................................157
Unique Contributions of This Study........................................................................160
Applications of This Research................................................................................161
The Future of Parenting Studies.............................................................................163

References ...............................................................................................................167

Appendix A: Electronic Questionnaire Content .......................................................184
Appendix B: Parent Interview Protocol ....................................................................187
Appendix C: Employee Interview Protocol ..............................................................189
Appendix D: Funder Interview Protocol ..................................................................190
Appendix E: Qualitative Analysis Codes and Definitions .........................................191
List of Tables

Table 1: Research activities and number of participants .........................................................57
Table 2: Employee interviews by role ........................................................................................59
Table 3: Comparison of race and ethnicity among all Side By Side participants and respondents to electronic questionnaire .................................................................113
Table 4: Frequencies of free listed descriptors of “good” parenting from questionnaire........117
List of Figures

Figure 1: Visual representation of Nurturing Minds organizational and program structure ................................................................. 20

Figure 2: ASQ Scores from 2015-2016 .................................................................................................................... 88

Figure 3: Household income of participants by race/ethnicity as collected from parenting questionnaire ................................. 114

Figure 4: Education level by race as collected from parenting questionnaire ........ 115

Figure 5: Work status by race/ethnicity as collected from parenting questionnaire .... 116
Abstract

The purpose of this research is to understand definitions of what it means to be a “good” parent as described by parents and child development specialists at a family service organization in the Southeastern United States. Previous research on social reproduction and concerted cultivation have opened up pathways to understanding how social and economic inequality manifest in family life and the social structures of which they are a part. This ethnographic study is an effort to contribute to an anthropology of parenting by unveiling the ways that definitions of “good” parenting in middle-class and wealthy communities reflect time-intensive, attachment-based ideologies that are also encouraged by child development professionals.

Through a mixed-methods approach, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and electronic questionnaire, the author describes how parental beliefs about spending time with children and focusing on developmental milestones become central to ideas about “good” parenting. This widespread ideology is situated within a broader social and economic context to suggest that a system of inequality emerges when parents with less time, knowledge, and other resources are not able to access time-intensive parenting practices in the same way as parents more social and economic capital.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Why study parenting? This question was posed to me almost three years ago by a professor in a graduate class, and it took the better part of those years to articulate the importance of this pursuit. Defining what it means to be a “good” parent is not a matter of urgent undertaking by most accounts, but I found along my course of study that it is something parents and child development professionals are eager to do. Understanding cultural values and beliefs of a society is at the heart of anthropology, and what better way to access these values than through ideas parents and child development experts hold to be fundamental to raising children? Parents are often held responsible for their children’s behaviors, successes, and problems, and we typically assume who children become as adults has much to do with the way they were raised—whether it was with a lot of interaction or very little, or with great intentionality or none. Yet parents exist within social structures that may either constrain or encourage them in their endeavors to raise their children in particular ways. Those variables are equally valuable in interpreting the beliefs and practices of a society. Parenting is an act of reproduction at an individual level and at a societal level; people are physically reproduced in families, but these people make up the communities, systems, and beliefs that define a society. The very act of parenting is steeped in cultural ideas about what matters most for human beings. It is for this reason that there is a need for more studies on parenting practices in the US, including the experiences and interactions of parents with organizations aimed at improving parental and child outcomes.

Anthropologists have shown strong interest in studying children and childhood in recent decades, yet a focus on parenting remains underdeveloped. Some anthropologists, often
working with researchers in allied disciplines, have given the possibility of an anthropology of parenting a strong foundation, as with Sara Harkness and Charles Super’s work on *parental ethnotheories*, which I have drawn from in this dissertation (Harkness and Super 1996; Harkness and Super 2002; Harkness and Super 2009), or with Thomas Weisner and colleagues’ work with US families and their development of the *ecocultural niche* (Gallimore et al. 1989; Weisner 1997; Weisner 2011a; Weisner 20011b). Others have begun to make connections between the home or family setting and structures of which they are a part (see, for example Hoffman 2013; Cucchiarra 2013; Doucet 2011; Trainor 2010). Yet, there is still a dearth of ethnographic studies of parenting and studies that theorize about parenting, in the US and elsewhere. This study is an effort to begin filling the gap that exists in the anthropology of parenting. In this dissertation, I use ethnographic methods to explore the way parent participants and employees of a family service organization define what it means to be a “good” parent in practice and in ideology. Specifically, I examine the structural role the organization plays in producing and reinforcing a particular idea of parenting among participants, both explicitly and implicitly. For parents, I investigate the ways that their interpretations of what it means to be a good parent, from this organization and from their social networks, shapes their family and work life.

My use of “ideology” is derived in part from a Marxian definition, which posits that the ideas that make up an ideology are representative of the “ruling class” (Marx and Engels 1965). I point to ways that parents and professionals with more social status and economic resources uphold a particular definition of “good parenting,” thereby feeding into a class-based ideological structure in which middle-class and wealthy educated families are often able to achieve an ideal parenting scenario while lower-class families or those who are not familiar with child development advice struggle against it. This is not necessarily the reality, however, as not all families buy into the ideology presented in this study, thus presenting a resistance to ideology that is not present in the Marxian strand. In fact, alternative ideas may be part of the forming a
mainstream ideology, even if it is because the ideology is formed against them, and I argue in chapter six that we should pay more attention to these alternative ideas of parenting. While the merits of ideological thought as it relates to culture and society have been debated by major thinkers for centuries, the complexities of which cannot be elaborated on here, suffice it to say that I interpret ideology as more than simply a system of ideas espoused by various structures or groups; I see it as serving some families’, organizations’, and individuals’ interests over others, as I describe in more detail in chapters four through six (for anthropological critiques of ideology, see Asad 1979, Larrain 1991, and Wolf 2010).

In this study, I provide an analysis of both parents and employees in order to give insight into the interplay between organizations and individuals. Some anthropologists have specifically drawn attention to the realm of nonprofits or NGOs—the so-called “third sector”—with efforts to highlight the complex work culture that is often embedded in more obscure political and social systems (Lewis 1999; Markowitz 2001; Murdock 2003; Craven and Davis 2013; Wright 2013). Rachel Wright suggests that studying nonprofits helps to “gain a stronger understanding of the processes by which nonprofits both mediate social change and also reproduce social inequalities” (2013). I, too, seek to contribute to a more holistic understanding of nonprofit organizations and their impact on individuals and communities. But rather than examining the culture of the nonprofit alone, I parse out the various ways that parent participants and employees interact to create a system of mutual feedback that ultimately supports an ideology of parenting that is heavily reliant on parental time and interaction.

Time, in fact, is central to ideologies of good parenting. The title of this dissertation, *The Time to Love*, has a dual meaning. First, I argue that time is a factor around which parents develop their parenting ideologies, or views of the best ways to raise children. This is especially true for middle-class and wealthy mothers who quit their jobs or reduce their work to very part-time hours in order to be with their children in the early years. For many of the parents in this study, spending time with their children was the most important thing they could do to be a
“good” parent. Secondly, time is used by child development specialists to emphasize an early period in which parents should interact with their children in specific ways in order to avoid negative consequences later on in the child’s life. In interviews with organization employees, the first three years were frequently discussed as a sort of window of opportunity to ensure a child’s developmental needs were progressing according to widely accepted standards. The implicit message here is that parents who are unaware of this advice or who do not heed it, for a variety of structural or other reasons, may be putting their children at risk for academic, social, or relationship challenges in the future. Parents with little time to spend with their children, like many low-income and working-class parents, cannot participate in a time-intensive ideology of parenting, yet they are being “good” parents in other ways, such as providing for their families. I explore the many barriers to having “the time to love” in greater detail in each of the following chapters, and I specifically relate these barriers to the acceptance of neoliberal policy and ideology in the United States.

The research questions that have guided this work are as follows:

- How do the employees of a local family support organization define “good” parenting and what informs these definitions?
- How do parents who participate in the organization’s services define “good” parenting and what informs these definitions?
- How does the organization explain its rationale for parenting programs, and how do program participants inform the way programs are structured?
- What is the broader structural role of this organization in the community it serves and how do these programs and services ultimately impact families’ lives?

Throughout this dissertation, I piece together different components of social movements and individual and organizational thought and practice in order to paint a picture of middle-class parenting in a metropolitan US city today. I draw broadly from reproduction theory (Bourdieu
1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) in order to show how parenting practices and access to child development knowledge contribute to differences in perceived outcomes for children. I begin, in this chapter, with a brief history of changes to family life and conceptions of children throughout the twentieth century, as these have led to new ways of understanding parenting roles that, arguably, many are still grappling with today. I then move to a more specific discussion of the concept of parenting in the US with an emphasis on the kind of parenting many child development specialists and psychologists see as dominant or ideal, often referred to by scholars as intensive parenting or attachment-based parenting. Crucial to this conversation is the consideration of women and work, which has both shaped and been shaped by other social changes throughout the twentieth century, and which I argue, similar to other scholars (Blair-Loy 2009; Hays 1996; Hrdy 1999; Stone 2007), is an unresolved matter. Finally, the development of family service organizations is also woven into the fabric of the social history of the United States in the past century, emerging alongside concerns of social justice and questions about what role institutions play in children’s and families’ lives. I end the chapter by describing Nurturing Minds, the organization with which I partnered for this study.

I chose to use pseudonyms for the organization, names of programs, interviewees, and locations of the study sites in order to protect the identities of all participants involved in the study. This was an ethical choice I felt was necessary in order to protect the organization and its staff from any punitive attitudes or actions that could potentially result from some of the more critical aspects of my analysis (see Murdock 2003), though I felt the risk for this throughout was very low. I also hoped that anonymizing participants’ identities would allow them to feel more freedom in discussing their points of view and that parents wouldn’t feel inhibited from

1 Attachment here is distinct from what is commonly referred to as “attachment parenting” in many Western societies and which has been popularized by Dr. William Sears and colleagues and the many advice books they have published. I discuss secure attachment as a theoretical stance put forth by John Bowlby and colleagues later in this chapter, and it is this framework that I see as being integrated into Nurturing Mind’s programming and ideologies.
participating due to concerns about their children’s identities being exposed. I conveyed my intentions to make names and places anonymous before conducting interviews, and I have made many efforts to ensure the exact organization or location is not easily discernible.

**The Impact of Family Changes on Social Life During the Twentieth Century**

The twentieth century saw momentous change in social, political, and academic movements related to children and families. In the early decades, conflicts over child labor that had been brewing since the end of the nineteenth century intensified, resulting not only in new legislation limiting the amount of time children could work, but also in a highly public moral debate—mostly among the white middle class—about the value of children (Fass and Grossberg 2012; Mintz 2012; Zelizer 1985). While many people saw work as beneficial to both children and families (particularly in the working classes), a new group of reformers called “child savers” challenged this view by portraying children as sacred, and childhood as sentimental (Mintz 2010; Zelizer 1985). From this “sacred child” perspective, it can be argued that childhood, as this newly carved out, protected time and space, was intended to belong to and be “for” children. There was a shift in which childhood became seen as a time to grow, play, learn, and be nurtured rather than exploited through hard work. As the emotional value of children was emphasized, parental love was redefined, thus leading to an increasingly complex idea of what it meant to be a “good” parent and attend to multiple aspects of children’s lives.

However, this “reinvention” of childhood (Fass and Grossberg 2012) applied largely to middle and working-class white children, and as Steven Mintz (2010) notes, “Trying to universalize the modern ideal of a sheltered childhood without regard to a child’s class, ethnicity, gender, and race was a highly uneven process and to this day has never encompassed all American children” (52). African American children, in particular, were not included in the newly forming ideology of the sacred child, as indicated by the strict racial segregation that existed in both public policy and civic life in the early twentieth century (Davies
 Nevertheless, the “sacralization” of children was ultimately reinforced by many public institutions that began to focus their efforts towards improving the wellbeing of children, including public health, education, and child welfare, to name a few (Zelizer 1985).

Government-created institutions whose missions revolved around children were created during the early part of the twentieth century. The first federally funded institution to focus wholly on children, the Children’s Bureau, was established in 1912 with the goal to “investigate and report…upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people” (Children’s Bureau n.d.). An extension of this goal was to inform parents and professionals who worked with children of the latest research on child development. The literature produced from the Bureau in the form of pamphlets and booklets was widely distributed and cited, a major step towards establishing public institutions as sources of expertise in childrearing (Hulbert 2003; Lindenmeyer 2012). A decade later, the Sheppard-Towner Act was passed in 1921, officially certifying “conservation of child life as a national concern” (Zelizer 1985, 29). Many other laws related to child welfare were passed in the next decade, culminating in the Aid to Dependent Children section of the 1935 Social Security Act, solidifying the period of time that children (until age 17) would be under the protection of the federal government (Lindenmeyer 2012). This paradigm shift showed the inherent culpability of the government for the condition of families, which signified a major change in understandings of family life from private to public (National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project 2014).

These policy developments evolved alongside the newly emerging field of child psychology, which was becoming highly influential in many realms of American society during the early twentieth century. Influenced by well-known psychologists like G. Stanley Hall, child psychology, which led to the field of child development, was based on the premise that children have different needs, stimulations, and interactions with people and their environment at
different points in their lives, and rather than treating all children prior to adolescence the same way, children’s needs should be met in terms of their stages of development (Coleman 2010; Lassonde 2012). This theory heavily influenced the way that public education was conceived of, but it also had far-reaching implications for parenting. Parents were now expected to respond to this, presumably, science-based knowledge that children of different ages require specific kinds of engagement (Schlossman 1976; Mintz 2010; Lassonde 2012; Zelizer 1985). With the growth of child psychology came greater attention to children’s emotional wellbeing, and advice by psychologists added another dimension to parental responsibility. Taking care of a child’s physical health and basic needs was only the starting point of childrearing; experts now asserted that parental style made a difference in children’s psychological outcomes (Mintz 2010). This period of the early twentieth century marked the beginning of a heightened emphasis on the parent/child (usually mother/child) relationship from the psychological perspective.

New patterns of family life also began to take shape, leading in the later part of the twentieth century to the isolation of the nuclear family. Families had fewer children into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and adults invested more time and emotion in their children than ever before (Coleman 2010). White, middle-class families no longer counted on extended kin support, and raising children became a private affair (although kin support still remained salient in many poor and working-class communities [Lareau 2011 [2003]; Stack 1974; Stack and Burton 1994]). As Coleman (2010) argues, “These changes, combined with smaller family sizes, have increased the demands on parents to play the emotional, educational, and socializing roles that siblings, neighbors, and friends once filled” (144). The increasingly private nature of childrearing in Western societies served to intensify the responsibility of parents while simultaneously removing community supports. But these family patterns weren’t relevant to everyone. As many scholars point out, the early research conducted on child development, and even the problems of poverty and health that led to federal child protection, were largely based
on white, middle-class children (Lee et al. 2014; Mintz 2010; Scholssman 1976). The idealized, protected model of childhood that became prominent in the twentieth century served as a way to establish nationwide norms, yet the basis on which this model was formed excluded experiences of many immigrant, African American, American Indian, and poor children (Davies and Derrick 1997; Halverson et al. 2002; Jimenez 2006).

Regardless, the idea that parents could and should access knowledge that would improve their children’s lives became firmly entrenched in beliefs about parenting in the US. Science continued to give way to new understandings of child development throughout the mid twentieth century, and professionals like psychologists and pediatricians began to dominate mainstream conceptions of childrearing in the US (Apple 2006; Hrdy 1999; Lee et al. 2014; Mintz 2010). Historians and other social scientists describe a shift from community-based or folk knowledge to expert-based scientific knowledge, or what many scholars refer to as “scientific parenting” (Apple 2006; Hays 1996; Lee 2014; LeVine 2007, 248; Mintz 2010, 52; Romagnoli and Wall 2012). Of course, parents were still responsible for their children, but knowledge that may have previously been passed down by generations in multi-generational households and across communities became increasingly seen as more legitimate coming from child development professionals.

**Attachment Theory and Its Impact on the “Ideal” Parent**

A wave of psychological research in the 1960s on infant cognitive development and parent-child attachment heavily influenced child and family professions and organizations (Krane et al. 2010; Lee 2014; LeVine 2007). Many scholars and child development professionals saw these studies as providing scientific proof of the best way to raise children, which, from a psychological standpoint, included frequent and nurturing parent-child contact in order to create a secure relationship (Bowlby 1982 [1969]; Quinn and Mageo 2013). The work of psychologist John Bowlby and colleagues on attachment theory (1982) was foundational to this
new stream of thought and became heavily integrated into mainstream ideas of parenting. Bowlby’s basic premise on attachment theory was that infants seek security from a primary caregiver, usually the mother, through attachment behaviors such as crying, sucking, clinging, and even smiling in order to keep the caregiver close to provide protection and ensure the infant’s survival (Bowlby 1982; Schön and Silvén 2007; Hrdy 1999). Furthermore, Bowlby proposed, this early “secure base” establishes the framework for long-term emotional and relational health and stability (Bowlby 1982 [1969]). The influence of this theory on practitioners who worked with parents and children cannot be overstated, as it permeated virtually all professions and institutions related to childrearing and became a point of orientation for philosophical and psychological advice towards parents (Lee et al. 2014; Hrdy 1999; Quinn and Mageo 2013; Small 1998).

Many feminist scholars responded negatively to Bowlby’s assertions, stating that attachment theory was deterministic, viewing women’s roles as mothers as their primary and essential role (Hrdy 1999; Konner 2005). As Hrdy elaborates, “Attachment theory…rubbed precisely the spot where evolutionary acid burns deepest into feminist sensibilities. Women seemed to be offered the choice of putting their lives on hold for years or else becoming irresponsible mothers. The way many feminists saw it, an infant ‘attached’ meant a mother enchained” (24). But even though Bowlby and colleagues focused heavily on the mother as the optimal figure for infant attachment, the extent to which a mother’s time should be spent on caregiving behaviors wasn’t always clear. Mary Ainsworth, who worked closely with Bowlby to develop attachment theory and also extended the work on her own, suggested that the following attributes were ideal in a caregiver in order for secure attachment to ensue:

a) Frequent and sustained physical contact between infant and mother, especially during the first six months, together with a mother’s ability to soothe a distressed baby by holding him; b) a mother’s sensitivity to her baby’s signals, and especially her ability to time her interventions in harmony with his rhythms; c) an environment so regulated that
the baby can derive a sense of the consequences of his own actions. Another condition she lists, which is perhaps as much a result of those given above as a condition in its own right, is the mutual delight that a mother and infant find in each other’s company. [Bowlby 1982:346]

This list, on its own, would seem to predispose a mother to spend the majority of her time with her baby, at least for the first six months (which is far more time than most working mothers in the United States are able to spend on parental leave). However, there are other areas of Attachment in which more room is allowed to interpret the amount of time caregivers must spend in order to appropriately answer the infant’s demand for security. Bowlby found that there are two main caregiving behaviors that are significant in making attachment successful: readiness in response to crying and readiness to interact socially with an infant, neither of which were necessarily dependent upon long periods of time. Additionally, Bowlby stated that there was virtually no difference in terms of success in attachment between breast- and bottle-feeding, since the intimacy of feeding should be enacted with intention, and not just as an extension of physical closeness (347). So while Bowlby and Ainsworth did not outwardly suggest that mothers would do best to stay at home to raise their children, they also did not propose a clear picture for the 1980s working mother, for instance, to practice attached parenting.

Women and Work: An Unresolved Quandary

Bowlby and colleagues were writing at a time when Western parental practices that allowed for distance and separation from children were the norm: women were entering the paid workforce at a rapidly increasing rate while their children went to daycare; bottle-feeding was heavily favored over breastfeeding; and cribs and strollers were considered essential for a new baby (Lee et al. 2014). It is not surprising, then, that a theory arguing for an increase in mother-child bond was controversial. Other social changes took place that were seen as disruptive to
traditional ideas of family life, such as higher divorce rates, an increase in single mothers, and the movement of significantly more women into the workforce (Coontz 2010; McCurdy and Daro 2001; Reich 2005; Roberts 1991). More mothers were working and spending less time with their children, which was often seen as contradictory to psychological advice that mothers should focus on caretaking (Krane et al. 2010).

However, given these widespread patterns of more women needing and choosing to work, very few social programs provided practical supports like free or affordable child care, and in fact, efforts to pass legislation that would help to fill this rapidly widening gap have been rejected (Mintz 2004). Many studies of women and work in the US between the 1980s and early 2000s demonstrate ways that this change in women’s roles brought to light conflicts between home life and work life (Blair-Loy 2009; Hays 1996; Hochschild 2012 [1989]; Lamphere et al. 1993; Stone 2007). Hays (1996) and Hochschild (2012 [1989]) reveal the full weight of the mothering role in an era that is often depicted as one in which women have greater freedom and choice than ever before. Blair-Loy (2009), Lamphere et al. (1993), and Stone (2007) expose the way that nineteenth and twentieth century ideologies of separate spheres of work and home for men and women are still firmly entrenched in the workplaces and homes of many Americans. Even as women were making huge strides in the workforce, the equality they were said to have changed dramatically with their entrance into motherhood, as depicted by these studies.

Some scholars suggest that this conflict between two ideologies was not as present for many women of color, as Collins (1994) notes:

Work and family have rarely functioned as dichotomous spheres for women of color…Whether because of the labor exploitation of African American women under slavery and its ensuing tenant farm system, the political conquest of Native American women during European acquisition of land, or exclusionary immigration policies applied to Asian Americans and Hispanics, women of color have performed motherwork that challenges social constructions of work and family as separate spheres, of male and
female gender roles as similarly dichotomized, and of the search for autonomy as the guiding human quest. (46-47)

This is not to say that women of color and working-class and poor, white women did not struggle with these roles; however, because the past “protection” of work applied only to middle-class and wealthy white women, the ensuing identity conflict is largely what has been written into the literature. However, more recent studies have shown ways that women of color engage in related ideological struggles with motherhood and other aspects of womanhood (Barnes 2008). What is abundantly clear across all families, however, is that the US has never fully embraced the role of the working mother, as evidenced by the lack of systematic or affordable childcare, poor and erratic family leave policies, and continuous ideological pressures to spend an amount of time with children that working parents rarely have.

Many of these conflicts are at the heart of this study. The ideas of secure attachment still resonate widely with child development professionals and parents, as demonstrated throughout this dissertation. The terms “attachment” or “attached” are used frequently by both groups to described the ideal way of parenting, and the Nurturing Minds organization, especially, uses descriptions similar to those outlined in Attachment (Bowlby 1982 [1969]) to encourage a way of parenting that presumably leads to a strong relationship between the child and caregiver. It is likely not coincidence that this group of parents is also made up largely of stay-at-home mothers—those who are perceived as having the greatest ability to put attached parenting into practice. As I illustrate in Chapter 5, mothers whom I interviewed made decisions to adjust or hold off on their work lives, which speaks to an underlying belief system that places high value on spending a significant amount of time with children during the early years. This pattern is important to consider in light of reproduction theory. If, in fact, there are long-term benefits for children when parents stay home to care for them early on, then how does this choice and ability of mothers to move in and out of the workforce play into the future success of their
children? Work, it would seem, is a key determinant of family life and should be considered integral to studies of families and parenting.

**Intensive Parenting**

Sharon Hays’ (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* provides the first explicit analysis of the intensive motherhood ideology, in which Hays argues that intensive mothering is widely understood as the most appropriate type of mothering, and although it is culturally constructed, it serves as a dominant model for all mothers, regardless of their socioeconomic differences and acceptance of the ideology. Many other scholars have extended this idea to parenting more broadly and consider intensive parenting the mainstream norm in the US and other Western societies (Elliott et al. 2015; Hoffman 2013; Lee et al. 2014). Although the idea that parents should be responsible for raising their children is not unique, the expectations for parents in terms of knowledge, resources, and interaction have changed considerably in the past couple of centuries, with considerable influence from attachment theory. Furedi (2002) highlights the distinction between simply raising children and the new connotations of “parenting”: “Childrearing is not the same as parenting…The belief that children require special care and attention evolved alongside the conviction that what adults did mattered to their development…The work of mothering and fathering was now endowed with profound importance” (106). It is widely agreed that the dominant model of parenting in the US today is characterized by spending a great deal of time, energy, and resources caring for, interacting with, and managing children’s lives (Furedi 2002; Hays 1996; Lee et al. 2014). The expectations for this way of parenting come from pediatricians and other health professionals, schools, social services, and other institutional settings that generally follow the same ideals of what constitutes “proper” parenting (Christopher 2012; Ginsburg 2007; Hays 1996; Lareau 2011; Romagnoli and Wall 2012). Intensive parenting is at least implicitly associated with “good” parenting as if it exists on a spectrum; the more time, energy, and resources spent on children, the better a
parent one is assumed to be (Hays 1996; Lee et al. 2014). This time is ideologically translated into better future outcomes for children, a belief that I address further in chapters two and five.

However, as previously mentioned, recent research has pointed out that expectations of intensive parenting are strongly rooted in a middle-class milieu that assumes that a particular set of resources, family structure, and general lifestyle exists which makes this type of parenting possible. This includes a two-parent household in a safe environment, access to expert advice, time to spend on child engagement, and financial stability (Christopher 2012; Elliott et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2014; Romagnoli and Wall 2012). These analyses hinge on feminist theoretical frameworks that complicate women’s (especially mothers’) roles across race, class, and time and highlight the ways that families are differently affected by changing mainstream norms. Specifically, these feminist frameworks view mothering as a role that women of color and low-income women have experienced differently than their white and middle-class or wealthy counterparts, and therefore the mainstream interpretation of what it means to be a mother is inadequate and excludes the multitude of ways that women interact with the role (Collins 1994; Lamphere et al. 1993). Furthermore, many scholars argue that the very idea of a baseline of outcomes that all children should have and that all parents can access stems from a white, middle-class framework (Elliot et al. 2015; Romagnoli and Wall 2012). Intensive parenting is also supported by neoliberalist concepts, such as each family striving for their own success through their own means, which inherently plays into American ideals of competition (Larner 2000). Throughout this dissertation, I explore local parents’ definitions of good parenting and compare them to dominant mainstream definitions. Also, in chapters two and six, I include discussions that highlight alternative parenting practices both within and outside the US, providing context for the intensive practices that are described in this study.
Family Service Organizations: A Response to National Movements

Several developments throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries converged to define the field of family services, including the establishment of the Children’s Bureau and social welfare programs, the professionalization and broadening of mental and physical health services, the introduction of compulsory education, and the creation of early mothers’ voluntary associations (Croake and Glover 1977; McCurdy and Daro 2001; Roberts et al. 1991; Schlossman 1976; Weissbourd and Kagan 1989). However, it was during the 1950s to the 1970s that a heightened awareness of child abuse came about. Some scholars attribute this to the sharp increase in poverty that came after the end of World War II (Lindenmeyer 2012), some say it went hand in hand with a burgeoning feminist movement that brought issues of domestic violence to light (Reich 2005), and some point to the inability to continue ignoring black children’s rights to protection amid intensifying debates about racial inequality (Abramovitz 2006; Smith and Devore 2004). Along with this heightened awareness of poverty, child abuse, and minority children’s rights came a period of rapid growth for family service organizations (Roberts et al. 1991; Schlossman 1976; Weissbourd and Kagan 1989). Many family service organizations—both public and private—provided parent education in the form of in-home services, counseling, or parent support groups, with an increasing focus on parenting children in the early years. Sometimes called family service organizations, sometimes family support organizations, and sometimes family resource centers, the goal is one and the same: to provide services for families they cannot or do not know how to provide for themselves, but should. The should here is more implicit, but it emanates from the messages we can discern from historical and present day structuring of public and private family service institutions. While institutions and organizations are often spoken of as decision-making bodies in themselves, it is, of course, the people within the organizations who make decisions about how to operate and who to serve. In chapter four, I provide insight into how decisions are made by the people who are responsible for the direction of programming at the family service organization under study.
As mentioned previously, one of the most significant elements of change in parental roles throughout the past century has been the increasing reliance upon expert knowledge of child development. From influential psychological theories to the medicalization of childcare, from compulsory education to advances in neuroscience, public institutions became heavily woven into the very fabric of childrearing (Apple 2006; Lee 2014; LeVine 2007; Zelizer 1985). Furthermore, an increasing focus on the emotional, physical, and psychological wellbeing of children led to a rising number of federal government bodies and policies that were developed to protect children from harm (Children's Bureau n.d.; Lee 2014; Lindenmeyer 2012; Ryumph 2012; Zelizer 1985). Child welfare agencies, in-home parent education, and family service organizations grew throughout the second half of the twentieth century in response to child abuse awareness (McCurdy and Daro 2001; McGowan 2005; National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project 2014; Schlossman 1976). However, the convergence of these movements came to a halt in the 1990s as neoliberal policies led to the dispersion of federal funding to state governments and private entities (Larner 2000). Many nonprofit organizations that provide parent support and education have shifted from a focus on child abuse prevention to that of positive parenting and healthy child development. These changes in the structure, focus, and offerings of family service organizations were influenced by specific shifts in national policy and identity.

The underlying belief in programs and services for parents is that children’s wellbeing is inextricably linked to the capabilities of their parents (Roberts et al. 1991; Schlossman 1976; Weissbourd and Kagan 1989). The impetus on parents (especially mothers) to provide social and emotional guidance to children has become even more defined over the past few decades. However, there has never been a uniform, widely-supported system of parent education. Most family service programs are intended for families who have one or more risk factors, as defined by the organization providing services. For instance, to qualify for a pre- and post-natal program in one southeastern US county, participants must meet at least two or three of the following
criteria: be single, have an unwanted pregnancy, be 18 years old or younger, received late, little, or no prenatal care, have no high school diploma or GED, have trouble paying bills, have history of or current alcohol or substance abuse, smoked cigarettes during pregnancy, have current or previous history of mental health issues or counseling, have children in the home under five years old, or have other people in the home with special needs (Healthy Families 2016). The organization represented in this study is unique in that it is open access, meaning it can serve anyone, including middle-class and wealthy families who have no risk factors. In chapter four, I expound upon this element of their work and the implications it has for the broader community and the way we conceive of parenting support in general. Below, I provide a description of Nurturing Minds, the organization that has served as the foundation for this study, and I outline the major programs and services that informed this work.

**Situating Nurturing Minds**

Nurturing Minds is a non-profit organization located in a sprawling metropolitan area of the southeastern United States that I refer to as Elmwood. It is home to over 100 employees, and it served nearly 38,000 individuals through its programs during the year I conducted my research. There are more than ten different programs and services that are offered across several sites, and additionally, employees of the in-home parent education program provide services at nearly 500 different homes throughout the county. The organization’s breadth is impressive, and their programs are well-known among child development specialists and other family service organizations in the community. Funding is secured through a variety of means, but the majority of support comes from a local Children’s Services Council that encourages collaboration with several other local funders. While these numbers and parameters help to reveal some characteristics of Nurturing Minds, its origins and current existence are rooted in a deeper story that includes important social movements, influential scientific and psychological
pronouncements, and a continuously evolving ideal of family life, as imagined by middle-class
and wealthy families. This story is conveyed in chapter four.

Nurturing Minds currently implements a wide array of programs and services for children
ages zero to five and their caregivers. The in-home parent education program, “Side By Side,” is
free and open to anyone and includes one visit per month from a trained educator who spends
approximately one hour doing a combination of activities with the child and discussion with the
parent that both focus on the developmental stage of the child (or children). There are also
approximately ten centers throughout the county at which the organization provides
developmental play groups, called “Play N Learn” (see figure 1 for a visual representation of
programs). The main site for these groups, called The Playroom, is also where the
administrative offices of the organization are located. Play N Learn are intended for parent and
child to engage together in fun and meaningful activities that also encourage or emphasize
elements of the developmental stage of that particular age group. The groups are free at most
sites, but require a small fee at one The Playroom. As I was beginning my research with
Nurturing Minds, the organization had just secured a grant for a well-known parenting
curriculum that is done in a group format, this time for parents only (with childcare available).
This program focuses more on common challenging behaviors that children exhibit, and how to
work through them. The group sessions are followed up by one-on-one sessions in the parent’s
home or by phone. There are prenatal, breastfeeding, and baby massage classes, as well as
several programs specifically for fathers². There are variations of many of their programs at
different kinds of locations, such as an in-patient substance abuse prevention center, hospitals,
and schools, and they partner with many other non-profit and government funded agencies to
provide their programs. Suffice it to say that the organization is well-entrenched in the
community and known for having expertise in the realm of early child development and

² Although all other programs are open to any parent or caregiver, the vast majority of participants are
mothers. This is discussed in more detail in chapter five.
parenting. And again, the focus is always on the parent or the parent-child relationship; programs are never provided for children alone.

Figure 1. Visual representation of Nurturing Minds organizational and program structure

Although this dissertation’s audience is an academic one, the subject is relevant for a broader audience, including professionals who provide parent education, child development specialists, educators, policymakers, and of course, parents themselves. My central focus is on the way we conceive of time in relation to parenting practices in the US, and how time is a coveted parental resource that has the potential to positively impact multiple areas of children’s lives; the more time parents can spend on their children, the better off their children will be, both
in the present and future. But just who can (and can’t) take advantage of this kind of capital is unclear. What is clear is that mainstream expectations of parenting clash with government and workplace policies that restrict parents in their ability to spend a lot of time with their children. All members of society benefit when parents can raise their children in a healthy and desirable manner, and so the discussions in the following chapters include considerations of broader societal implications for parenting.

In chapter two, I delve into the ways that anthropologists have considered parenting from a theoretical perspective, laying the groundwork for a discussion of why this work is relevant to the field today. Chapter three provides an overview of the methodology, detailing the research process and my own positionality to the study. In chapter four, I explore the viewpoints of employees from Nurturing Minds in order to highlight professional perspectives on parenting, also giving attention to their structural roles in society. Parents are given the spotlight in chapter five, as I draw out their definitions of what it means to be a “good” parent and shed light some discrepancies and deviations. Finally, I offer further discussion and conclusions in chapter six, tying together pieces of both professional and parental perspectives and situating them within a historical and societal context. I argue that the ideologies espoused by the employees and parents in this study emanate from a system of social and economic inequality that privileges families in which parents have more resources, such as time, money, and education. This same system inhibits many lower-income and minority parents from accessing child development knowledge and taking part in highly valued parenting practices, thereby disadvantaging them in their choice and ability to be “good” parents.
Chapter 2: The Emergence of an Anthropology of Parenting

We can see the history of research in culture and parenting as a creative tension, at best a dialogue, between the drive for clarity, concreteness, and universality on the one hand, and for synthesis, thematicity, and the understanding of cultural uniqueness on the other. (Harkness and Super 2002:276)

An anthropology of parenting has yet to take form. There are no interest groups on parenting within the American Anthropological Association, only one volume dedicated to the ways in which the field has treated parenting, and no review articles on the subject. Although parents have certainly been included in numerous studies, attention to the meanings and practices of parenting (a term that already warrants further interrogation) has been spotty and shifting over the past century in the discipline of anthropology. Parenting, or childrearing—a more favored term historically—has frequently been part of broader discussions of socialization and the transmission of culture (Harkness and Super 2002; LeVine 2007). Early theoretical viewpoints on culture and parenting in anthropology were heavily embedded in psychological perspectives on child development. Although this influence still lingers, more recent anthropological studies on parenting do not share a common goal in the same way they did during the early and mid-twentieth century, when anthropologists were united in efforts to disprove universalist psychological theories (LeVine 2007). Recent studies appear to be developing in relative isolation from one another, and it is difficult to find a common theme or motivation that grounds them.

Importantly, however, anthropologists have produced a substantial amount of research on children and childhood over the last decade and a half. One of the uniting themes across this

---

3 There was a special edition of *Ethos* on mothering in 2010, which I discuss later in the paper, but this was not nearly as extensive as more formal review articles usually are.
research has been an interrogation of the extent to which children have their own agency, or even their own culture (Bluebond-Langer 2007; Hecht 1998 Hirschfeld 2002; James 2007; Lancy 2008; LeVine 2007). These studies have deconstructed the traditional view of children as passive recipients of culture who develop on a linear plane on their way to adulthood. While the focus of these studies is on the child or the concept of childhood, implicit in them is a question of the role of the parent. If children are to be viewed anew, then what does this mean for our interpretations of parents and their interactions with children? This influx of research on children provides a strong impetus for completing the picture of family relations by concentrating also on parenting studies.

Some anthropologists have speculated on why there has been a lack of interest in parenting in anthropology. For instance, in discussing her research with Beng babies of Côte d’Ivoire, Alma Gottlieb (2004) points out that many cultural anthropologists are not parents when they begin their fieldwork and cannot envision the kinds of questions to ask or approaches to take that would lead to a meaningful study. She also highlights problems with the gendered notion of maternal instinct, in which people assume that mothering is natural to women, and not something that is learned: “In this case, what is there of interest for the anthropologist studying cultural processes? Not much” (50). Additionally, in earlier ethnographic studies of societies with strong separation between public and private realms, the “domestic” or private sphere where mothering acts took place were not accessible (or even, perhaps, of interest) to anthropologists, especially men. Perhaps this negligence was resolved by feminist movements and the surge of research on mothering that has happened since the 1970s, especially by feminist anthropologists seeking to understand cross-cultural differences in gender, including the maternal role (Lamphere 1977; Leacock et al. 1978; Milton 1979; Quinn 1977; Rosaldo 1980; Sanday 1973). But that still leaves us with remarkably little anthropological investigation of conceptions of parenthood in general, especially in the United States.
Furthermore, much of the research on parents and children emerged from an anthropology that drew heavily from psychological research and psychologically influenced frameworks during the early and mid-twentieth century (Benedict 1946; Mead 1968 [1928]; Whiting and Whiting 1975) continue to be popular among anthropologists and other social scientists studying children and parents today (Harkness and Super 2006; Weisner 2011b). Sociologists and historians have also provided rich insight into patterns of family life, which greatly inform present day inquiries about the nature of social structures related to parents and children (Coontz 2010; Fass and Grossberg 2012; Hochschild 2012 [1989]; Lareau 2011 [2003]; Lindenmeyer 2012; Mintz 2010).

Given that there is widespread attention on the topic from other fields, is there even a need within anthropology to provide a space for the study of parenthood? And what elements of parent life would make this a worthy goal? In order to answer these questions, I will identify the various ways anthropologists and social scientists in related fields have considered parenting thus far, with a specific focus on theoretical frameworks. This analysis is intended to highlight the most pertinent theories to studies of children, families, and parenting. Throughout the discussion I consider possibilities for combining elements from these different fields and approaches in a way that best responds to gaps in research on parenting and how this ultimately connects to my dissertation research. I begin with a description of the ways that anthropology has differed from other social sciences like sociology and history in its approach to studying family life, while also emphasizing the benefits of incorporating knowledge from these fields. These other perspectives will be woven throughout the paper in order to help situate anthropological research during certain time periods. Finally, I argue that by integrating multiple theoretical frameworks across disciplines, we are able to view parenting as a powerful cultural force—one that carries with it markers from historical and social movements, and one that also plays a significant role in shaping future societal values and practices through social reproduction.
Early Ethnographies: The Theoretical Value of Studying Childrearing

The study of children provides a window into conceptions of parenting, and for anthropology, we can begin by looking at studies that helped to define the US “brand” of anthropology in the early twentieth century. As Harkness and Super (2002, 254) note, accounts of parenting practices during this time were often merely “interwoven” with descriptions of other rituals and practices, yet we can still see the emergence of a more robust focus on parenting eventually begin to take place. Some of the most recognized ethnographic works of the early twentieth century included descriptions of children and childrearing, such as Radcliff-Brown’s *The Andaman Islanders* (1964 [1932]), Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1968 [1928]) and *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1966 [1930]), and Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946). Mead and Benedict’s work, in particular, were representative of the “culture and personality” school, which focused on understanding how culture shapes individuals, giving special attention to the crucial role of childrearing in socialization (Harkness and Super 2002; LeVine 2007). The idea of socialization at the time was heavily influenced by developmental psychology theories, particularly those of like Sigmund Freud, who, during the 1920s onward had become highly influential, as LeVine (2007) describes: “Freud’s works drew unprecedented attention to the subjective experience of children and added a public preoccupation with the new and anxious questions: What is the best way to raise a child? What is the normal child? Through what stages of child development do infants become adults?” As is evident in this quote, children were seen by psychologists as developing on a path towards adulthood, a notion also supported by Benedict’s description of a grown child as a “finished product” (1946, 254) (Harkness and Super 2002; LeVine 2007). This idea would later be heavily critiqued by anthropologists who argued that infants and young children have a unique and innate ability to “acquire cultural knowledge” (Hirschfeld 2002:614), or decipher cultural categories on their own (Gottlieb 2004; Hecht 1998).
However, in the culture and personality school, childrearing practices were seen as ideal for observing the transmission of culture, with the implicit assumption that these practices were both interpretable by an outsider and indicative of actual beliefs and values held within the culture. Research in these non-Western, “traditional” societies was important in contradicting widespread psychological theories that claimed that all children developed through universal stages in the same way; anthropologists could show that child development was culturally bound and concepts such as adolescent angst or infant attachment were not experienced in the same ways cross-culturally (Hewlett and Lamb 2005:4; Lancy 2008; LeVine 2007; Quinn and Mageo 2013). However, because of the focus on attempting to define the norms and values of a “whole culture” during this time, early anthropologists struggled to make sense of individual variation within culture, and their work was later seen as generalizing entire populations (Harkness and Super 2002; Sanday 1979). Furthermore, in their attempts to examine broader cultural patterns and rituals, there was little scrutiny of the nuances within parenting practices, such as where they emanated from and how local people interpreted their own beliefs with respect to raising children.

Efforts to find generalizable patterns across cultures continued into the mid-twentieth century, but with a renewed focus on being able to predict “modes of socialization” from cultural elements such as the biophysical environment, subsistence pattern, political structure, and division of labor (Harkness and Super 2002; Lancy 2008; Hewlett and Lamb 2005). By the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists such as John Whiting and colleagues sought to define types of families or communities within a culture, rather than generalize about a whole population (Harkness and Super 2002). Cultural variables, such as having a nomadic lifestyle or having certain kinds of co-sleeping arrangements, were used in a formulaic way as predictors to test psychological or behavioral outcomes across cultures. The Whitings and colleagues’ Six Cultures study (1964)– an attempt to compare numerous practical and psychological aspects of the parent-child relationship across six distinct societies–is a classic example of work from this
period and is noteworthy in that it gives specific attention to the role parents had in determining children’s social behaviors (Harkness and Super 2002). Caretaking practices were seen as indicators of behavior patterns that could be generalized within societies. While this massive undertaking was ultimately outside the reach of concrete theoretical findings, it brought out questions of structure and agency in childrearing that other anthropologists would continue to explore (Whiting 1980; Whiting and Whiting 1975). It also showcased the wide variability of parenting and childrearing practices around the globe, further demonstrating the limitations of Western psychology’s models of child development “norms.”

Extending the analysis of environmental influences on childrearing practices, several biological anthropologists, beginning in the 1960s, conducted research examining infant caretaking, particularly among small foraging groups in non-Western societies (Blaffer Hrdy 1999; Harkness and Super 2002; Konner 2005; Hewlett and Lamb 2005). It is clear that psychology continued to influence these anthropological studies. LeVine (2007, 254) suggests that the 1960s brought with it new psychological evidence of the ways in which infants developed in response to their environment, leading to more widespread inferences that certain developmental patterns are universal and “hard-wired.” Melvin Konner was among the first to work in this area in the 1960s among the !Kung San, leading many others to build on his work both in sub-Saharan Africa and many other regions across the globe (Konner 2005; Hewlett and Lamb 2005; LeVine 2007).

The objective of many of these studies was to understand infant care in an environment “considered to most closely replicate the conditions under which humans are thought to have evolved…” (Blaffer Hrdy 1999; Hewlett and Lamb 2005; Quinn and Mageo 2013, 8). At the time, there was a tendency to view many non-Western farming and foraging societies as “living fossils,” untouched by Western interactions and practices, but this notion was strongly disputed in later years (Hewlett and Lamb 2005; Lee 1979). These studies were often used to support a prominent psychological idea at the time known as attachment theory, developed by
psychologist John Bowlby and colleagues, who suggested that it was the hunting and gathering environment in which human attachment-forming processes developed (Bowlby 1982 [1969]; Hewlett and Lamb 2005; Small 1998). Although Bowlby asserted that strong infant/caregiver attachment characterized by frequent responsiveness and proximity was essential to human development, anthropologists would later use some of these same hunter-gatherer studies to challenge Bowlby’s attachment theory, arguing that it was theoretically and methodologically ethnocentric and that the mother’s role was overstated (Small 1998; Blaffer Hrdy 1999; Konner 2005; Quinn and Mageo 2013; Lee et al. 2014). Generally, this cross-cultural research conducted by anthropologists exposed the variability in foraging societies and allowed scholars to analyze universalist theories with more depth and complexity.

However, one of the major problems with many of the early ethnographic studies across subfields is that the position of researcher was considered to be wholly objective, and the assertions he or she made about the societies they studied were considered authoritative and uncomplicated by their status or social orientations to the people they lived and worked among (Mascia Lees et al. 1989). There were still traces of ideas about “primitive” versus “civilized” societies and assumptions that foraging people represented a sort of “living fossil” of the environment out of which modern humans evolved, an idea that has since been criticized on many levels (Lamb and Hewlett 2005). Furthermore, the categories under study, such as parental responsiveness or indulgence, were defined externally as culturally meaningful, not within the cultural frameworks of the people in these non-Western societies. Anthropologists were looking for specific evidence to support or dispute mainstream psychological theories about child development (Harkness and Super 2002; Lamb and Hewlett 2005; LeVine 2007). What was really lacking from a sociocultural subdisciplinary perspective was discussion of how parents interpreted their own beliefs and goals for raising children. Perhaps this was because the power and authoritative positioning that came with being an anthropologist prior to the postmodern turn in the 1980s allowed them to believe their interpretations were objective.
But the lack of emphasis on parents’ own understanding of their ideologies towards raising children was a gaping hole nonetheless, that would soon be filled by changes in ethnography through critical, feminist, and postmodern points of view.

Next, the path towards an anthropology of parenting leads to a more linguistic approach in the 1970s and 1980s, continuing the focus on socialization and its reception by children. In particular, there was a strong emphasis by many linguistic anthropologists on the “language socialization” theory, which viewed language development as inextricably linked to cultural development. Infant and mother interactions across cultures were a fundamental part of this new body of research, though it also expanded to children and caretakers at many different stages (Heath 1988; Ochs 1988; Ochs and Schieffelin 2011). Ochs (1988, 14) elaborates on the interactions between language and sociocultural processes:

> Given that meanings and functions are to a large extent socioculturally organized, linguistic knowledge is embedded in sociocultural knowledge. On the other hand, understandings of the social organization of everyday life, cultural ideologies, moral values, beliefs, and structures of knowledge and interpretation are to a large extent acquired through the medium of language…Children develop concepts of a socioculturally structured universe through their participation in language activities.

These studies were an attempt, in part, to understand to what extent culture was “in the heads of all people” or learned through interactions with people and the environment, with some anthropologists arguing that language was a mediator between the “nature vs. nurture” argument, as it was both innate and learned (Heath 1988; Ochs 1988, 5). Although these studies gave significant attention to parents through observations of caretaking interactions, the main focus was still on how linguistic interactions affected children and their development into “competent” members of society (Ochs and Schieffelin 2001; Paugh 2011).

As may be evident, the theoretical frameworks used to shed light on childrearing in anthropology during much of the twentieth century rarely focused on the actual acts or beliefs of
parenting for the sake of understanding parents in their own context; most of the research related to parenting during this time was motivated by a desire to describe cultural patterns of non-Western societies or to understand cultural processes through the ways children acquire culture. In their attempts to examine broader cultural patterns and rituals, there was little scrutiny of the nuances within parenting practices, such as where they emanated from and how local people interpreted their own beliefs with respect to raising children.

As American anthropologists set out to explicitly find evidence for or against universalist claims of child development, they often neglected to look in their own backyards⁴. Surely, this stemmed from the idea that anthropologists could not be objective within one’s own society, and the preference to study “others” was also likely a facet of the colonialist underpinnings of the discipline in its early years. Nonetheless, these missing narratives left a void in studies of children and families in the United States from an anthropological perspective, at least during the first half of the twentieth century.

Anthropologists would eventually produce rich ethnographies of issues related to family structures beginning in the 1960s with urban anthropology (Liebow 1967; Sanjek 1990; Stack 1974), but most of the attention to childrearing would come from comparative analyses of other societies. One of the major takeaways from these early- to mid-twentieth century endeavors, however, is that understanding childrearing practices can help to reveal the cultural values of a society, a notion I extend further in consideration of parenting ideologies. They also showed us, in both general and very specific ways, how the economic, social, and political makeup of a society can influence the ways that we see children and childrearing. More refined theoretical extrapolation from ethnographies of parenting practices would come later, however, as scholars

⁴ Some anthropologists conducted research with Native Americans, including Ruth Benedict’s “Configurations of Culture in North America” (1932), but the diversity of families in the United States went mostly unrepresented by anthropology during this time.
began to integrate and build on ideas brought forth from some of these earlier treatments of socialization.

**Mothers, Work, and Feminist Perspectives**

Broadly, the civil rights movement sparked interest in issues of race, violence, and poverty, but the growing focus on women in the US through feminist movements seemed to infiltrate the field of anthropology in more pervasive ways, especially with regard to women’s roles as mothers. Feminist activism and theory throughout the past half century has greatly influenced academic and popular ideas about parental roles. Feminist research from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s emerged out of “the women’s movement,” a politically active struggle to advocate for women’s equality and eradicate the notion that women should only be relegated to the private, caretaking sphere. Much of the feminist literature from this time viewed motherhood as an oppressive force that relegated women to restrictive roles and prevented them from engaging in public life to the same extent as men (de Beauvoir 1952; Chodorow 1978; Freidan 1963; Gilligan 1982; Rich 1977; Ruddick 1980). However, it became clear that the feminist movement hinged on the perspectives of white middle-class women, as elucidated by Sarah Ruddick’s comment in her essay, *Maternal Thinking*: “…I draw upon my knowledge of the institutions of motherhood in middle-class, white, Protestant, capitalist, patriarchal America…” (1980, 214). The stark differences between women who were leading the movement and many of the women whose interests they were claiming to represent would remain a lingering criticism of the so-called second wave feminist movement (Collins 1994; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Glenn 1994).

Nevertheless, this brand of feminism was a powerful motivator for change, and many disciplines—anthropology among them—began to incorporate feminist reflections into their work. During the 1970s, anthropologists “…produced an entire new literature on the status of women cross-culturally” (Quinn 1977, 181). The field saw an influx in research devoted to women in
many capacities, including better understanding their lives and roles, reexamining their value outside of a dichotomous and patriarchal view, complicating universal ideas related to sex and gender, and acknowledging the bias inherent in previous work that prevented men from fully entering into the realm of women’s lives or interpreting them in an unbiased way (Lamphere 1977; Leacock et al. 1978; Milton 1979; Quinn 1977; Rosaldo 1980; Sanday 1973). One area of women’s lives that received increased attention was the role of the mother; although anthropologists widely agreed that women everywhere took on greater responsibility in childcare than men, these new studies sought to have a more nuanced understanding of the elements that led to such a responsibility, shedding new light on “female values, goals, and strengths” (Rosaldo 1980, 386; Leacock 1978; Quinn 1977). Not only was a subfield of feminist anthropology quickly taking root, but many feminist writers used anthropological studies as a basis for showing either that women were oppressed around the world or that there were many egalitarian, or even matriarchal societies that Western societies could learn from (and the irony of using some of the same studies to support opposing views was not lost on anthropologists) (Rosaldo 1980; Strathern 1987).

Despite its awkwardness at times, the dialogue between feminism and anthropology was largely fruitful, and the flowering of anthropological research on women and mothering continued into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the US also saw an increase in sociological studies of women and mothers, and as women increasingly moved into the paid labor force towards the end of the twentieth century, the conflict of competing “devotions” between home and work were brought to light (Blair-Loy 2009; Hays 1996; Hochschild 2012 [1989]; Stone 2007). These studies show that gender roles that praise women as mothers and devalue them as workers were still deeply embedded in the workplaces and homes of middle-class and wealthy Americans, despite the feminist movement which sought to eradicate such limitations. However, this conflict between two ideologies was not as present for many women of color, as Collins (1994) notes: “Work and family have rarely functioned as dichotomous spheres for
women of color” (46). This is not to say that women of color and working-class and poor, white women did not struggle with these roles; however, because the past “protection” of mothers from work applied largely to the white middle-class, the ensuing identity conflict that later occurred is largely what has been written into the literature. However, some anthropologists during this period produced research on more diverse aspects of the work/family discussion. For example, Lamphere and colleagues’ *Sunbelt Working Mothers: Reconciling Family and Factory* (1993) examines how working-class white and Mexican-American women’s ideologies converge and depart in the face of heavy demands in both their work and home lives.

Within feminist theory, discussions of mothering—as distinct from parenting—continued to be pervasive. Between the 1980s and 90s, many feminist scholars saw a need for transforming feminist theory to address the multiplicities of experiences and identities and speak to broader issues of social justice (Anzaldúa 1987; Butler 1990; Collins 1991; Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1984; Lorde 1984). Thus, theories of intersectionality took hold, calling out the limitations of the idea of a unified “women’s” experience (Crenshaw 1991). The interplay between categories such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender became a major focal point of feminist research. As Dill and Zambrana note, “Intersectional analysis begins with the experiences of groups that occupy multiple social locations and finds approaches and ideas that focus on the complexity rather than the singularity of human experience” (2009, 2) Intersectionality was particularly useful in understanding the various experiences of mothers situated differently across social spaces. Although feminists were careful not to use mothering as a deterministic lens through which to view women’s experiences, some brought about important viewpoints for understanding personal, political, and structural ramifications of denying the varying experiences of mothers in the US.

For instance, in her seminal work, *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), Patricia Hill Collins devotes several chapters to discussion about the varying historical circumstances of black women with regard to work, family, and mothering, exposing disparities between mothering
ideology as it was often portrayed—from a white middle-class perspective—versus how it was experienced by many black women who historically faced different challenges. And in their edited volume, *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (1994) Evelyn Nakano Glenn and colleagues include chapters that challenge traditional and binary ideologies of mothering by focusing on “the existence of historical, cultural, class, and ethnic variation in mothering, and the existence of conflict and struggle over competing conceptions and conditions under which mothering is carried out” (ix). These notions fit in well with anthropological explorations of varied meanings of caregiving and mothering, because, after all, anthropologists had grappled with these issues in a cross-cultural context for decades.

This attention to mothering—especially from a feminist lens, both within and outside of anthropology—was necessary and insightful, and it gave scholars a strong foundation for expanding on discussions about how parenting ideas play out in mothers’ (and fathers’) everyday lives. Throughout this study, and particularly in chapter three, I utilize these feminist perspectives to underscore the way that mainstream parenting ideals are *not* being informed by multiple perspectives, and are, in fact, centered around an idea of family life that has historically applied largely to white, middle-class families. Feminist theoretical framings of work and family are also influential in my exploration of the decisions many women in this study make in deciding how to orient their lives around work and family, which I discuss in further detail in chapter five. In order to understand the various actors, practices, and structures that converge to make societal ideologies salient, I now turn to a discussion of practice theory.

**Practice Theory and Its Lasting Impact**

Many anthropologists during the 1980s began to develop and build on ideas of practice theory, as espoused largely by Pierre Bourdieu during the 1970s, along with influence from major theorists like Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, who’s work defined a good deal of anthropological thought in the preceding decades. Although there are different schools of
practice theory, one of the common threads is that it emerged as an oppositional response to understanding culture in either structural or symbolic terms, which viewed behavior as being determined by external systems or environment, respectively (Ortner 1984). In contrast to these theories, practice theorists viewed human actions as having agency and being at least somewhat motivated by self-interest, and as contributing to larger social structures rather than simply being defined by them (Bourdieu 1995 [1977]; Ortner 1984). According to Bourdieu, there was a feedback system between the *habitus*—or the internalized principles, actions, and habits of people—which influenced structures, and the structures, which informed and constrained people’s practices. This meant that culture could be better understood by analyzing people’s participation in society through everyday practices and interrogating the spaces between the rules and norms of practice as insiders portrayed them to observers.

Sherry Ortner defines “practice” broadly (and perhaps somewhat satirically) as “anything people do” (1984, 149), and in some ways, it is exactly the unremarkable, routine activities that people participate in which practice theorists seek out to interpret culture. Bourdieu suggests that “natives’” accounts of their own practices may be seen as ideological projections imbued (or tainted) with meaning that an observer cannot perceive (1995 [1977]). Therefore, when people are partaking in everyday, tacit practices, the meaning is more valuable: “It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know” (Bourdieu 1995 [1977], 79). This rationale calls into question people’s interpretation of their own cultural worlds, suggesting that attempts to define meaning internally may be an act of alteration in itself, and that more valuable meaning may be located in people’s participation in practices. This theme of practice versus ideology became salient in related social sciences, especially those related to psychology and development, and many scholars have applied this framework to parenting practices.

Ortner points to the “so-called domestic domain” as a space “where action proceeds with little reflection,” inadvertently pointing to ways that practice theory may be especially useful for
understanding cultural phenomena related to the home (1985, 151). Practice theory and a focus on practices may also help to make distinctions between beliefs and ideologies about parenting, versus actions and language that make principles evident. Jacqueline Goodnow (1988) highlights how research on parenting beliefs has shown a difference between beliefs and practices, delineating some of the ways that social psychologists have attempted to capture meaningful insight about parents’ social worlds within these contradictory spaces. Amy Paugh (2011) expounds upon this dichotomy between “real’ and ‘ideal’” in her discussion of what she terms *local theories of childrearing*: “During early socialization activities, parents and other caregivers often make explicit for children’s benefit cultural rules and knowledge that are usually tacit, offering researchers insights into local goals or priorities of child development” (152). In other words, while caregivers may not be able to readily articulate beliefs about parenting, the way they socialize their children through language gives many cues to the values implicit in their parenting philosophies.

Many social scientists from psychological backgrounds have adopted the practice approach and expanded on theoretical framings of families and parenting. Thomas Weisner and colleagues developed a framework called the “ecocultural niche” to study the ways that families negotiate with and draw from larger cultural ideologies in order to create culturally significant practices and routines (Gallimore et al. 1989; Weisner 1997; Weisner 2011a; Weisner 2011b). The ecocultural niche is important in highlighting the ways that parents and families are “active participants in the construction of their own cultural settings rather than simply replicators of the wider culture around them” (Harkness and Super 2002). This perspective implies that parents are aware of cultural messages from their environment and have agency in determining whether or not to participate in them or define them on their own terms. Although Weisner’s research has focused largely on families with children with developmental delays, we can see a clear movement toward a more nuanced understanding of parental roles as influenced by cultural norms.
Similarly, Sara Harkness and Charles Super elaborate this theme in what they term the “developmental niche,” defined as a “theoretical framework for studying how the child’s microenvironment of daily life is culturally shaped” (2002, 272). They see parents as having a crucial role in three defined aspects of the developmental niche: 1) the physical and social settings of the child’s life; 2) culturally regulated customs and practices of childcare and childrearing; and 3) the psychology of the caregivers (Harkness and Super 2002, 272). This developmental niche harkens back to previous research on environmental influences on child development, yet Harkness and Super specifically hone in on parents’ cultural belief systems through elaboration of what they term “parental ethnotheories” (Harkness and Super 1996; Harkness and Super 2002). According to Harkness and Super, parental ethnotheories are what shape parenting behavior and help parents determine how to raise children, or even to decide what kinds of attributes are desirable in children. This framing of parents as having a crucial role in impacting cultural processes is especially valuable for researching parental definitions of what it means to be a good parent. However, some studies conducted using the parental ethnotheories framework have relied on generalizations about whole societies, an ironic remnant of earlier anthropological work on whole cultures.

Beyond the 1990s, there is little reference to “practice theory” in such a clear form (if it ever even neatly came together), although many researchers studying culture and parenting or children continued to focus their analytical lens on practices as a point of entry into cultural understandings. This departure from a broader theoretical perspective in exchange for the methodological “meat” of practice theory has been met with criticism by some. Ortner (1984) notes the emerging focus on “microdevelopments” within the field, which seem removed from proper contextualization; Gaskins (2000) warns of the problems with only focusing on “microanalyses” of culture, or simply describing practices, without situating them in macroanalyses; and Rouse (2007) explains that there is such a wide variety of practitioners employing a practice methodology that it would seem impossible to situate it within a coherent
theoretical framing. However, Rouse also notes that the reason so many social scientists utilize a practice approach is because “there must be a level or dimension of human understanding expressed in what we do that is more fundamental than any explicit interpretation of that understanding” (503). So although the diverse theoretical elements that accompanied a focus on practice may have never fully converged, it is clear that the interest in locating culture in everyday activities became highly influential.

Practice theory, then, has been woven into both the methodological approach and the theoretical structure of this dissertation. My decision to study both parental and professional ideas about parenting is reflective of the interplay between agent (the parent) and structure (the organization) inherent in practice theory (Bourdieu 1995 [1977]). It is precisely the intersection of these ideas and the bi-directional influence that I attempt to unearth. Also, the assumption that researchers can glean meaningful insight from discussions and observations of daily practices—which is also the basis of this study—has been formalized through practice theory (Ortner 1984). Even though observation and interview have long been the basis of ethnography, practice theory offers a rationale for looking beneath the surface of people’s actions and words to search for underlying motivations. For parenting, especially, actions can often be reactive or spontaneous, as demands often arise before parents have time or realize the need to think through beliefs or ideal practices. Yet many have already been imbued with messages about what “good” parenting is (or at least what “bad” parenting is), and for this study, I use practice theory as a basis for understanding what is unspoken in parents’ beliefs about parenting practices.

**Reproduction Theory: A Twist on Socialization**

Reproduction theory is another school of thought that emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century, reflecting anthropological attempts to understand the relationship between cultural values and the social structures that influence them. Many anthropologists and
sociologists developed theories to explain how and why people took part in the reproduction of their own social status. Reproduction theory is often described as either economic or cultural, depending on which functions of society theorists sought to explain (Giroux 1983; Levinson and Holland 1996). From an economic reproduction standpoint, institutions were viewed as reproducing oppressive circumstances through capitalist functions (Giroux 1983; Yon 2003; Collins 2009; Foley 2010). Schools were a particularly fertile ground for debating issues of reproduction, as they were clear structural entities through which intentional and unspoken cultural processes could be observed (Althusser 1971; Apple 1979; Baudelot and Establet 1975; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Rist 1973). Although family life is not typically considered an institution in the same way that more formal structural entities are, it is certainly not outside the realm of theorizing with regard to economic reproduction, though it may require an analysis of how families intersect with institutions in order to reproduce patterns of financial stability or instability. For families in this study, I point out the way education and certain categories of jobs provide more support for raising families according to mainstream values, which then allow children in those families to be better positioned long-term to be academically and financially successful, thus replicating the same pattern.

The cultural strand of the reproduction model, however, brought about a more nuanced view of how inequality is reproduced, largely through Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This approach is distinguishable from an economic approach in that it uses the symbolic, cultural bases of privilege such as “taste” and “intelligence” (which are also subjectively and arbitrarily tied to power) as units of social power. Those who are members of the dominant class carry greater cultural capital than those who are members of the working class because they have been able to accumulate more capital over time and through social relations. Those who embody the dominant cultural norms are legitimized and those who do not are marginalized (Giroux 1983). Importantly, Bourdieu extends this analysis to show that cultural capital is ultimately transferrable to economic capital (from
good school credentials to college acceptance and graduation to high-paying jobs), thus fulfilling a system of stratified economic inequality. Bourdieu’s discussion of *habitus*, or learned disposition, allows us to see how people are complicit in staying in their place in the social hierarchy. It is the habitus of both the elite class and the subordinated class that allow the unequal system to continue (Bourdieu 1977).

Bourdieu’s work was important for rounding out economic reproduction theory by showing that inequality was more than a matter of placed structural movement from one institution to another (i.e., school to work); whether or not people had the “right” kind of cultural knowledge, along with arbitrary constraints that kept them in their places also contributed to a continued system of inequality. This concept is useful in understanding how parents of differing social classes learn about and interact with family service organizations—are they learning about services from their middle-class peers and social networks, or are they referred by a court? And how might parental education be interpreted differently given such varying circumstances? Most significant to this study, however, is the way that child development professionals have determined that a “right” way of parenting exists, and throughout the study I critique both the way the knowledge is derived and the way that it is applied to all families, regardless of whether it fits with their needs or desires.

Of course, many scholars have pointed to limitations of Bourdieu’s theory as well, most notably that his model was overly deterministic in implying that class-based differences were set in stone and he neglected to complicate issues of embedded systems of power such as patriarchy and racism (Levinson and Holland 1996; Collins 2009). Giroux (1983) also criticizes Bourdieu for showing a unidirectional process of cultural production—from the dominant class to the working class—neglecting the processes by which working class people participate in their own cultural production. As a whole, reproduction theory received enough criticism by the end of the 1980s that it began to wane from theoretical perspectives in the field. The most consistently listed problems with reproduction theory were that it lacked room for agency, individuality, and
voice (Giroux 1983; Collins 2009). And social structure, especially, was “increasingly recognized as being unstable, contradictory, and no longer the taken-for-granted, all-determining object ‘out there’” (Yon 2003, 419-420). While many scholars note that reproduction theory was more or less left behind as a singular theoretical framework (Collins 2009; Foley 2010), these new ways of conceptualizing power and inequality were hugely significant in beginning to place (much needed) focus on marginalized people and in moving anthropology (among other social sciences) forward from a place of cultural determinism.

It is clear that the substantial value gained from these perspectives still influences developments in social theory today. Cultural capital, especially, is frequently used as an explanation for inequality and differences in lifestyle among different groups of people (Banks 2012; Lareau 2011 [2003]; Perrier 2012; Vincent and Maxwell 2016). In a keyword search for “cultural capital” and “families” in ProQuest’s social science database, for instance, 3,511 matches were found for peer-reviewed articles published within the last five years. Perhaps the global movement towards neoliberalism over the past few decades, in which public funding and resources have become privatized and widely accessed public supports have been restricted (Craven and Davis 2013; Faircloth 2014; Larner 2000), has heightened our awareness of inequality and prompted scholars to search for a more comprehensive understanding of how these patterns have evolved. Distributions of capital that are seemingly more subtle, like knowledge and beliefs gained from social networks, are as important to understand as more structured distributions, like money, jobs, and education, and this dissertation is one way that that we can access such knowledge about parenting ideologies.

**Concerted Cultivation—New Insights**

Although Bourdieu’s and other anthropologists’ point of reference for reproduction theory stemmed largely from the realm of education, issues of cultural reproduction also have widespread implications for parenting practices. In *Unequal Childhoods* (2011 [2003]) Annette
Lareau has elaborated on this concept by showing how families in different economic classes interact within a specific framework of ideologies, communication, and participation in civic life in order to maintain their class identities. She infuses the concept of cultural capital throughout this work, arguing that middle-class and wealthy families participate in a system of concerted cultivation in which parents intentionally hone opportunities for their children throughout their childhoods, paving the way for lifelong success. Working class and poor parents, on the other hand, are described as taking a more hands-off approach to allow child development to unfold on its own, which Lareau refers to as the attainment of natural growth. This is a tactic that allows for more autonomous development and socialization in children, but one that does not give them advantages in institutional settings. Because concerted cultivation is valued by major institutions, families who practice it are more successful in navigating important systems that ultimately lead to a continuation of higher economic status and security. Likewise, according to Lareau, children who follow a natural progression of childhood with little interference or direction from parents experience more challenges with education, work, and possibly health, causing them to remain in the same lower economic status. Cultural capital is used frequently by higher income parents and is rarely accessed by lower-income parents.

This explanation for the continuation of social inequality is limited, however, in that it generalizes entire classes of families, and it does so along seemingly arbitrary economic lines. There are certainly many outliers to Lareau’s suggested pattern, such as the so-called upward mobility of many families from one class to another, for which we are left with no explanation. Additionally, although “race” is included in the subtitle and referenced throughout the book, it is done so inconsistently and without a clear purpose. Lareau largely discusses race in regard to black families, in terms of the additional labor parents must do to incorporate considerations and conversation about race into their parenting. While this is an important observation and worthy of further discussion, it is not theorized into her larger framework. If the social concept of race is something that is part of inequality, then it would seemingly play a part in both black and white
families in the study, although there is very little discussion of how race contributes to parenting practices of white families. The analysis also only discusses black and white heteronormative families, who are depicted as representative of their entire social classes. What kinds of insights might change this theoretical perspective on cultural capital if a more diverse sample of parents were included? The ways that families are structured and parental roles and identities are formed influence the needs and capabilities of families in raising young children. If only some families are included in this discussion, the conversation is limited. For example, Lareau’s work does not speak to the experiences of families who have immigrated to the United States in recent generations, and how their cultural values intersect with those of American institutions.

Some scholars have elaborated on the concept of concerted cultivation, providing answers to some of the questions left unfulfilled by Unequal Childhoods. Katerina Bodovski (2010) complicates Lareau’s finding that race was not as significant a determinant of parenting styles by arguing that parental expectations and practices vary consistently by the child’s race and gender, even once class is controlled for. In her study, African American parents were found to do less concerted cultivation, especially of daughters, than their white counterparts. Furthermore, Bodovski found that parenting practices affected academic achievement more at the younger age examined (kindergarten) than the older age (fifth grade). Patricia Ann Banks (2012) points to ways that some middle-class black families embrace concerted cultivation by explicitly involving their children in arts education as a means of enrichment. While this method fulfills Bourdeiu’s theory of cultural capital, a distinction here is that many of the families intentionally exposed their children to black fine arts through exhibits or pieces in the home, serving as a way to “legitimize” their race while also participating in a mainstream parenting practice. A similar trend was found among black middle-class families in England, in that black parents who participated in concerted cultivation did so with multiple purposes, which included helping their children gain advantages in the future and asserting a valid association with the middle class (Vincent and Maxwell 2016). Importantly, in these families it was typical for black
middle-class parents to provide education to their children on racial injustice, which may have been done informally at home or through specific programs and organizations. From these examples, it is clear that cultural capital as conceived by Bourdieu was limited, and that class alone should not continue to be viewed as a determinant of parent/child interactions.

Furthermore, Carol Vincent and Claire Maxwell (2016) nuance the concept of concerted cultivation by addressing the issue of intentionality. The authors suggest that parents may have multiple purposes and motivations in proactively managing their children’s lives, and that in an effort to project the impact of concerted cultivation onto future outcomes, Lareau may have overlooked real-time benefits, such as socializing with diverse peer groups and building community in a society that no longer naturally does so. Tamara Mose (2016) and Maude Perrier (2012) both complicate the issue of intentionality by showing how concerted cultivation affects parents, regardless of the benefits to their children. In Mose’s *The Playdate: Parents, Children, and the New Expectations of Play*, she theorizes that middle-class and wealthy Brooklyn parents stage elaborate play dates for their children largely as a way to accumulate both social capital (by increasing the number of professional parents in their networks) and cultural capital (by showcasing the appropriate tastes in lifestyle and material goods) for themselves. Perrier’s qualitative study of ten United Kingdom mothers points to the agency of the mother in performing concerted cultivation; it is not simply for the benefit of the child, it has become part of her identity. Many of the mothers in her study saw their adherence to concerted cultivation as a way of developing their moral selves, and whether or not they could be considered a “good” mother. These examples provide a multifaceted understanding of mothers’ rationale for participating in concerted cultivation, unlike the unidirectional, outcomes-oriented ideology put forth by Lareau.

Some resistance to the idea of concerted cultivation is becoming evident. In popular media, terms such as “hovering” and “helicopter parenting” have become commonplace derogatory descriptors of parents who take too much responsibility in cultivating their children’s
development, as have terms such as “entitled” and “privileged” in referring to children who are considered too dependent on their parents and who expect educational and career pathways to be paved for them (Jayson 2012; Gillespie 2014). Out of these phenomena, and as Lareau notes in her conclusions (254), trends that focus on very limited parental intervention and unstructured education such as “free range parenting” and “unschooling” have emerged with increasing popularity (Gibbs 2009; Skenazy 2010; Davis 2006). As another example of resistance to concerted cultivation, Romagnoli and Wall (2012) show how young Canadian mothers resist the intensive mothering ideology in a parent education program, both explicitly by questioning the validity of cognitive development advice, and implicitly through not having the time or financial resources to participate in such cultivation. Finally, Maude Perrier (2012) complicates the view of middle-class parents eagerly providing multiple opportunities and activities for their children’s advancement by showing how mothers in her study struggle with the expectations of concerted cultivation. Their ambivalence about how much to buy in to concerted cultivation stems from perceived judgments about a host of parenting practices, including how much time to spend with a child, what kinds of toys and media are appropriate, whether they are overemphasizing formal learning instead of unstructured play, and whether they are overextending their children through multiple activities. The characteristics of the accomplishment of natural growth, as outlined by Lareau, seem to have leaked in to mainstream thoughts on parenting, especially with regard to younger children.

Although early uses of reproduction theory were often applied broadly to social institutions, like schools, it became clear to many social scientists that the framework was useful in understanding how parents played a part in reproducing for their children the same economic and cultural milieus which they inherited themselves. Concerted cultivation—an outgrowth of cultural capital that directly speaks to cultural and economic reproduction—has been aptly applied to social class during a cultural moment in which expectations for parents’ abilities to set their children up for long-term success and happiness are high, as are the perceived risks for
not doing so. The knowledge, resources, and networks (in other words, cultural and social capital) that parents possess are seen as reflective of their ability to be good parents. Many of the recent reflections on concerted cultivation highlight the diverse and personal nature of parenting, adding necessary nuance to a limited, yet widely accepted ideology. Again, however, most of the scholars representing concerted cultivation as it relates to the family are not from anthropology. The connection between parenting ideologies and social inequality in the US is rarely being made by anthropologists; yet the data available for this type of analysis is plentiful.

The Current State of Anthropology and Parenting

I have argued that anthropological theories of childrearing have important implications for understanding parenting in cultural contexts, and that other fields like sociology, history, and psychology have also added valuable insight to this topic. So how can we put these pieces together? Many historical and sociological analyses have tended to reproduce work on the same pattern—for instance, the conflicting nature of mothers and workers. And although this problem is both pervasive and extremely important to understand, we should consider women who don’t feel these same constraints, how they are conceptualizing their roles, and what this says about the diverse cultural models and family patterns in our society. Some studies have begun to elaborate on different ideologies, as with studies of mothers who explicitly challenge the intensive mothering model (Christopher 2012; Elliot et al. 2015). Furthermore, many of the sociological studies on mothering and work have relied simply on qualitative interviews, with little else (although there are important exceptions, like Lareau’s Unequal Childhoods [2003]). Without observational data and data from other actors in women’s worlds, it is difficult to develop more robust theoretical perspectives, especially those common in the anthropological trends of considering broader structural elements as well as human agency. Women’s words are powerful and important, as feminist scholars have demonstrated, but women do not exist in a vacuum, either in terms of how their identities are constructed, how they conceive of and
manage raising children, or how they place themselves in the realm of work. This is where theoretical strengths of anthropology can benefit sociological processes. The practice of applied anthropology, in particular, focuses on using knowledge gained from ethnographic research to solve social problems. If we do not understand in what ways cultural forms influence or are influenced by practices, then we cannot know how to appropriately propose solutions to those problems.

For their part, anthropologists have investigated a wide array of issues related to childrearing across the globe, drawing on and expanding theories of how culture informs and is shaped by childcare needs, including a significant body of work on multiple caregiving (Blaffer Hrdy 2009; Henry et al. 2005; Jones et al. 2005; Lancy 2008; Seymour 2004; Seymour 2013) and some on fathering (Hewlett 2008; Marlowe 2005). These very frameworks could be useful in understanding the missing narratives of families in the US who rely on multiple caregivers, or whose ideologies of mothering or fathering look very different from mainstream norms. How might attention to these varying family forms “at home” inform theoretical development in new ways? The anthropological record is replete with analyses of women and work in many other societies, yet the field has produced little in the way of conceptions of parenting in the US. That is the aim of this dissertation, to describe the processes through which parents in a Southeastern US city come to understand what it means to be a good parent and how they negotiate their work and family roles around those beliefs. This is especially important given the dynamic climate in which private family needs and public institution and workplace needs are converging to find ways for parents to be available to raise their children according to socially acceptable norms while also maintaining productive and economic capacities (Miller 2015).

Parenting, it seems, is an up and coming theme in anthropology and related fields. In 2002 Harkness and Super called culture and parenting a “rapidly growing field of study” (266). The 2010 special issue on “Mothering as Every Practice” in Ethos brings together approaches from practice theory and cultural analyses of what it means to be a mother and participate in
society in other ways at the same time. Of course, these local and global studies were focused narrowly on women and mothering, but in the seven years since then, prominent anthropological journals have published many articles with an explicit focus on parenting in the US. Some titles include “Power Struggles: The Paradoxes of Emotion and Control among Child-Centered Mothers in the Privileged United States” (Hoffman 2013); “Are We Doing Damage?” Choosing an Urban Public School in an Era of Parental Anxiety” (Cucchiara 2013); “Parent Involvement as Ritualized Practice” (Doucet 2011), and “Reexamining the Promise of Parent Participation in Special Education: An Analysis of Cultural and Social Capital” (Trainor 2010). It is evident even from the titles that recent anthropological research on parenting is still rooted in psychology, although many new educational anthropology studies are expanding beyond schools and institutions into the home. Trainor’s (2010) study, in particular, has connected the dots between parenting and cultural capital. We can also see the influence of practice theory in these articles; this seems to be the dominant mode of analyzing cultural elements of parenting today. These articles are indicative of parenting in general, but there is also some evidence to suggest that gender is being addressed in more inclusive ways, as with Pelka’s (2010) observations of childrearing in a lesbian-led family, or Shwalb and colleagues’ analysis of fathers in their diverse roles cross-culturally (2013).

The theoretical points I have elaborated on throughout this chapter provide a rich grounding for further developing an anthropology of parenting. Cultural production is an especially useful framework for understanding parenting because the family is a crucial entity through which values and beliefs are passed on, through both explicit teaching and implicit practice. Although other sites and institutions in the US have captured the interest of anthropologists in seemingly more extensive ways than the family has, now is the time to return our attention to the family. Parents’ beliefs about how best to raise their children impact the social institutions in which they participate (or choose not to). Decisions about what kind of work to participate in and for how long are often mediated by ideologies of parenting and child
development, as are considerations of schooling and extra curricular activities. Conversely, government and workplace policies that affect children and families often have a significant impact on parents’ lives. Anthropologists are trained to analyze and critique the varying cultural elements at play in such systems, and to make sense of structural influences on individuals’ lives, thereby unveiling phenomena that are often otherwise taken for granted. All of the moments when parents make decisions about how to interact with their children, what is important long-term for children, and what roles both parents and children should have in the family are embedded with cultural values. These decisions also have an impact on how children are raised and grow into adults, thus fulfilling a system of reproduction. Anthropological studies of parenting can help to simultaneously unveil latent values in a society and demonstrate how practices based on these values may lead to advantage or disadvantage many families.

In some ways it may seem natural for a field with a relatively short history to only now be defining the best methods and theoretical perspectives to study parenting; on the other hand, the lack of a robust and cohesive body of research in anthropology on parenting may be seen as a considerable oversight. Taken as a whole, though, the recent attention to parenting research in anthropology and allied disciplines is encouraging. While it may be true that parenting does not register on many anthropologists’ radars, it cannot be denied that childrearing intersects with so many different aspects of life. This research is an attempt to contribute to an anthropology of parenting by better understanding the ideologies, motivations, and routine practices of local parents, and by using a cultural reproduction framework to make sense of the relationship between families and the structures with which they interact.
Chapter 3: Planning an Ethnography of Parenting

When I embarked on this research project in the fall of 2015, I was somewhat familiar with Nurturing Minds because I had previously worked for a non-profit organization in the same county for five years, and I had experience working with the same government entity that funded many of Nurturing Mind’s programs. The non-profit community in Elmwood is close-knit, and many employees from different organizations know each other through collaborative events and partnerships. This knowledge of the community afforded me some level of awareness in knowing the scope of possibilities when it came to designing a local research project around parenting programs. Having an understanding of the organization’s role and interactions in the community was a benefit, to be sure. However, I was also a graduate student who needed a dissertation project, and I learned that Nurturing Minds was no stranger to students looking for internships or volunteer hours.

From the beginning I tried to be mindful of the possibilities for collaboration and the ways I might be able to be helpful to the organization, rather than just using them as a site for data collection. The anthropology department at the University of South Florida, where I am pursuing my degree, specializes in applied anthropology, which has long been considered an active and community-oriented type of anthropology because of its focus on applying academic knowledge to social problems that stem from human organization (Hale 2008). In the early stages of the project, in particular, I was heavily influenced by principles of engaged ethnography, which assert that the researcher has an obligation to collaborate with and provide meaningful input to the organizations or participants who serve as sources of their research, often with a goal of unveiling social injustice (Calhoun 2008; Goldstein 2012; Hale 2008; Low and Merry 2010). This approach ultimately became more watered down than I envisioned because, in the end, the
organization needed me much less than I needed them. Nonetheless, I kept the general theme of collaboration in mind throughout the project, with specific examples discussed in the following section. I also plan to make a career out of family studies in this community, and I foresee many of these interactions continuing into the future.

For this study, I used a methodology that centered around ethnography, although adapted somewhat to take into consideration the multi-sited nature of this research. The process relied heavily on participant observation in eight group settings and three homes, as well as 44 interviews with parents, employees, and funders. I also distributed an electronic questionnaire to parents (57 were completed) and analyzed two data sets that already existed within the organization, containing demographic and developmental assessment information about 3,623 participants. The following discussion outlines the strategies I used to access culturally embedded ideas about what parents think they should do to raise their children well, and what they feel is at stake if they do not adhere to professional ideologies of good parenting. In addition to describing the methods I used to collect data and the processes of analysis I utilized, I also include my personal and professional involvement with Nurturing Minds, as well as a discussion of my positionality as it relates to interactions with various actors and the way my status was integral in developing a research plan.

**Ethnography and Parenting Studies: A Continuance**

While there are a multitude of studies on the effectiveness of parenting programs and services from public health, psychology, and social work perspectives, these kinds of studies often lack the depth, historical context, and attention to personal perspectives that ethnography offers. Parenting practices are both implicit and explicit; while the explicit and intentional strategies parents adopt may be easier to explain through interviews, the implicit understandings that contribute to their ideas about raising children may require unmasking through other kinds of strategies that ethnographers frequently employ, like observation,
discussion of routines, and a genuine effort to learn the participant’s point of view (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007; Harkness and Super 2006; Weisner 2011a). Some anthropological studies from the last few decades emphasize the benefits of using ethnographic methods with family studies and serve as a rationale for using similar methodologies with this parenting study.

Thomas Weisner, through work with many different colleagues, has developed a tool called the Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI), which is designed specifically to guide researchers in having families “tell their stories” in accessible ways, allowing them to “generate the terms and categories in their own terms,” rather than having researchers assume certain models exist first (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007, 198; Weisner 1997; Weisner 2011a; Weisner 2014). He argues that this is crucial to understanding families in their own environments and responding to their own constraints, and that it is a way to understand parental goals for children outside the assumptions of the researcher (Weisner 1997). I referred to this protocol when developing my interview questions, specifically with regard to questions that ask about parents’ daily routines and struggles.

Sara Harkness and Charles Super have done numerous parenting studies through which they’ve developed the concept of parental ethnotheories: “…parental ethnotheories are often implicit, taken-for-granted ideas about the “natural” or “right” way to think or act, and they have strong motivational properties for parents” (Harkness and Super 2006, 62). As an approach that draws from both anthropology and psychology, they also locate culture as emanating from the developmental niche, which takes into consideration several aspects of a child’s environment, including physical and social setting, childrearing practices, and beliefs of caregivers (Harkness and Super 2006; Super et al. 1996). This work offers a specific framing of why parenting beliefs are important in terms of child development and expressions of culture, and it provides direct tools for accessing that framework. These ideas were influential in the development of my questionnaire and interview questions, as well as in observations and
analysis, as they helped provide a multi-dimensional understanding of parenting that requires attention to individual, community, and structural factors.

And finally, my decision to use both qualitative and quantitative methods for studying parenting ideologies was partly influenced by a brand of cognitive and psychological anthropology that often advocates for mixed methods ethnography (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007; Harkness and Super 2006; Lende 2009; Weisner 2011b). The quantitative data collection, especially with regard to this study, helps to provide a broader base for situating a more focused study of individuals and sites. And as Daniel Lende (2009) notes, “Ethnography helps provide a ‘why’ that quantitative methods often cannot address” (249). The two together are complementary and each one helps to fill in gaps that the other cannot adequately address. A detailed explanation of the methods I used for this project is below.

An Evolving Methodology

I utilized a mixed-methods approach with an emphasis on ethnographic methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with staff, parents, and funders, and a parent questionnaire. As I was building my relationship with Nurturing Minds, I asked if there was any data analysis I could help with during the off-weeks for play groups. Several staff had mentioned some new patterns they were noticing with a developmental assessment tool they used in all of the programs, so I offered to look at the data and do some comparisons by sites and demographic factors. This became a year-long project, during which I worked with representatives from different departments to gather the necessary data. Not only was this an opportunity for me to collaborate with Nurturing Minds on a different level, but this project provided an understanding of the organization’s “numbers,” or the number of children they served through each program and at each site, including basic demographic information. It was very useful in understanding the broad picture of participants served by Nurturing Minds.
As I became familiar with the multitude of sites and the breadth of services that Nurturing Minds offered, I realized that I would need to narrow the scope of study in a way that would satisfy my research questions while remaining within a realistic workload for a dissertation project. My main goal was to discover how parent participants and employees of the organization understood what it meant to be a good parent. Because of the multi-site program and home visiting structure of the organization, the “field” for this study potentially included ten different sites and hundreds of individual homes spread across a large county—a scope that was clearly out of reach. All Nurturing Minds programs and partner sites describe their services as being intended for “families from a variety of neighborhoods” or families “from all walks of life,” yet it was unclear how or whether the organization explicitly addressed these differences. Several staff also described the organization’s programs as being for “any baby, any family,” or being “universal access.” But these statements seemed dubious to me—perhaps a sort of pretense that concealed the challenges of being relevant to diverse family backgrounds and needs. So through the qualitative components of the study, I planned to focus on how parents interpreted ideas of good parenting and whether there were differences in their interactions with the organization.

Many studies highlight discrepancies in how different individuals and families experience “expert” knowledge from family service programs, and not surprisingly, race, ethnicity, and class are some of the variables that may impact one’s interactions with programs (Coard et al. 2004; Johnson 2009; Perriera et al. 2006; Roche et al. 2007; Garner et al. 2014; Weaver et al. 2001). For instance, Romagnali and Wall (2012) have stressed that young, low-income mothers resist the idea of cognitive development philosophies and curricula, and feel that the expert point of view contrasts strongly with various parenting practices that are either culturally bound or restricted by resources. Laura Ruth Johnson (2009) critiques a family literacy and parent education program by showing how its widespread application may be inappropriate for some cultural groups outside the mainstream, such as the Chicago-based Puerto Rican mothers in
her study. Coard et al. (2004) explain that parent training programs are typically developed and evaluated with white, middle-class families, and do not acknowledge important practice of racial socialization that many African American families participate in with young children, and are therefore often seen as irrelevant. And finally, Roche et al. (2007) discuss the ways that parenting styles often differ by race, ethnicity, and gender, and can be further complicated by other factors such as neighborhood and risk factors. Because of this array of literature, I anticipated finding early on that some parents might have cultural conflicts with the advice or nature of the programs, and to that end, I planned to target locations and participants that represented distinct communities. Several of the community centers at which play groups and other Nurturing Minds programs were offered were strategically located in parts of the county where different ethnic or racial groups had a strong presence and which drew from a mix of lower and middle-income families.

For participant observation, I chose three sites of focus with different socioeconomic demographic patterns. The first is the main site, The Playroom, which is adjacent to the organization’s administrative offices, located in an affluent neighborhood with a majority white population⁵. This site is wholly owned and operated by Nurturing Minds, and it is one of the hallmarks of the organization. For the second site I chose the Shelton Center—a community center in partnership with Nurturing Minds that is located near a lower-income community with a significant African American population (50 percent) ([Shelton] Crime and Civic Association Demographics 2010), although after beginning observations I found that a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds were represented at this site, most of which were *not* African American. The third site, the Azalea Center, is in a mixed-income area with a strong concentration of Latino families (50 percent) ([Azalea] Demographics 2013). These two centers were among several that were managed independently from Nurturing Minds but had steady funding for

---

⁵ It is difficult to find census information on this area but nearby schools list the population of white students as between 60 and 80 percent.
Nurturing Minds programs and maintained a close working relationship with their staff. I hoped that the differences between these populations would provide meaningful contrasts to one another in terms of how parents understood what “good” parenting was, as well as in how they interacted with the program ideologies.

These sites served as the basis of my observations, which were conducted from January 2016 through February 2017. I began volunteering to assist with the playgroups as a simple and agreeable way to gain entrance into this realm of the organization’s work. I helped the facilitator of each group set up materials and activities, and I participated in the group along with everyone else. This usually entailed singing songs, playing instruments, and frequently sanitizing toys, passing out supplies, or cleaning up tables throughout the class. The cleaning was fairly mindless and offered an ideal opportunity to observe, while the other activities offered a way for me to interact with parents and children and be seen as part of the group. I usually took notes reflecting on my time in the groups at the end of the day, and not during the classes. I did not want to appear as a distant judge, ever watchful of how parents spoke to, bonded with, and disciplined their children. At the end of the 6-session groups, I discussed my research project very briefly and handed out a flyer to recruit volunteers for semi-structured interviews. This turned out to be a very inefficient way of recruiting, as it only yielded four total participants from three play groups (out of 52 program participants from eight different play groups). But because the stand-alone community centers were more isolated from the administrative oversight of the programs, I thought it was important to make several attempts to understand the viewpoint of these particular parents, as they might experience the program differently from those who attend programs at the main site.

In order to draw from a larger pool of participants, I sent out an electronic questionnaire to two different groups of parents (see table 1 for a list of all research activities). One included parents who had participated in play groups in the past year (452) and the other included parents who were currently receiving the monthly in-home education program, Side By Side (223).
The group consisting of play group participants was limited to those who had been to The Playroom only, as the organization did not keep contact information from parents who participated in their programs at stand-alone community centers. The questionnaire was administered via email by program administrators, along with a script I created to briefly introduce the study. The questionnaire content included open-ended responses to questions about parenting ideologies and resources; Likert-type questions about intensive parenting, parenting supports, and work/family balance; and demographic questions (see Appendix A). In addition to serving as a recruiting tool for parent interviews, the questionnaire allowed me to receive responses from parents who were not able to do an interview. The section on demographics also included a question on household income, data which the organization does not consistently collect, but which is helpful in understanding the constituent base. Finally, the questionnaire allowed me to analyze responses in a more concrete and quantitative way, making it easier to see general patterns of responses and compare by various demographic factors.

**Table 1. Research activities and number of participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Activities</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Electronic Questionnaire–Side By Side</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Electronic Questionnaire–The Playroom</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Interviews</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Interviews</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funder Interviews</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side By Side In-Home Observations (3)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play N Learn Observations (8)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting Class Observation (1)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questionnaire respondents were given the option of giving their contact information if they were interested in participating in an interview. I received 57 completed questionnaires back, 38 of whom indicated interest in being interviewed. Out of those 38 responses, 23 culminated in interviews. I realized with each whittling down of respondents that I would not
have a large enough sample to select ones that met any predefined criteria, such as race, ethnicity, income level, or area of town. In order to have a meaningful sample size, I chose to set up interviews with all respondents and then later determine the defining characteristics of the sample and how they would differ from my previous postulations. One challenge of doing exploratory ethnographic research is that some parts of the process unfold along the way. I knew that the organization served families all over the county, so I assumed the interviewees would live in disparate parts of the county. However, as I began confirming and conducting interviews, I noticed that most of the interviewees who did the in-home education program lived in one general area of the county (which happened to be on the opposite side of where I lived—sometimes up to a one-hour drive on expressways, to give an idea of the size of the county). It was also a different area than the three sites I had selected to observe play groups, so this added another dimension to my analysis in terms of understanding who was accessing parent education classes. Although I did not acquire the diverse sample I had hoped for, the homogeneity of this group meant that I could delve into the ideologies of those who were representative of this sample—white, middle-class and wealthy moms who stay at home to raise their children or work very minimal hours. This changed the focus of my project from an examination of cultural differences in perceptions of programs to an analysis of time and intentionality among parents with adequate resources, issues I draw out more comprehensively in the following chapters.

I conducted interviews from November 2016 through April 2017, beginning with the in-home education parent group in the fall and moving on to the parents who attended play groups in the spring. Staff at multiple levels of responsibility at Nurturing Minds (17 total) were interviewed throughout that time period as well (see table 2 for a list of employee interviews), and I also interviewed two employees of the major funding entities that supported Nurturing Minds. The parent interviews included questions on involvement with the organization and what they think about the programs, discussion of their daily routines with their children, and how they
utilize resources and support to influence their parenting ideas (see Appendix B). Employee interviews followed a similar path, with questions about their role and background, a description of their daily routine, questions about how programs are developed, a section asking for their professional ideas about what it means to do “good” parenting, and questions about their interactions with parents in their work (see Appendix C). Questions for funders were largely centered around the structural role of both funding bodies and family support organizations, as well as how decisions are made to award grants to parenting programs (see Appendix D).

Table 2. Employee interviews by role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program and Role</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Side By Side Parent Educator</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side By Side Supervisor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side By Side Administrator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play N Learn Facilitator</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play N Learn Supervisor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play N Learn Administrator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatherhood Program Facilitator</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization Administrator</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews were semi-structured, in that for each group, I asked the same basic questions, but I also allowed respondents to elaborate or even move “off track” if they were so inclined. Interviews were a key part of understanding how parents and staff interpreted their daily work; they served as a means of actively conceptualizing what was otherwise taken for granted through habitus, or everyday acts of parenting practice. They also allowed parents and staff to express themselves in their own terms and feel a sense of agency in the process. Knowing that their input may be useful for research or for people in similar situations can also be rewarding for participants. I interviewed each person one time, although in many instances, I saw the parent outside the interview while I was observing at a play group or in-home session, or I saw the staff member at events, groups, or meetings, which added additional insights. For questionnaire respondents, of course, I had their responses ahead of time, so the interview
served as sort of second interaction with them, and although these were not formally analyzed in conjunction with each other, they did inform overall interpretation of results. The interviews each took around 45 minutes to an hour, and for those at the administrative level, they took up to one and a half hours. I sent an informed consent form ahead of time to each interviewee and had it signed before beginning, and then I digitally recorded each interview.

For parents, I usually met them in their homes, although in some cases I met them at coffee shops if they were without children (I always offered to meet at their homes or somewhere they would feel comfortable, including free places like parks or libraries). Parents were gracious with their time, especially considering they often had toddlers clinging to their legs while I was talking with them. The opportunity to reflect and unburden seemed welcomed, and several said they could talk about parenting all day. Many people enjoy discussing their ideas and thinking about certain aspects of their lives in a wider cultural context, but this is especially true for many of the mothers in this group who were often isolated from other adults for much of the day. Researchers have also discussed the therapeutic nature of interviewing, particularly with regard to family life (Blair-Loy 2002; Bobel 2003; Hochschild 2012 [1989]; Weisner 2014). Being in participants’ home environment, where many acts of parenting take place, provided me with a glimpse into their world, if only for a small amount of time, and it was an important part of seeing everyday acts in context. Ortner points to the “so-called domestic domain” as a space “where action proceeds with little reflection,” inadvertently pointing to ways that practice theory is especially useful for understanding cultural phenomena related to the home (1985, 151). I took in the neighborhoods, cars, houses, furniture, food, pets, toys, and other elements I noticed as I spoke with parents about their days and their efforts (and struggles) to be the parents they envisioned.

All of the interviewees were mothers, with the exception of one dual interview that included both the mother and father. In a couple of other instances the father was home for part of the interview, but I was only able to chat briefly with him. Sometimes the children were in
preschool while I visited (if they were old enough), and sometimes they were home. I remember one interview with a mother of very active 18-month-old twins who required a lot of attention from her. She continually made sure they were fed, entertained, changed, and played with throughout the course of the interview. They were in and out of four different rooms—me following along with the recorder—and our interview was repeatedly interrupted by little (but demanding) voices that were only just beginning to form words. Although my presence surely had an impact on the toddlers’ demands of their mom, this was more or less a typical hour for her. And while it was wonderful for observation, it did not make for the best recording. In fact, many of the recordings were interspersed with similar yells, cries, coos, and baby talk, which made transcription frustrating, but it also elucidates the constant demand for attention that these mothers feel from their young children.

The staff interviews, on the other hand, were much clearer, as most were done in a private office or other space (although some were conducted at coffee shops, and therefore subjected to the intermittent clanking of dishes and oscillation of voices). Staff, too, were extremely generous with their time and willingness to participate, especially given the inordinate amount of activity the organization was involved with during my research period. There were some important staff transitions taking place, a new program being implemented, some serious staff illnesses, and major events to celebrate Nurturing Mind’s fortieth year of existence. These were all in addition to what is normally a hectic and fast-paced environment. I realized that my research was not a priority for them, but my role evolved more as an internship than a strict outside researcher, and although I sometimes struggled to get responses from staff on various logistical issues or when I was trying to set up interviews, I was mostly welcomed with open arms and treated as someone who was at least somewhat part of their community. My original vision of “hanging out” at the office to help with mundane tasks or to just be around for observations was not feasible. At a couple points I offered to come in and do data entry during a busy time, but because a staff member was dealing with a serious family sickness, she needed
that work to do at home. Additionally, I realized that very few staff members actually “hung out” at the office themselves. Educators, facilitators, and administrators were all beholden to the multi-site system within which the organization operated. As a researcher then, so was I.

In addition to the key methods of observation, questionnaire, and interviews, I participated in several other types of interactions with the organization, including “ride-alongs” with staff to observe the Side By Side program in homes (Kusenbach 2003), meetings with leadership and other staff to discuss my research, an observation of the new parenting support group, and various community events that I either helped out with, attended, or brought my own children to. All of these processes and interactions helped to round out my understanding of the Nurturing Minds community, and each conversation, observation, and piece of information was used to develop the data base for this project. Analysis of such diverse forms of data requires a strategic plan, which is outlined below.

Data Analysis: Revealing Patterns through Process

Because ethnography often begins with a very general plan, rather than a concrete theoretical model into which data are made to fit, the analysis part of ethnographic research is also a refining process (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). This is also consistent with grounded theory, in which meaning is derived from the data, rather than using data to test a preconceived hypothesis (Birks and Mills 2010). I loosely followed the concepts and some strategies of grounded theory, which calls for a continuous refining of the research process as each stage of data collection and analysis informs the next (Birks and Mills 2010). For several reasons, some of the patterns I thought I might find did not emerge—either because they did not exist or because I was not able to observe them through the people and data I had access to. It was not until all questionnaire responses and interviews were completed that I knew the general demographic makeup of the participants. Some themes I had anticipated finding emerged in different ways than I expected, just as new themes became more prevalent than I could have
imagined. The following steps allowed me to identify a more specific focus from the emerging data.

I recorded interviews using a digital voice recorder and transcribed the data into text documents. I transcribed interviews using the traditional method of listening and pausing to type using Audacity 3.0, which allowed me to slow down the audio as it played. I completed fifteen transcriptions on my own; however, I soon realized I would need additional help in order to stay on the projected timeline, so I opted to pay a small stipend to two undergraduate students to help with the remaining transcripts. To conduct a formal analysis of these data, I created codes and definitions derived from my interview questions in order to categorize the responses from each interviewee. For instance, the responses about what resources parents used were represented by one code, and responses about family support were represented by another. These codes were placed into three larger families: parents, employees, and funders. There were 17 codes for parents, 17 for employees, and eight for funders [see Appendix E for code definitions]. I used ATLAS.ti 6.2 qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti 2010) to code the transcripts and create a report organized by family and code. I then used Scrivener 2.8 (Scrivener 2017) to organize data and quotes from the report, extrapolating more specific topics within each code and noting redundancies in order to capture their frequencies. For the electronic questionnaire, I downloaded the results from SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey, Inc. nd), the online software through which it was administered, and I entered the data into SPSS statistics software version 24.0 (IBM Corp. 2016) to perform exploratory data analyses, including descriptive statistics overviews and visual representations of data. Although I took notes after every observation and interview, I used these in a more informal way, cross-referencing them with my analysis as the need arose and searching for narratives that would help contextualize other data in order to create a more robust ethnographic portrait of the Nurturing Minds community.
Ethical Considerations of Critiquing “Good” Work

In addition to complying with the University of South Florida’s Institutional Review Board requirements in all of my protocols and communications, there were also ethical concerns unique to non-profit organization that needed to be considered. Some research has pointed to minor ethical dilemmas inherent in doing social science research with non-profit organizations or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). For instance, Murdock (2003) warns of the ethical implications for writing about NGOs and making determinations about whether their work is “good” or not, as these organizations are tied to funding that may be undercut by public academic perceptions of their work. Uzwiak (2013) has highlighted the difficulties of knowing how much or how little to reveal about how NGOs or non-profits operate, especially when the operational style is in conflict with the organizational goals. And Craven (2013) has discussed challenges of critiquing organizations while doing research with them, even while advocating for them at the same time. I grappled with each of these issues since my first meeting with Nurturing Minds.

My intention was never to provide an evaluation of the organization or its programs, but in doing interviews and observations with its staff and participants, I was gaining access to staff and parent opinions of Nurturing Minds, my assessment of which may be seen as evaluative in nature. Fortunately, the vast majority of responses about programs were glowingly positive, among both parents and staff. But there were some statements that I found questionable or that highlighted viewpoints that could be perceived as ill-informed or even somewhat detrimental to program participants. Critique is part of an anthropologist’s job. If we embark on projects of this scope and find no points of contention among individuals or no ways in which research participants are negatively impacted by other people or structures, we are probably not very good at this job. Although I do not think that any conclusions I have made would be enough to seriously penalize Nurturing Minds or diminish their reputation, I have given pseudonyms to all people and places and I am intentionally vague about identifying information. I also plan to
share my findings with the appropriate representatives of Nurturing Minds, including critiques as seems appropriate.

**Positionality and Personal Involvement**

My experience as a mother has informed the shape of this project in many ways. Shortly after having my first child in 2011, I resigned from my job in a non-profit organization and began a PhD program to both strengthen my future career and also carve out more space to delve into parenthood. As a first-time parent, I read vigorously and weighed information from different experts on infant needs and child development, and I attended developmental playgroups with my own daughters. My understanding of what it meant to be a “good mother” aligned well with dominant ideas about parenting, and I found resources to support these beliefs to be plentiful.

Before I had children, I expected to continue working full-time after I had my first, but I was swayed by popular practices like attachment parenting that advocated for physical closeness to one’s child, frequent responsiveness, breastfeeding “on demand,” and other time-intensive ways of parenting. I oriented my work around my children and felt both a desire and obligation to make myself available to provide frequent interaction and nurturing to them. As a mother of two young children, I personally tried to navigate intensive motherhood while also scrutinizing it from a more academic point of view. I eventually began to question my interpretation of good parenting while also studying parenting more generally through an anthropological lens. This brought me to the realization that the dominant model of intensive parenting is constructed primarily from a white, educated, middle-class point of view, and it was not representative of many families. Part of my goal in choosing this project was to find some of those families and better represent their parenting experiences. Instead, I found strong adherence to the intensive parenting ideology among the parent participants of Nurturing Minds, which I discuss in more detail in chapters four and five. My attempts to step outside my own early parenting experiences were thwarted as I found myself surrounded by parents (and employees) who seemed to be
oriented toward the same parental goals as I initially was. Despite this fact, I still attend to these issues based on what data I was able to collect, and the insights I gained on differences in parenting beliefs and capabilities are presented in the conclusion chapter.

I was also a participant in the Side By Side program, and therefore a recipient of the same advice as other participants. I started this program shortly before I officially began my research. A neighbor of mine had told me about the program when my daughters were four years old and one year old. After learning that the program was free and that someone would come to my house, I decided to try it out. I did not feel like I was in desperate need of help, but I wondered whether this program would be a fit for an educated, upper-middle-class family, and if so, what that would mean about how family support services are organized in our county. I was still finishing coursework, but I had an idea of what I wanted to focus on for my dissertation, so I used this opportunity partly as a way to gain insight into the organization. When two educators showed up at my house the first time (one was still in training), I made sure to ask whether or not the program was intended for people who are struggling or have fewer resources than I did, as I was concerned about taking away support that others may have more urgently needed. They assured me that the program was designed for anybody, and that any parent could use help with young children—a theme that would eventually become more developed in several staff interviews.

My daughters and I quickly grew fond of our main educator (and all others that visited our house); they loved the fun activities and having a special visitor, and I appreciated having someone to provide reassurance about any concerns I had about my children’s development. This first-hand experience has not only allowed me to observe a two-year progression of the program, it also allowed me to welcome employees into my home so they might get to know me and my family on a more intimate and vulnerable level. Importantly, it has also helped me to keep fresh in my mind an idea that I couldn’t quite reconcile—that family services were free to people like me who were educated, financially secure, and had a decent amount of childcare
support, while there were so many other parents struggling to raise their children and live stable lives. Even though the program is open to poor and low-income families as well, does the fact that it is equally open to middle-class and wealthy families create an even wider division between rich and poor, low-risk and high-risk? More importantly, my participation in the program urged me to learn about how the employees at NM reconciled these issues themselves.

**My Identity as a White, Educated Mother**

Being marked as a mother was beneficial as a researcher in having a sort of shared knowledge with participants of raising young children. At times, it seemed that all I had to do was mention that I had a child the same age as someone else or share a quick anecdote about how one of my daughters sucked her thumb for a long time too, and I was “in”. I graciously offered this information since I was always without my children when I observed or interviewed, making my parental identity ambiguous. It seemed to put parents at ease to know that I was part of the club. But being a mother has both sharpened and dirtied the lens through which I viewed interactions with parents. I was more highly attuned to the way parents interacted with their children or the way they responded to facilitator guidance because I had been in many similar situations and heard my own maternal voice responding at the same time as theirs. Sometimes their voice was an echo of mine, and sometimes it was a departure. The departures were easier to recognize, but the echoes were just as valuable. This is why the trajectory of observing, interviewing, listening to recordings, and reading transcripts and notes is so important. The analysis becomes simultaneously more distant and more objective as the research process goes on, but it can never be wholly objective.

However, being a woman—and, in particular, a white, college-educated woman—likely also precluded me from accessing certain groups. I interviewed all of the employees who worked with the fatherhood programs (three employees total, although by the time I finished only two were left). Some of the fathers in the programs were part of support groups, and they
were referred by a court and already involved with the Department of Children and Families (although their participation was still considered voluntary). Others were part of a play group for fathers based on a coaching model in which veteran dads teach new dads about infant care by demonstrating activities with their own babies. All fatherhood program employees were men, and while they were eager discussants and offered many valuable insights, I was ultimately unable to observe any of their groups. I discussed options for observing a group or meeting with individual fathers from groups, and the employees seemed hopeful that something would pan out (although they all were reluctant to allow me to observe in a fathering play group or support group). They all said they would see if they can put me in touch with one or two fathers from the programs, but by the end of my research period, no one was able to produce a contact, even after I had followed up several times. I can only assume it was because it was either a difficult task finding someone who would be willing and able to talk with me, or because they did not feel comfortable initiating the connection after all. The fatherhood program employees discussed ways in which fathers generally felt vulnerable about their roles as caregivers, in part because it is not masculine, and they hinted that a woman’s (or a mother’s?) presence would be uncomfortable. Perhaps with longer term involvement with the organization and multiple kinds of outreach efforts, my goals to interview or observe fathers would have been more achievable. But for this project, those plans did not come to fruition, and my gender was likely a key factor.

Finally, in considering positionality we must consider how our research is affected by how others see us. In the first few groups I observed, I was aware of the difference between the familiarity with which parents and caregivers regarded the facilitator and the apprehension with which they regarded me. I initially felt out of place in the group because I was not an authoritative figure like the facilitator, and I was not a parent or caregiver with my own child, like all others. I wanted to be helpful, but it was unclear to what extent parents would be comfortable with me interacting with their babies and children since I was a stranger. Yet at the same time, I
had placed myself in an interactive role. Below are field notes in which I reflected on such uncertainty:

I felt a continued sense of awkwardness this week, which I think is partly due to not having a clear place in the group…I also feel like it might be more comfortable if I was more active like [the facilitator], but I have a hard time intervening when the group is supposed to be focused on caregivers and their children, and since I’m not trained on what ideas to promote, I end up finding things to chat about (thank god I have children!). This all reminds me of a discussion in my Engaging Ethnography class about the “messiness” of fieldwork, which I’m sure was intended for far more important matters, but today it did just feel awkward and murky and messy. (Field Notes 5/26/16)

Often, this resolved over the course of the group as participants became familiar with me and I interacted with them more. My experiences as a mother often helped to overcome some of the discomfort.

However, in one play group I observed at the Azalea Center, the majority of families were Latino, many of whom only spoke Spanish or spoke very little English. The facilitator for this group was bilingual, and she often translated in both languages throughout the class. Throughout the six-week session, I would try to connect with parents or children in small ways, by greeting them and noticing what the children were doing in the group, but it often felt like there was an invisible barrier to overcome. Although some of this awkwardness was present in the other groups I observed, my ethnicity did not stand out in the same way among more mixed or mostly white groups. Below are field notes from fifth week of this group, as I tried to tease out this tension a bit:

The second group had all but one Spanish speaker today, and I feel much more hesitant to engage because [the facilitator] does the class half in Spanish, and I’m not sure if the adults or children will understand me if I talk with them. I try here and there, but it just
doesn’t seem as natural as it does with [other groups]. Not sure if it’s a paranoid/perceived barrier or if it’s really there. (Field Notes 6/2/16)

As I participated in more groups over time, I came to feel more comfortable, and I learned that the more I acted like a facilitator, the easier it was to engage with families. I also became more comfortable speaking with some of the families in my limited Spanish, as many of the activities were focused on things like colors, shapes, and counting, just right for my elementary vocabulary.

More important than my own comfort level, however, was the participants’ response to me and the result of my outreach efforts at this site; out of around 30 participants to whom I distributed flyers (six classes), I received only one response (and she ultimately ended up cancelling on the day of our meeting and sending me typed responses to my interview questions before I had a chance to reschedule). This doesn’t mean people shunned me simply because I’m white, but my whiteness may have been untrustworthy for a variety of reasons, especially in an environment of increased fear and injustice for people of color in the United States\(^6\). There may have been concerns that I would judge their parenting unfairly; if family members were undocumented, they certainly wouldn’t want to invite outsiders to their home; and then there is the simple matter of language, although I did offer to provide a translator for the interviews. In this situation, the privilege my mothering status afforded me was limited.

I also wondered how much of the denial of access to one of the sites had to do, in part, with my race. The Leeford site was a sort of replica of the main site, although it was geared towards a very different demographic and different family needs. It was in a low-income African American neighborhood that was the focus of many other non-profit outreach and university research efforts. In fact, the reason that the director ultimately chose not to allow me to do

\(^6\) This research took place during the tumultuous election of Donald Trump as president—in fact, my very first interview was on the day he was elected. As the new administration put forth what many perceived as unjust and discriminatory policies towards minorities, racial tensions were palpable during this time, although I cannot say for sure whether it had a direct impact on this specific project.
observations there was because she felt they were inundated with research projects already, and she did not want to further subject the parents there to more outside scrutiny (which I understood). And we cannot ignore the fact that the history of white researchers studying poor communities of color is fraught with issues of exploitation and mistrust (Freimuth et al. 2001; Gamble 1993; Goodwin 2016; Parker and Lynn 2002). Although I may never know why they rejected my access to this group, this early hurdle made me especially attuned to understanding how this site fit in with the rest of Nurturing Minds, and I paid special attention throughout my research to how employees perceived its role.

The Irony of Studying Parenting and Time

One of my daughters had just started kindergarten as I began this research, and the other was still in part-time preschool, which meant that I had about three and half hours of consistent childcare each day. This heavily influenced my schedule and it meant that the majority of my work was done in the mornings during weekdays, although I always offered afternoon, evening, and weekend times when scheduling interviews. I relied on childcare once or twice a week in the afternoons from our babysitter, and my husband or sister would sometimes take advantage of the flexibility their work places offered to help with childcare during the day if I was in a pinch. Even with this support, I had real time constraints because of my parenting obligations. I often felt the irony of using all of my resources for childcare while rushing around to interview parents about their time with their children or observing play groups with children my daughters’ ages while not having them with me. I would sometimes listen to mothers talk about how much time they spent playing and interacting with their children as they discussed their daily routines each day, and I would feel a slight tinge of guilt for choosing to be away from mine. Or a mother in a play group would ask what I do with my youngest daughter while I attended the morning group, and I would wonder if they looked down upon my choice (or ability) to have her in preschool, since none of the mothers in the group did the same.
On the other hand, I had to reconcile some of the ways I felt drawn to some aspects of intensive parenting with my attempts to be objective about how other mothers felt about it. While I read through a transcript of an interview I did with a mother named Paula, who worked full-time, I noticed that a question I asked reflected more about my own internal conflicts with the work/family balance than hers (most relevant sections bolded):

Anna: Okay. How long were you a stay-at-home mom for?

Paula: Well, for the first 17 months I didn’t work at all. Then I put him in two half days and I started working a little bit, maybe 10 hours a week. Then that turned into more because I’d have to work some from home after he’d go down to bed at nighttime. I’d have to stay up two to three hours to type and things like that. That was really exhausting. Then after that I was like, “Okay I’m ready to go back.” In August, this past August is when I went back full time.

Anna: Okay, and you chose that? Even though you were doing part-time [work] before, you felt like it would work out better for everybody to do full time?

Paula: Full time, yes.

Anna: Okay.

Paula: He was at that age where being home with a toddler all day, every day, was starting to really wear on me, and like, “He’d be better off going more days, and I would better off being with other adults.”

Anna: Yes, and you still feel good about it?

Participant: Yes.

My attempts to double check that what she was saying was accurate may have stemmed from my personal inability to feel the same level of comfort, even ideologically, in working full-time while having young children. I was not at peace with what Blair-Loy (2005) refers to as the competing devotions of home and work, and so it struck me when participants were. This was likely not the only instance in which my personal ideologies influenced my interactions with participants, but this is sometimes a consequence of doing research on a topic one has a personal stake in. But it is also this personal investment that may contribute to a more intimate evaluation of the data.
Getting the Story Right

Reflecting on her research with Mexican migrant families in the Midwest and her place as a new mother among many experienced ones, Leah Schmalzbauer asks an important question: “Where do I fit and am I in a position to get the story right?” (2013, 90). The iterative and reflexive methodology I embraced was useful in answering this question. I am both an insider and outsider to the community I studied, and I have developed my own ideologies about good parenting through my experiences as a mother to young children. Although locating my place in the “field” took some time, the multiple observations and lessons learned from early interactions allowed me to find the right zone of participation, which embodied elements of enthusiasm and confidence as well as contemplation and detachment. Whether or not I am in a position to get the story right is more difficult to answer. Multiple stories were unveiled from the massive amount of data collected. Deciding which ones deserved telling is a subjective process, no doubt. But as a mother who has experienced the tumult of raising children, as a former worker in the nonprofit sector, and as an academic who has studied the history and development of family services and parenting, I came to this project with unique insight. I hope that insight will serve the participants of this study well and that it will open up dialog and opportunities that will be beneficial to many families and communities who are affected by the same issues as the ones in this study.
Chapter 4: Structural Influences on Parenting Ideology

On a crisp and sunny fall morning, I arrive at a charming and well-manicured 1920s style house in the middle of a wealthy neighborhood near downtown Elmwood. A small outdoor play area sequestered by a white picket fence designates the house as a child-friendly space, yet the surrounding buildings and parking lot in back are suggestive of office buildings. This is The Playroom—the main site at which Play N Learn groups and seasonal events are held, as well as the administrative site that hosts a majority of the employees at Nurturing Minds. It is considered the hub of the organization, as it is where Play N Learn groups were designed and tested, to be reproduced later at multiple partner sites. I am here to interview an administrator, from whom I would learn a great deal about the origins of Nurturing Minds, which began as a small and intensive child abuse prevention center—quite different from its present operations. In fact, this neighborhood—Bayview—is far-removed both geographically and demographically from the first programs hosted by Nurturing minds.

Below I discuss Nurturing Minds’ early rationale for providing parenting programs and the motivations that led to changes in their service array over the decades to be less intensive and include a wider demographic. I describe their current ideologies of best parenting practices, paying particular attention to ways that different families have been explicitly included in and implicitly excluded from services based on the structure of the programs. While I rely largely on data from staff interviews and observations to illustrate organizational ideologies, I also integrate broader social developments in order to provide context and to demonstrate the interplay between structure and agent—a relationship that practice theorists have pointed to as being mutually influential (Bourdieu 1995 [1977]; Ortner 1984). In this case, structure may be seen as those more obscure forces, such as policy, funding, and academic knowledge, while the agent
is the organization. Nurturing Minds is at mercy of funders and the historical, political, and social trends that have shaped what family life looks like and what parents’ needs are. However, on another level, they have agency in choosing the programs, target constituents, training, evaluations, and funding sources they pursue. In this scenario, the organization may be seen as the structure, influencing individual parents (agents) and taking part in shaping social practices. The organization is not exactly disempowered but also not exactly powerful. It is kept at bay by funding and legislative constraints while it simultaneously projects values and meaning through programs and interactions with families. Finally, the ways in which the organization is influenced by families is particularly relevant, and I argue that this level of influence has led to some of the changes apparent in the operations of Nurturing Minds over the years.

From Child Abuse Intervention to Prevention

Nurturing Minds grew out of a small community meeting on child maltreatment in the mid 1970s. This meeting served as a catalyst for the development of a community council on child abuse, which led to one of the first Nurturing Minds programs—a therapeutic childcare center, the Sunshine Center, composed of a handful of clinical staff that served both parents and children on-site. The Sunshine Center specifically served children whose parents who were deemed abusive or neglectful by the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS)\(^7\), and it was a requirement for parents to come to the center at least two out of the five days it operated so they could be observed with their children and receive support and education. An administrator describes the early (1970s and 80s) programmatic emphasis on both parents and children, as well as the connection between parent attachment and child abuse prevention:

---

\(^7\) In 1996, this department was split into what is now the Florida Department of Children and Families, commonly referred to as DCF, and the Florida Department of Health.
...part of it was this agency’s approach to be with the parents, sometimes just to talk to
the parents for us to understand them better—were they just overwhelmed or
disorganized or whatever it was, or angry, or whatever it was. But when was it just
perfectly clear that they simply didn’t know what to do with their kids? They were so
ignorant about their children they didn’t know what to do with them. They didn’t know
how to change their diapers, didn’t know how to feed them, didn’t know how to spend
time with them, didn’t know how to moderate the volume of their voices…those kinds of
things…So it was an opportunity to be with the parents and watch how they were with
their children and use that as the opportunity to help them be a little more effective and
more comfortable and better informed. Which we viewed as an opportunity to help them
be not only better informed but also rebuild their psychological and emotional attachment
to their own children. And that became sort of a safety strategy. If they understood their
children and liked their children better, um, frankly this attachment would emerge and
they would be more focused on protecting their children.

This statement reflects the way that parenting was imbued with specific characteristics, in that
parents were expected to know in what ways they should “spend time” with their children and
how to “moderate the volume of their voices” with their children—practices that may look different
cross-culturally or even from one family to another. Parental ignorance is seen as the main
cause of such perceived dysfunction in many families, yet this is a very simplified view of what is
often a complex problem that may also include some combination of financial hardship, mental
illness, past abuse or neglect, or substance abuse (Barth 2009; Lawson et al. 2012). Also, with
regard to the structure of Nurturing Minds, the statement also highlights the organization’s
perspective that, in order to prevent child abuse, parents should be the at the heart of family
service work, and more specifically, parents and children should be together in services.

The Sunshine Center may be seen as an alternative intervention to foster care that
reflects a parent-centered ideology, where, instead of removing children from parents,
professionals place children in an ideal childcare environment while simultaneously teaching parents basic caretaking skills as well as emotional and psychological competencies that the organization felt were necessary in a parent-child relationship. The rationale was that in these “families in trouble,” as one administrator describes them, parents were either not aware of how to care for their children or consumed by personal challenges such as coping psychologically with their own emotional struggles, and they needed intensive hands-on support in learning to “re-parent.” The decision to provide these kinds of “deep end” services at the time were a logical extension of the national–and urgent–movement to address child abuse, as well as a response to the type of funding that became widely available (McCurdy and Daro 2001; McGowan 2005; National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publications Project 2014; Schlossman 1976). This is a clear example of the ways that larger structural events, like the national child abuse initiative, influence local reactions. And “reactive” is precisely how some of the more experienced administrators described the organization’s early work.

However, as time went on, new insights in the child development field would lead to an increased interest in children’s brain development, which would give family support services a new way of looking at problems related to children and families. Rather than targeting families already involved with child abuse or neglect, the science on brain development suggested that all children could be at risk for poor outcomes later on if essential brain connections were not made early on (Macvarish 2014). Most of the poor outcomes emerging from this research were associated with school success, and as a result, programs were oriented around the ages where there is little to no structural support for families–birth to five. Furthermore, during the 1990s the Elmwood’s child welfare services faced significant privatization under the Governor of the region at the time “that changed all of the contracting” in the area, according to an administrator. These political changes in the region essentially severed some of the stable funding that the organization had received, while new funding streams oriented towards more general prevention services and school readiness became available. All of these elements–new
financial support, fresh program directions, and popular psychological and neuroscience discourse—converged to shift the direction of programming. Many changes to Nurturing Mind’s program offerings and constituent base took place from the 1990s into the first decade of the twenty-first century, and thus the signature programs the organization is known for today were formed.

New Directions: Early Child Development

Leaving behind a more explicit focus on child abuse—and the stigma that came along with it—the organization embraced an approach that was oriented around children’s developmental milestones. As described in the introduction chapter, the foundations to this kind of thinking began in the early twentieth century with G. Stanley Hall and the development of child psychology, and there was an acceptance among psychological and medical professionals that children went through general stages of development throughout the century (Coleman 2010; Lassonde 2012). But beginning in the late 1990s, markers of whether or not a child was developmentally “on track” became more and more specific with advancements in neuroscience, and new understandings of infant brain development placed a greater emphasis on the first few years of life\(^8\) (Macvarish 2014). This new focus was a stark contrast from previous schools of thought, in which most children were seen as being able to make their way through the early years without very much intervention. Alex, an administrator from Nurturing Minds, expands on these previous understandings of child development:

As opposed to how people, on an average basis, used to think about children, that the whole learning brain, producing brain didn’t really kick in until a child was enrolled in kindergarten. It was, ‘uh, zero to five is one phase that kind of doesn’t matter. Just be

---

\(^8\) Although John Bowlby and colleagues’ attachment theory (discussed in the introduction) had established a widely accepted norm among child development professionals that babies needed security and bonding in the early years, this neuroscience added an additional level of scientific legitimacy.
This is in comparison to current ideologies that describe early development as a crucial time for brain development, and one that is often seen as providing that elusive and long sought-after instruction manual for parents. Importantly, Alex’s use of “intentional” with regard to parent interactions in the early years demonstrates the way that parents and child development professionals often see brain development as an opportunity for cultivation; babies and young children are seen as very malleable, and with good parenting, they can be directed towards ideal outcomes. From the perspective of Nurturing Minds, there are relatively simple answers to being a good parent and raising children to be well adjusted and successful; it’s just a matter of parents understanding this formula.

But because there is not a uniform way in which parents become proficient in knowledge about brain development, Nurturing Minds sees it as their role to impart that knowledge upon parents, thereby providing a pathway not only to a positive parenting experience, but to a happy and successful child, and ultimately to a better society. Another administrator, Vicky, expands on this gap in knowledge by parents, pointing to the role of experts in the process:

[Scientists] have done a stunningly poor job of teaching the science of early neuron connectivity to parents and families. I think the science and the scientists know all about it, but parents don't necessarily know about it. Many parents don't think a baby really learns much until they can talk or they go to kindergarten. So, they tend not to pay a lot of attention to the early, early years.

The problem, according to Nurturing Minds, is not that parents are incapable of raising their children well or that the process is mysterious, but that knowledge about the importance of
interacting in a particular way during the first few years of life has not permeated the worlds of most parents. The organization, then, saw itself as one of the structural forces that is responsible for guiding society in raising children. They act as disseminators of expert knowledge to families who otherwise may not have enough time or resources to figure out the “right” practices in raising children. After all, a cornerstone of the organization’s philosophy is that all parents need some kind of help or support. Parents should not be expected to be able to “do it all” on their own in the current environment of intensive parenting. In this sense, the organization sees its role as contributing to social justice by disseminating expert knowledge to the community; it is only fair that all parents should be able to have access to this valuable research. However, this line of reasoning creates a narrow framework in which good parenting can occur, and there is little gray area between neuroscience-based parenting (and particular interpretations of it) and child abuse or neglect. An acknowledgement of various other ways of “good” parenting was missing from the ideology to which the organization subscribed.

Although some critics of neuroscience-based parenting suggest that it removes the natural connection and intuition parents have used to raise their children for millennia (Macvarish 2016), the organization has a unique way of reconciling this expert knowledge with biology by suggesting that the science is simply revealing natural processes. Nancy, an administrator, explains this perspective:

For me, brain development is how, um, it's always been exciting to me. You know, intuitively we--any parent--can know what their children understand. But now we have the science behind it because of the imaging and all that as to, you know, what is stimulating the brain, what parts of the brain are being stimulated and um, that's--that has shaped some of our programs.

In such a technologically advanced time, perhaps it would be naïve to suggest that people should rely on family and community members or instinct to figure out how best to raise their children, when, ostensibly, the means of discovering the “real” answers is available. This is one
of the ways that expert knowledge becomes viewed as more reliable than social knowledge. Nonetheless, people have raised children without this knowledge for thousands of years, and one would be hard pressed to say that all or even a majority of parents during that time were doing a poor job.

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, parents often feel a tension between learning from their immediate environments and parenting according to expert advice. And because many of the families Nurturing Minds serves are relatively isolated from their extended families, it makes sense that the lack of a strong social network would be replaced by another kind of network—one that is hosted by child development professionals. Reliance on experts grew relatively slowly throughout the twentieth century in the US, but I suggest that now it has become part of a parenting habitus, especially among highly educated, middle-class and wealthy white families, such as those who make up the majority of parents in this study. Parents—and perhaps mothers in particular—assume that consulting professional advice is a natural part of their role, sometimes to the exclusion of family and community advice. While some mothers did discuss the value of learning from their immediate social network or family, they also exhibited a trust in child development advice that was unparalleled to other forms of knowledge.

Being “On Track”

One of the main outcomes that Nurturing Minds captures is how many of the children they serve are developing according to a predictable timeline. The tool used to measure this is a widely used developmental assessment called the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) that scores children’s abilities in five major areas: Fine Motor, Gross Motor, Communication, Social Emotional, and Problem Solving (Squires and Bricker 2009). In the Side By Side program, the results are used to guide the educators in what areas to focus on. For instance, parent participants in this in-home program are asked to complete an online evaluation with their child
at specific intervals, such as three months, six months, nine months, and so on, with more space between assessments as the child gets older. For some items, the parent is expected to answer a question, such as, “does your child use four- and five-word sentences?” while for others, the parent is prompted to have their child complete a small activity, such as drawing a horizontal line, after which the parent reports on the outcome according to a scale. A final score is computed for each assessment area, and the educator discusses the outcome on the next visit. Scores may fall into categories delineated as White (passing), Gray (reassess), or Black (refer for services).

The category a child scores within can be a source of great anxiety for parents. On one occasion when I was observing the Side By Side program at one family’s home, the educator, Amanda, had told me ahead of time that the three-year-old child (a younger sibling) had scored low in fine motor skills, so she had prepared an activity to help develop his ability in this area. Below is an excerpt from my field notes about this visit that highlights a parent’s concern about the assessment outcome:

One of the concerns with this family was that the son scored “low” on the fine motor skill area on the assessment, so Amanda came with an activity to address those skills (making a paper bag “wild thing” after reading Where the Wild Things Are and doing cutting, pasting, hand movements, etc.). The mom tried to ask about the scoring of the assessment in that area a few times—I think because she wasn’t sure it was an accurate representation of her son’s ability. She answered questions, some without him having tried the activities before, so she felt like maybe if he just tried them he could do them. But it seemed like there was already an established “issue” with his fine motor score, so that was how Amanda was viewing things, and she had also discussed other services they could get to help with that. In hindsight, it seemed a little overkill to me, and maybe the better thing would be to have him do the activities that were problematic on the
assessment (and the mom made copies of that section this time to work on those things).

In this instance, because of the assessment, the mother was left to question her parenting, pondering whether she had provided him enough opportunities to practice fine motor skills. But she also showed some resistance (even if hesitantly) to the idea that the assessment could accurately capture her son’s ability in a whole developmental area based on a few questions. In one sense, the assessment is very specific in the kinds of activities parents are asked to do with their children. But in another sense, it seems that the educators often lack specific knowledge of the range of capabilities of the children they see, since they usually only see them once per month for one hour.

During another observation of Side By Side with a facilitator named Camilla, a new mother expressed her anxiety over her one-year-old daughter’s language development, but was somewhat relieved by the assessment’s outcome. My field notes on this session are below:

We all sat in a baby-gated area and talked and played with the baby girl. Camilla was very at ease and natural with her—seemed genuinely interested in how they were doing. Camilla followed up on a few things that they had discussed the last time, and asked if the mother had any concerns. She said she was worried about her daughter’s language development because she wasn’t really talking yet. One of the main goals for this meeting was to do an assessment, which Camilla read directly to the mother and had her answer along the way. She was able to quickly answer most, if not all answers, and seemed to be taking it pretty seriously. The baby did very well, and only had a couple iffy responses, but she was definitely in the White [low to no risk category on the assessment]. The mother seemed concerned about it until she saw her progress from the last couple assessments. Overall the meeting went really well, and if I had any kind of critique, it might just be that I thought Camilla might have eased her anxiety as a new mom a little more—she seemed overly concerned about her daughter’s language, but her
daughter seemed to be doing great, and I hoped that Camilla might calm her fears a little more.

As a new mother, this tool served as an official guidepost of her child’s proper development. The progress from test to test was reassuring, but even still, she wanted to make sure she was providing enough opportunities for her daughter to develop speech well, so Camilla brainstormed some ideas with the mother, such as taking her daughter to playgroups in order to provide opportunities to interact with other children and observe speech from peers.

Even in the Play N Learn groups, children are given the developmental assessment before they begin a multi-week session. In these cases, the purpose is to notice any deviance from a normal developmental track so that it can be addressed early on, though not necessarily through the play group. The organization may offer suggestions or further resources when a child scores in the Gray (moderate risk for developmental delays) or Black category (high risk for developmental delays) in order to help the child or children stay “on track.” Cindy, a staff member who helps manage the assessments, explains the process and rationale:

And so early intervention, if we could intervene or catch a developmental delay at, say 18 months rather than three years, then you have more time for help. So, um, it's about helping families, supporting families early. And, um, what we found was the families really appreciate it, being able to fill out an ASQ and for the most part know their children are developmentally on track, and for the families whose children weren't, they were very grateful for the referrals and the information they could get –to get their child help much earlier than they might normally have gotten help. So what we've seen through our playgroups, um, over the last, say 3 years is, um, families come to playgroups and they're fun and they want their kids to have fun but families learn developmental information and they also, um, become aware of their child's development whether or not it's on track. Sometimes all that's needed is really a little more socialization and a little more practice. Maybe a child is not, um, a two-year-old or a two-and-a-half-year-old
is not cutting with scissors. Maybe they've never been given scissors to cut. So it's a matter of exposure and practice, that kind of thing. So, you know, that's not a developmental delay. But that's something, you know, a parent that recognizes that's one of the questions on the ASQ and, “Oh, I should be giving my child opportunities to, you know, develop their fine motor skills.” So that's all kind of stuff that we do in the playgroup.

Cindy touches on an important theme regarding the use of developmental assessments. Many parents are often already concerned about whether or not their children are on track, and while some parents may disagree with the outcome, most seem to see it as a valid tool, thus providing relief if a child is found to be on track, or producing stress or anxiety if they are not. However, the ultimate purpose is always to guide children back onto the projected “normal” track, so the methods used in play groups heavily emphasize standard skills related to these outcomes, such as dancing for gross motor skills, stringing beads for fine motor skills, singing and reading for communication, and so on, adjusting to the developmental level of the age group.

However, in some cases, there may or may not be any follow up based on a child’s assessment results. A couple of parents who attended play groups at the partner sites conveyed their confusion about the purpose of the assessment since their child’s results were not discussed further. For Nurturing Minds, the assessment also serves as a method of accountability to funders. A staff member who helps manage the assessments described a process in which scores for every child are reported to a funder as well as to the organization’s Board of Directors, and then the board and the staff will internally discuss patterns or reflect on the scores, but it is unclear whether any other action is taken by the funders, as it seems mainly to be used as a reporting tool for them. When assessments are given without follow up, it can leave parents feeling unsure of where their child stands and unclear about whether or not they should be doing anything differently, as indicated by the observations and interviews I
conducted with parents.

The significant efforts to encourage specific results in children according to a developmental track is very consistent with a concerted cultivation framework (Lareau 2011). Popular understandings of developmental milestones are that if children are on track, they will be more successful, and therefore, if they are not on track, the parent—with the help of professionals—must intervene to steer them back in the right direction. Parents may consult with many specialists in order to ensure their child is developing normally, and this mindset is encouraged by Nurturing Minds. During the course of the Side By Side program with my own children, our educators suggested having both of them see a specialists for different issues. One was for vision, based on a simple test in which an educator asked my daughter to follow a light with her eyes (something I’m not sure was part of the curriculum), and the other was for hearing, based on an audio test the educators do for each family (the results of which I found to be very inconsistent from the type of device used). For both children, even though I was not convinced of the seriousness of the issues, I ended up consulting medical specialists. My five-year-old daughter had an extensive vision examination done by a pediatric ophthalmologist, after which we were told her vision was perfect. I had not previously noticed any issues with her vision, but because the educator suggested seeing a specialist, I felt it was my duty to follow up, especially since I knew I would likely be asked about it at our next visit. My two-year-old daughter had examinations by an audiologist and an Ear Nose and Throat doctor, who suggested surgery to insert ear tubes because some fullness in her ears could prevent her from hearing well enough to develop language appropriately. In this case, my daughter was still learning to speak, and while I sometimes wondered if some of her speech peculiarities were potentially problematic, I mostly thought they were typical of toddler speech development. Ultimately, we ended up not doing the surgery because her pediatrician checked her ears shortly before her surgery was scheduled and said they looked completely normal.

I share this story to illustrate the impact of having a vast array of developmental
knowledge and applying it widely and indiscriminately. All children are screened for all developmental abilities, whether concerns exist or not, and this feeds into a system in which parents constantly worry about their children’s milestones or feel they should seek out expert advice “just in case,” or “just to be sure,” which was often the language used by the educators. These pursuits of reassurance can be time consuming and stressful, not to mention expensive, yet they are very consistent with a middle-class concerted cultivation framework that relies on interactions with medical and other child development professionals in order to ensure the best outcomes for children. The role the educators and facilitators play as child development specialists are often perceived as sort of intermediary to medical professionals, legitimate enough to invoke a seriousness that parents feel they should not ignore. Although the programs at Nurturing Minds are intended to provide support and validation to parents, in many ways they add to the burden of responsibility by opening up areas of concern that may not have otherwise existed.

To be sure, some parents found developmental screenings to be invaluable when they eventually found that their children did have developmental delays or required external services. But in those cases, the parents usually already had concerns, and they found the programs most useful in helping to identify other community resources. The majority of children (73 percent) involved in programs at Nurturing Minds scored in the White category of the developmental assessment and were considered developmentally on track (see figure 2). This was true for each site as well as the whole organization. This means that a majority of the organization’s work (and funding) is going towards developmentally healthy children. It might be argued that the programs are helping children stay on track, and thus the screenings reflect the organization’s work. However, many screenings are done prior to beginning programs and are likely more reflective of preexisting developmental patterns among participants.

So in terms of cultural and economic reproduction, it is important to consider the implications of this work. On one hand, intensive parenting culture and the isolation of families
has created space for much-needed parental support, especially during the early years. On the other hand, millions of dollars annually in this one community are going towards supporting families whose children are already on a path towards healthy development and future academic success. Is this the most valuable way to conceive of parent support? For the families who are able to participate in programs and spend time explicitly working on their children’s development, parents are able to take part in “good parenting” ideology. They use professional supports to become aware of proper child development and take steps to ensure their children stay on a specified track. But for parents who aren’t able to participate in this system or don’t desire to, resource constraints or ideological differences necessarily limit them in their ability to participate in these perceived “good” parenting practices.

**Figure 2.** ASQ scores from 2015-2016
Reasonable Expectations and Positive Parenting

One of the ways that Nurturing Minds staff explain the focus on development is by pointing out the ways that understanding children’s developmental processes helps to avoid parent frustration, thus lessening the potential for abuse or maltreatment. Many staff stated the importance of setting parents’ expectations, emphasizing what is “reasonable to expect at any age.” Alex explains that this focus on development gave the organization a much “richer” conversation to have, as they could now say to any parent, “by the way, when she’s three months old, don’t expect her to act like she’s seven months old, because she’s not there yet.”

The shift to prevention allowed them to tap into all parents’ potential misunderstandings of their children, thus casting a much wider safety net. Other staff members explain this philosophy in response to my questions about what messages were inherent in programs:

Camilla (Educator, Side By Side): We also focus on the positive disciplining aspects, so we try to encourage our parents not to use things like punishment and um, you know, hands-on type of things. We try to encourage our parents to teach their children, not to do a temporary, you know, [disciplinary act] that's going to make the parent feel good at the moment because you know, “okay I got my frustration out, I'm fine.” But the child didn't learn anything at the end of the day. So it's going to continue to be frustrating and, you know, that type of experience. We also, um, a lot of the curriculum that we do, it's based off of participatory guidance, so basically getting you prepared for the next step that your child is going to—that they're going to experience.

Dave (Facilitator, Fatherhood Program): If you believe, that, uh, if you believe that a good child sleeps through the night, right? So if your child does not sleep through the night, you've got a bad child, right? There's something wrong with them. And you're going to view them and treat them differently based on that belief system.

From this perspective, many of the problems with child abuse or maltreatment occur because
parents’ expectations do not match actual developmental abilities of their children, leading to anger and exasperation, and potentially mistreatment. However, not all staff connected the focus on development to child abuse prevention quite so readily; the two staff members quoted above worked largely with parents who were involved with DCF in some way, and their perspectives may have been honed by their unique experiences with higher risk families.

Many other staff did identify an underlying connection to child abuse prevention, but a more common explanation of the organization’s rationale from different staff interviewees focused on positive parenting and attachment. Perhaps more important than simply understanding developmental milestones is the manner in which parents are expected to respond to them. Nurturing Minds espouses a philosophy that is widely referred to in the field as positive parenting. Positive parenting is characterized by the primacy of the parent/child bond above all other aspects of interaction (Barth 2009; Faircloth 2014; Hays 1996; Macvarish 2014). Physical, emotional, or any other kind of punishment is seen as damaging and ineffective, while interaction, encouragement, and gentle guidance are viewed as essential to a healthy relationship.

Many of the materials used in programs explicitly reflect this approach. For instance, in one of the introductory parent handouts in the Side By Side program, values of attachment are quite evident. Handouts like this would be given intermittently to parents in the program as supplements to the handouts about children’s developmental stages. In describing how to best nurture one’s child, the advice outlines several points that emphasize warmth, positivity, and close interactions:

- Celebrate both results and efforts. Give your child positive, specific feedback when he keeps trying or searches for new ideas after running into problems.
- Use a warm tone of voice when you talk to and about your child. Show how much you love him. Make eye contact, give hugs, share laughter, snuggle up and spend time together.
- Accept your child’s emotions. Talk about what he’s feeling—happy, sad, angry or fearful—and the reasons why. Let him know everyone feels that way sometimes.
• Allow him to make mistakes without criticism. Perfection is not one of your child’s goals! Children learn from correcting their own mistakes.

• Comfort him when he’s upset. Discuss what happened and help him understand that he will be okay. Think about your child’s needs. Stay flexible–his needs may change over time.

• Provide a safe base. Your child explores more when he knows you will be there when he returns.

• Encourage appropriate risk-taking. Taking on new tasks or trying new experiences can feel scary to your child, but he will be more willing to try if you are there to support him. (Materials provided to researcher by Nurturing Minds)

Nurturing, in this example, is very specific and is embedded in psychological ideas of secure attachment. The way parents speak to children, express affection, respond to their emotions, and instill a sense of security are all part of how child development professionals piece together ideas of a secure or attached relationship between parent and child (and yet any one of the bullet points above could be explained as meaningful only within very specific cultural contexts [Lancy 2008; Small 1998]). Language of attachment is often used by staff and in program materials, and it is sometimes intermixed with concepts of positive parenting and development, as illustrated by Casey, an educator for Side By Side, who describes some of the ways parents can best raise their children:

Um, I would say positivity. Have a good attachment, um, just being aware of development. (Anna: And what do you mean by attachment?) A close, close bond. Being close with them, being comforted– comforting, being their safe person. Being aware and have that good attachment, be close with them and guide them. Yeah the attachment, the guiding and the closeness, and they trust each other.

Good parenting, then, is tantamount to establishing a secure attachment with one’s children, and this perspective is both explicitly woven into curricula and implicitly part of staff ideologies of parenting.
In Play N Learn groups, advice may be more subtle. Modeling is one of the primary ways that the desired kind of parenting behavior is shown. Several facilitators pointed out ways that they try to emphasize attachment and positive parenting principles in their groups. One issue that frequently drew agitation was that, from a staff perspective, the play groups are designed as a time for parent and child bonding and quality interaction, but some parents or caregivers become distracted and talk to other adults or look on their phones. Facilitators try to set expectations during the first session, but they feel there is little recourse when parents ignore this rule, so facilitators sometimes give a friendly reminder to the whole group when this happens. In other instances, a facilitator may point out an example of what another parent and child did that highlights values of attachment, as Tiffany describes: “I love when a baby or a mom presents an example and then I can say ‘look what Stephanie just did for us,’ you know, ‘she crawled off and then checked in back with mom, and then explored further.’” And although facilitators may often discuss how parents can replicate activities at home or do activities to focus on different developmental milestones, attachment is seen as the driving force behind programs, as further described by Tiffany: “Um, and I think the other big piece is how important attachment is, especially for the baby class. You know, we are not here to, you know, help your baby learn colors or to help them learn how to crawl, you know, we’re here for the attachment piece of it and all that other stuff is kind of incorporated in it. But, the attachment is the main goal.”

In my own experiences in programs and in my observations of others, educators were never forceful about ensuring that parents partake in a particular parenting style, and in fact, they often seemed careful not to be too authoritative about their positions or advice. Some even discussed feeling somewhat intimidated by parents that were highly educated, like doctors. Marisa, a Side By Side educator explains:

Marisa: I think the hardest families, for me, to work with, were the very well-educated families. Cause you feel like, “what am I going to bring to them?” You know, they know it
all, you know what I’m saying? But, no, they do appreciate what you’re bringing, and they do want you in their homes. They want to be able to, even if they have all this knowledge, they want to know what they’re doing is right, that they’re doing a good job with their child. That’s why they want you there. They want to make sure that they are parenting well, that they are doing what they [are] supposed to do.

Anna: Like, they want that affirmation, but from somebody outside.

Marisa: Exactly.

So even when some parents are viewed as being highly educated in general or in a particular field, Nurturing Minds is still seen by both the family and the staff member as explicitly providing validation for what counts as the “right” way to parent. On the other hand, many parents who participate in Nurturing Minds programs already espouse an ideology that emphasizes attachment and positive parenting, and they may find that the messages from Nurturing Minds reinforces what they already find present in their social networks. Many parents in middle-class and wealthy communities–especially stay-at-home mothers–may already believe that time with their children is a more worthy endeavor than paid work, at least temporarily (an idea that will be discussed extensively in the following chapter). From this point of view, we can see the interplay between organization influence and constituent influence. The organization is not only disseminating a certain ideology of parenting, they are also responding to participants’ desires to parent according to a set of widespread values based on attachment; the process is not unidirectional.

Several of the administrators I interviewed spoke of the bond they hoped to help create between parent and child because, they reasoned, if parents and children were bonded, this would be a protective factor against parents becoming abusive. One administrator notes: “But, you know, if you form a relationship with each other, then you’ll–then you’ll have this love affair between the baby and the caregiver. The baby will be safe and the person will, um, the
caregiver will be less likely to hurt the baby.” Another administrator echoes this sentiment: “If you begin to bond with your baby, you will protect your baby.” In many instances, attachment was described as the most important part of parenting. Cyndi, a program director, explains:

I think the biggest task a parent has is building a quality attachment with their child. And children attach when their needs are met. Children are attached when they're secure. Children can attach to more than one individual. So it's not just mom or it's not just dad. Um, it's both and grandparents or whoever else is in the family. Um, but attachment is not a mystery. Attachments are formed as consistent care is given, and a child looks to a primary caregiver for those needs to be met and the attachment forms.

But if attachment is so simple, then why must it be taught by professionals when the process is arguably supposed to be one of the most biologically natural ones for humans (Hrdy 1999; Gopnik 2016) Some employees had explanations for why nurturing did not come easily to some families, including not having the time, having low income, or even having past family relationships that have negatively shaped their own identities as parents. Staff also suggested that some parents viewed play and interaction as more or less unnecessary or trivial, whereas Nurturing Minds sees these activities as highly conducive to positive relationship building.

However, this idea of cultivating parent/child connections with great intentionality is still relatively new, and it is largely considered to reflect Western ideologies of parenting (Quinn and Mageo 2013). Parents may express love and nurturing in a variety of ways that may appear contradictory to the specific elements of secure attachment, as depicted by Nurturing Minds. Yet the assumption by staff is that there is enough evidence and science behind their philosophies that they are essentially proven to be the best ways to parent.

“Universal Access” and Redefining Risk

As Nurturing Minds began to embrace a developmental approach in the late 1990s, the constituent base grew and changed significantly. With the new shift in program direction, the
organization’s services were “opened up” to middle-class and wealthy families. The organization is unique in its programming and services in that there is an emphasis on “universal access,” or providing programs to anyone in the community, regardless of whether or not a parent or family has any risk factors. Many other family service organizations have requirements for being able to participate in programs, such as having low income or little education, or being involved with the criminal justice system or the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Several Nurturing Minds staff have backgrounds in social work and previously worked in state welfare departments or other nonprofit organizations as case workers or case managers, and they often commented on the positive nature of their current work environment compared to the stressful nature of their previous jobs. One of the aspects of work at Nurturing Minds they appreciated most was the “any family” policy, which to them meant that their clientele were parents who actually wanted support and education, rather than those who were legally mandated to complete a parenting education program. Marisa, an educator from the Side By Side program describes this key difference between the two types of jobs:

It was different to me because all the years that I’ve worked, um, basically was with families that were high-risk. And working with families that are high-risk has its pros and its cons because now in this program, the majority of families, they want you to be in their homes. When you are working with families that are high-risk, um, it might be part of their progress plan, or it is court ordered, or they necessarily need to do it…Yes, we do have some families that come to us from the [DCF case management agency] and so forth. It’s still, the majority of the homes, they still want us to be there. It’s not like where you are in a program when it’s a requirement. So it’s different to them—it’s essentially different. Me coming into your home because I have to be there as opposed to me coming to your home because you want me to be there.
Ranesha, a former Side By Side educator, now in a supervisory position, also describes the difference in atmosphere and interactions between her case management job and her job with Nurturing Minds:

Anna: Would you say that this work is very different from what you did before?
Ranesha: Of course. This is totally different. Like there is, and the difference is, with case management, you’re not wanted. They don’t want to see you, you know what I’m saying? They’ll probably, you know, cooperate because it’s court ordered to cooperate, but you don’t get that much cooperation. It’s more stressful, because if the kids are removed from the family, if it’s court ordered for the parent to see that child once a week, you’re having to go pick these kids up if the foster can’t pick them up. So you’re transporting, you’re taking the kids back. It’s like, you’re responsible. If these parents don’t follow through, with anything, you’re responsible for it. But with Side By Side, you’re wanted. It’s a voluntary service. And the parents want you in the home.

The underlying distinction here between case management work and parent education in a universal access program is the difference in families served. Nurturing Minds realized early on that “deep end services” were limiting, both in terms of who could be reached and what could be accomplished with funding. Because intensive services were so expensive and served a small amount of families, it was more desirable to be able to serve significantly more families through less intensive services, thus making more use of funds and broadening the scope of services to those who aren’t considered high-risk. These new constituents included many middle-class and wealthy families who might need social support, or who might just want reassurance that their children are developing appropriately. Josephine, an administrator, explains the importance of working with this new base of families:

Because I think the unique thing about us though is that universal access piece. Any family in [our] county. No matter if you live in Bayview [a wealthier neighborhood] or if
you live in Leeford [a poorer neighborhood]. It doesn’t matter…But a lot of programs
don’t see the need for that. You know, they don’t see the uniqueness or the appeal to
that as much. You know, but if they would talk to some of these moms that do live like in,
what might be considered a more affluent area and ask her what the value is, it will, it’ll
you know, it would really change their perspective. Because they really appreciate their
parent educator so very much. Even if it is just support, even if little Johnny’s developing
just like he should be, you know, mom might be just having a really rough time, you
know. And we’ve had that situation.

In this exchange, Josephine emphasizes that many low-risk or wealthy families—especially
mothers—need support, and that providing this support is an equally valid endeavor to working
with low-income families. Because most other organizations or programs do not work with “any
family,” people who have enough resources are left behind, according to this this reasoning. A
representative from one of Nurturing Mind’s funders agreed with this sentiment:

Anna: Do you feel like generally, with the kinds of programs and services you have, or
that you fund, that we’re mostly meeting most parents’ needs? Or do you feel like there
are any gaping holes that we just have a hard time addressing?

Funding Representative: I think the middle class, actually. Because the assumption is
they’re okay. And I would argue they’re not. And I think a lot of what we’re seeing right
now in our politics and what’s going on are reflective of the fact that we’ve neglected the
middle class, and still do, and will continue to do so. Just, because they’re able, at just
enough level, to put it off.

He also goes on to inform me that this is the very reason that many of the community sites at
which Nurturing Minds programs are offered were created, although some of them are in mixed
income or low-income areas. Another staff member points out the way that middle-class families
are often “missed” in the broader economic structuring of our society:
... I would say that the majority of our families [are] probably middle-class families, um which I fully, fully...Um, I think that they are missed. Um, you have your low-income families who, I mean I look at [poor neighborhood], and money is poured–um, totally my personal opinion–but money is poured into that zip code. Um and these families are overloaded with many, many opportunities. They need it. They are in drastic need of it. I fully support that. [The] wealthy have abundant number of resources available to them for financial reasons. Our middle class are–I feel like they’re left behind. They may be able to afford it, they may not. Um, I think it’s amazing to get in there and support them.

Staff expressed widespread support for this idea that anybody can benefit from the program, and that all parents struggle sometimes. Put in context of the historical trajectory of family changes in the US, this statement makes sense, given the decrease in supports and increase in responsibilities families have faced over time. But it is also the expectations of parenting in a developmentally focused and positive way that inform our understandings of what parents “need” in the early years, and what kinds of risks families face if they don’t have certain supports.

The placement of families into risk categories is problematic in many ways, as one characteristic of family life–such as household income, history of abuse, or level of education–can become falsely equated with “good” or “bad” parenting. There also seems to be lack of clarity among Nurturing Minds staff about what exactly counts as high or low risk, and while many seemed hesitant to place families within these categories, most of the staff I interviewed seemed to draw a line between higher income and lower income families, indicating that lower income families faced more risks. They were also comfortable characterizing families involved in substance abuse treatment or in DCF services as high risk. However, several staff members eluded to new ways of conceptualizing risk in order to illustrate the need for programs in stable, low-risk communities. In many of the families participating in services, the mother is the main caretaker and typically stays home full time with her children or works very few hours with a
flexible schedule. These mothers were often described as overwhelmed or needing to “unload” on a non-judgmental, supportive person. Tiffany, a facilitator, shares her perspective:

I think it’s just the stay-at-home moms, who are just so over-saturated with information, and here’s what you have to do, and you have to have every gadget, and you have to have flash cards, and you have to have them in, you know, all these classes from the time they take their first breath—I almost feel like helping them is becoming more of a focus than more of the at-risk families. They are at-risk in a different way.

Risk in these cases, as defined by some staff, is understood as having access to too much information and feeling pressure to keep up with multiple enrichment and learning expectations for babies and young children. Many staff also discussed the emotional intensity of stay-at-home mothers that differs from the traditional kinds of risks associated with low-income or undereducated families. But these observations were not limited to mothers who stayed home to care for their children. Vicky, an administrator who notes that risk factors come in all different shapes and forms, describes how, in homes where both parents work in what she refers to as “high powered” jobs, parents may interact very little with their children, therefore making the children susceptible to the risk of poor connection and attachment. Some staff suggested that education is not a good indicator of good parenting, describing parents with PhDs who don’t understand typical behaviors of babies or two-year-olds, which puts the children “at risk.”

Many staff alluded to the idea that it was not up to them to determine whether a family needed help, or specifically, to think that families did not need support just because they had money, as Ranesha explains:

So, um like I said with Side By Side, we service the entire county. So, it doesn’t matter if you are living in Leeford [a poor neighborhood], you know on welfare, we’re going to support you. Just like we’ll support someone over here that’s living in Bayview [a wealthy neighborhood]. You know, I’m not gonna go into the home and just be like, ‘oh you have everything, you don’t need my help. Why am I here?’ You know. She needs my help.
There’s a reason why she has me there, she needs my help. So I just think that we have that in our um…rights and responsibilities. We have that in there that we won’t discriminate, you know, against race or your political views, your sexual orientation. We go over that with the parents the first visit. Um, that we’re gonna treat everyone with dignity, courtesy and respect. You know, we have that written down and that’s what we live by.

Staff took the idea of universal access very seriously, and frequently defended the needs of middle-class and wealthy families, which are considered less obvious than the needs of poor families. Many staff suggested that the risk factors didn’t really even matter so much; all families could find value in the programs, as Marisa explains: “It doesn’t matter if they have high risk or no risk at all, they will all benefit the same. They take it and use it.” It was common for staff to give contrasting examples of a poor parent and a wealthy or highly educated parent and discuss how they both benefitted equally from the program (even though, in general, middle-class families were described as the majority).

Although well-intended, this insistence on equal benefits across families overlooks the many structural barriers that prevent poor families from accessing programs like those of Nurturing Minds as easily as middle-class or wealthy families. In fact, the very way that Nurturing Minds’ programs are structured prevent many families from participating in programs. Most of the Play N Learn groups are offered during weekdays, in the late morning or early afternoon, although some are occasionally offered on weekends. The educators I spoke with from the Side By Side program also did almost all of their visits during the weekday and said it was rare for them to do evening or weekend visits (although some occasionally did early evening visits). Although the curricula and programs were described by staff as very flexible and adaptable to different needs, they were intended for children (and parents) who were generally considered healthy and high functioning. Of course, the parents also had to have the time available to take their children to play groups or to be home to meet with educators. And for
families with multiple challenges that require intensive support, programs like those offered by Nurturing Minds may only scratch the surface. Administrator, Vicki accepts that the scope of impact for Nurturing Minds cannot meet the needs of families in the most distress:

Vicky: …we’re beginning to see more and more this whole—the evil trifecta of domestic violence, addiction, and mental health issues, all of which one causes the other and you self-medicate and then you…I mean it’s all there.

Anna: Do you see this organization as being able to help the families like that or you feel that's more for other agencies or organizations?

Vicki: …we have been much more going towards prevention and early intervention…How do you unravel that many shortfalls? If you’re addicted, you probably—and maybe you have mental problems or domestic violence, how do you unravel that for their health and for children’s health? So, it just makes sense to go into prevention and early intervention, and in the process, hope that you can turn the parents around.

Although Vicky goes on to explain that the organization does partner with a mental health substance abuse program and other local agencies that are considered “deep end services,” Nurturing Minds is a small part of that overall treatment. Furthermore, even though several employees stressed that services are voluntary for anyone, and anyone can refuse services, this is only true as a technicality. For parents who are court-ordered to complete a parenting education program or who received the Side By Side program as part of their residential substance abuse treatment, refusing services comes with great consequences. From my observations, the “any family” mantra has become more of a way to defend the vision of supporting middle-class and wealthy families in a field that usually provides programs to high-risk families. Families with more resources and more time may have more opportunities to employ the practices espoused by the organization, such as “working on” developmental milestones, or replicating the activities from play groups at home, or taking time out just to play or read with children. These practices ultimately support a concerted cultivation framework in
that the specified activities and ways of interacting are preparing children for a middle-class ideal of success and well-being.

**Parenting in Time**

As indicated by the title of this dissertation, time is a driving factor in the organization’s program development and outreach. The focus on the birth through age three age range is widely accepted as the most influential in a child’s life in terms of parent or caregiver connection and brain development (Macvarish 2016). Many experts have even suggested the first year is the most important, and an administrator from Nurturing Minds recently learned of research that posits that the first three months are what matter the most. The timeline for doing the best parenting is getting shorter and shorter.

Many of the staff at Nurturing Minds were quick to make statements about the problems that can occur later in life if certain connections in the brain were not made during the first year or two, as evidenced by this interview with two parent educators:

Monica: Studies show that when they are nurtured when they are a baby, they’re making like connections in their brains—a lot of connections. And when the child is abused or rejected or something like that, the connection—they don’t make those connections. And they show like pictures—

Lorena: The brain development—

Monica: —a nurtured brain [compared] to a not nurtured brain, and you see the difference in the brain.

Anna: Okay, is that from your curriculum training?

Both: Yes.

Monica: We show that to families because it is very important because when you cover all the children’s needs and they feel that love from you because you are the mom, you
are the family you know? And they will be believing everybody. If they don’t have all their needs covered, they don’t care about nothing in the future.

Although I could not get access to the exact image referenced here, there is a commonly cited study that has become widespread in discussions of child development in which the brain scan of a normal three-year-old showing a robust and healthy brain is compared to the shrunken and unhealthy brain of a child who has endured “extreme neglect” (Nelson et al. 2014). This image is often used as a casual example of what can happen if parents don’t make essential connections early on, even though, in its proper context, the unhealthy brain was from a child who had lived in an impoverished Romanian orphanage since birth. Although the severity of problems related to neglect, abuse, and trauma are certainly worth better understanding, the link made here is inappropriate, and it perpetuates fears that parents can severely damage their children if they don’t do everything right in the beginning.

Other staff indicated the importance of making connections as early as possible; otherwise the potential for a strong bond lessens over time. Steve, who works mostly with fathers, offers his perspective when asked about the main messages inherent in programs:

Sure, the first is that time is precious. Um, that bonding and attachment starts as soon as your baby is born and goes through their entire life. And the earlier that you get that connection with them, the stronger that bond is going to be. And again, just trying, no matter whether I get them at prenatal, whether I get them—I’ve had guys who’ve come, babies are three weeks old, and I have guys who don’t come until they’re 14 months old. No matter what, it’s still letting them know I appreciate you making an effort to come because this early time is so crucial. ‘Cause if they’re seeing me, that’s still significantly earlier than most men will end up spending significant time with their own children. Um, from what the studies show. Most guys don’t get involved in the first couple years at all.

For fathers, then, time is even more of a challenge because of the gendered norm that fathers do not need to be involved early on. Several staff mentioned that for many fathers—and
particularly African American and Latino fathers—the mother is the main caretaker in the beginning, and the father’s role comes into play when the child becomes old enough to play and talk, if at all. Sometimes a father is seen mostly as a disciplinarian, quite contrary to Nurturing Minds’ philosophy that all caregivers should interact frequently and lovingly with their children. Further studies on fathering would be well worth the effort given these contradictions in mainstream ideology and individual beliefs.

Administrator, Alex adds: “...it’s more commonly assumed [today] that by the time the child gets to three, and certainly by the time the child gets to five years old, anywhere from 80 to 90 percent of the child’s brain gets hardwired.” While the technicalities and accuracies of this so-called hard-wiring are outside the scope of this paper, I should briefly note that this kind of statement is complex and debatable (Macvarish 2014; Romagnali and Wall 2012), yet it is common for developmental specialists and practitioners to discuss infants’ early interactions and environment as creating a kind of “wiring” of the brain that is more or less permanent. And importantly, the idea that babies’ and young children’s brains become “hard-wired” implies a great threat to parents: if they do not do the right things early on, then there will be long-term and irreparable damage. Vicky emphasizes this point: “Children who fall far behind generally never catch up for those basic learning capabilities. Many children are receiving little or no brain exercise in these first key years with low levels of adult one-on-one. It’s the one-on-one interactions of [those] kinds that exercise brains.” Without appropriate caregiver interactions from the very beginning, children are at risk for being chronically behind.

If this is all true, then US structural supports are seriously misaligned with these values. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the US is the only one of forty-one nations that does not have mandated paid leave for new parents (Livingston 2016). Numerous sociological studies have shown that, even in workplaces that do offer family leave benefits, women often feel that they cannot successfully compete with their colleagues and also have time to be a mother because of strenuous workplace expectations, especially for
women at the professional level (Blair-Loy 2009; Stone 2007). The intensive parenting ideology that is espoused by Nurturing Minds is at odds with the realities of many families in its community. Yet, as I discuss in the following chapter on parent perspectives, this is likely a significant reason that the parents who do participate in Nurturing Minds programs are those whose values already align with a more intensive ideology of parenting.

“Someone Please Give Us an Answer”

I have illustrated the ways in which Nurturing Minds encourages an ideology of parenting that resonates with concerted cultivation, or the intentional honing of children’s development in order to either prepare them for success or prevent long-term damage. Although the organization began with programs in response to what was considered a national child abuse crisis at the time of its inception, it eventually changed direction and broadened its scope of services to middle-class and wealthy families who did not necessarily have any risk for child abuse. They were, however, part of a culture of intensive parenting that developed around the same time the organization changed gears, and these families’ beliefs in a nurturing, child-centered approach coincided with Nurturing Mind’s view that parents should be doing specific kinds of work to engage their children from birth through age five.

However, implicit in a positive parenting approach is that families be devoid of serious struggles, especially the multiple layers of challenges as with the families the organization started out working with. High-risk families continue to be part of the programming efforts, but in a less intensive, and less voluntary, way. Furthermore, using a developmental approach inherently assumes certain individuals—with time—can participate in programs. Staff repeatedly emphasized the “any family” or “universal access” aspect of Nurturing Minds, yet the organization is structured in a way that mostly only families who have weekday availability can participate. It is also unlikely that parents in the drug treatment center or fathers who have been court ordered to do programs are able to spend time and find resources to replicate activities
with their children. The information and support they receive may be very beneficial and wanted, but there is a difference in how these traditionally high-risk families benefit from the program compared to low-risk families with more time and resources. The programs seem to be better designed for low-risk families and their capabilities.

But do parents with varying income levels, education levels, and different challenges have the same basic needs and abilities for parenting? Funders’ perspectives are particularly instructive here, as they provide a broader understanding of how organizations and funding work together to meet the needs of the community. One interviewee from an organization that funds Nurturing Minds programs stresses the importance of understanding the realities of struggling families:

But, I think that where it really hurts is with those low-income struggling parents who live in struggling neighborhoods. Um, and with the stress and figuring out how to make ends meet and the experience maybe that they’ve had and maybe they didn’t graduate, um, it’s, it’s hard, you know, sometimes to really, I think understand why it’s important…um, if you’re really struggling and if you’re really stressed, the last thing you can do is think about, you know, to take time off to help your kid. So, um, and if you’re working two jobs to make ends meet and your spending as much time working, catching the bus to get to those jobs as you are working those jobs, where do you find the energy, you know? So I think, I think a big piece of that is getting families and parents to a place where financially they’re a little more, comfortable and less stressed. Which then allows them to be ready to be more engaged.

There is no question that working with struggling or high-risk families is challenging. In my experiences working with high-risk populations and doing qualitative research with DCF workers, I’ve seen just how widespread the problems of mental illness, substance abuse, and income instability are. But it might be unrealistic to have the same expectations of low-risk and
high-risk families, especially with regard to time, which I’ve posited is a central factor in what is considered “good parenting.”

When I asked one funder about other services that might improve the wellbeing of families with young children and if there were any gaps in this regard, I was surprised by his answer:

Anna: So I don’t know if this is something you’ve thought about before, but if there were programs or services that you could imagine us having that would better meet the needs of, um, parents with young children, that we can’t have for some reason, have you ever thought about what those might be?

Funding Representative: Every RFP [request for proposals] we write is trying to reach that. Everything we put out is trying to get something to that end. So, yeah…and I would argue that most funders feel that way about any RFP they’re putting out there. We’re looking for some—someone please give us an answer, because we’ve got what we’ve got, we want to do something amazing.

In other words, there may not be an easy answer, at least through programs and services. What was most surprising about my discussions with staff and funders was that very few people located the problems young families face as structural, or as being rooted in family leave policies, childcare affordability, work availability, transportation, and poverty (Lee 2014; Livingston 2016; McLeod 1993; Palley 2011; Romagnoli and Wall 2014). It is more or less expected that people should be able to work around programs like Side By Side or Play N Learn groups, yet there was little overt awareness that our social and economic supports are not in alignment with these things. To be clear, I do not find philosophies of attachment and developmentally-based parenting problematic, per se. Rather, the problem is that it is impossible for all families to participate in this form of parenting in a capitalist, neoliberal society that does not value equal social support for all (Abramovitz 2006; Elliott et al. 2015; Larner 2000; Macvarish 2014; Reich 2005; Romagnoli and Wall 2012). Furthermore, when
government-sponsored organizations support and encourage intensive models of parenting, the multiple needs of struggling families continue to go unmet while families who are more stable, at least economically, receive support and validation. As I illustrate in the following chapter, even the parents who are financially more secure and have their basic needs met find parenting young children to be a challenge. Yet, it is the messages they receive through programs like Nurturing Minds, the resources they have, and the social networks of which they are a part that help them to feel confident about their parenting choices.
Chapter 5: Defining a “Good” Parent

Really, I think [the most important thing] is just, like, spending time with them. I mean we all—even as I’m sitting here all day long with her and like, we’re having a blast—I have this list in my mind of things that I need to get done. But at the end of the day, it’s like, “Who cares if there’s dishes in the sink or our bathroom is dirty?” It does not matter at all. I really—I think that [this] is the most important time. Just spending time with them.

(Brittany, Side By Side Program Participant, Mother of Nine-Month-Old)

Cassandra is a parent participant in several Nurturing Minds programs. She was referred to me through another interviewee who had received one of my flyers at a fall festival. Both families lived in Bayview, a wealthier neighborhood in the study site, and had become part of each other’s parenting circles through Nurturing Minds. Cassandra and her husband and two children live in a modest townhome near the perimeter of the neighborhood—not quite as typical as many of the older, upscale homes in Bayview. She and her husband both made significant changes to their lucrative, but intensive, careers in order to focus on raising their children. I begin with an excerpt from Cassandra’s interview because it illustrates some commonalities among many of the mothers I interviewed. In particular, Cassandra emphasizes the way that time has been an important part of her and her husband’s ability and desire to parent well, just as developmental milestones have:

I really—I am a love, nurturing person. I believe the best thing that we can do is love our kids, tell our kids how much we love them every day to make them feel confident about what they like to do. I feel that, you know, in this day and age you have to have a hands-on approach. I know a lot of people that do have to work throughout the day and I feel bad for them because I know that they’re seeing their kids at night time versus, um, I think my husband and I have been lucky that we were able to leave our careers and work from home, because we’re involved with everything to help her. She never has to
feel that she’s, you know, somewhere all day long and then we’re just seeing her for an hour per night. We’re actively getting to spend that time with her. Um, I think that’s important, and I think, you know, really, we have to educate ourselves as parents, too, I think that—I really started going down that road once I went to the Playroom and I saw all the developmental milestones they should be reaching. [I saw the importance of] not just being a mom that was loving and nurturing but making sure she met those milestones through whether it was…I remember one of the first suggestions was wooden blocks, or a little house that you did role playing where she would use her language, and things like that. We really tried to take [an] approach of, how does she learn best, how can we help her learn? And now it’s like going through all these programs, I think, it’s made my husband and I better parents because now, too, you know, I was raised in a household where my mother screamed a lot. Um, we weren’t really—my parents weren’t really spankers, but they would do like a little pat with the, you know, shoe or whatever, small spankings. And I didn’t want that style for my kids. So we don’t believe in spanking, we believe in positive reinforcement, and you know, getting through things without screaming, and teaching her that there’s a way to handle situations without, you know, if we’re yelling then that teaches her that she should yell. So we try to handle things peacefully so that she knows in life that she can handle things that way too.

Cassandra’s description of what she feels are some of the most important aspects of parenting highlights values that are implicit in an intensive parenting ideology, as described by Hays (1996) and other social scientists who study parenting (Elliott et al. 2015; Hoffman 2013; Lee et al. 2014). For instance, the family is child-centered, as evidenced by both parents’ adjustments to their work schedules (and pay) and Cassandra’s belief that the children benefit greatly from time spent with their parents. This type of sacrifice is salient in studies of intensive parenting, and parents (especially mothers) are encouraged to put aside their own needs for the sake of their children’s needs (Faircloth 2014; Hays 1996; Lee et al. 2014).
Also, in Cassandra’s example the parents do significant work to ensure they are aware of child development information and strategies—an effort that is also reflective of concerted cultivation (Lareau 2011 [2003]) and one that is supported by Nurturing Minds. Lareau contends that through concerted cultivation, middle-class and wealthy parents foster opportunities for their children through education, enrichment, and general fluency in institutional knowledge. Cassandra’s story and many others in this study reflect this approach, though with a focus on babies and preschool children. It is also clear from the description above that Cassandra and her husband espouse parenting practices rooted in attachment theory and positive parenting. These two practices often go hand-in-hand, though attachment theory is more an attempt to describe what is seen as biologically natural for child rearing, while positive parenting is a more recent effort in child development to show appropriate parenting responses that counter more punitive practices. For Cassandra, parenting is characterized by love and nurturing, and these values are shown explicitly through interactions and communication, but also implicitly through the structuring of time and the choice to avoid punitive styles of discipline.

These key themes provide the basis for this chapter, in which I describe parenting ideologies of the mothers (and some fathers) in this study, all of whom have participated with their children in the Side By Side program or Play N Learn groups at Nurturing Minds. This analysis has been informed by interviews with the parents, as well as observations during the programs. Below I delineate some of the collective practices and beliefs the parents have embraced to create an understanding of “good parenting,” highlighting points of divergence along the way.

Who Are the Parent Participants?

There is not one “type” of parent who participates in Nurturing Minds programs, but from the data collected, some common denominators emerged among a majority of them. All but one participant were women, most were white, and most were middle- or upper-income for the
region in which the study took place. The demographic information I present throughout this study is reflective of multiple data sets, some of which were limited in the categories they encompassed. Therefore, I cannot say with certainty that the data I collected from the electronic questionnaire on parenting ideologies (presented below) is representative of all parent participants. For one thing, I was not able to send the questionnaire to any of the sites that do Play N Learn groups except for The Playroom (the main site in Bayview that also hosts administrative offices) because of the management structure of the other sites; other organizations manage the data collection from these sites, and my research scope was limited to Nurturing Minds’ controlled participant data. I did have access to a dataset that captured developmental assessment scores for children in all programs, but parent data was only included for one of the programs, Side By Side. For the other sites, there is information on children’s race and ethnicity, but I cannot assume these categories are representative of their parents’ identities. Still, the data that do exist are important for placing participants in social and economic context. Without being able to understand this positionality, the narratives would lack important details that contribute to larger understandings of power and privilege. Though I trace the relationships between race, ethnicity, economic status, and education to valuations of parenting expressed by study participants and in literature on parenting, I am careful to not make sweeping generalizations about entire groups based on these samples.

In the comparison table below (table 3), we can see some similarities and differences in the parents and families as represented by Side By Side and the questionnaire I sent out [which was sent to 223 Side By Side parent participants (with 36 questionnaires completed [16 percent]) and 452 parent participants in playgroups at The Playroom (with 20 completed [four percent]). The number of participants in the Side By Side program far exceeds those who responded to the questionnaire, but in terms of percentages based on race and ethnicity, white parents easily make up the majority for race in both groups, and non-Hispanic or Latino parents
make up the majority for ethnicity⁹. If we consider the Side By Side program to be representative of the general constituent base of Nurturing Minds, then the questionnaire sample is lacking in black, multiracial, and Latino participants (although it shows a higher percentage of Asian respondents). These patterns may be reflective of variables associated with response (and non-response) bias, differences in patterns of response by race/ethnicity (Sax et al. 2003), and other unknown variables, perhaps including those related to parenting identities and interest in the topic. But even with some of the groups above underrepresented, the sample does allow for an interpretation of parents who are strongly represented: white, middle-class or wealthy, highly educated mothers. For the questionnaire questions that focused on all of these demographic factors, I included questions to ascertain income level and education in order to have a more robust understanding of participants. These results are discussed below.

### Table 3. Comparison of race and ethnicity among all Side By Side participants and respondents to electronic questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Side By Side (n = 426)</th>
<th>Questionnaire (n = 56)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>308 (72%)</td>
<td>41 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>63 (15%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>39 (9%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>15 (4%)</td>
<td>6 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1 (&lt; 1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Side By Side (n = 426)</th>
<th>Questionnaire (n = 56)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>138 (32%)</td>
<td>6 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>288 (68%)</td>
<td>46 (82%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire data I collected are helpful in filling in some of the missing pieces from the data collected by Nurturing Minds through developmental assessments given to all children in their programs (which was discussed in chapter four). In terms of economic class, the

⁹ The demographic categories captured here are those used by Nurturing Minds in their data collection processes. I replicated them in my study in order to simplify comparison.
majority of respondents (69%) were considered middle- to upper-income for the region, with 13 percent falling within upper-income boundaries (See figure 3) (Fry and Kocchar 2016). It is important to note, however, that 23 percent of respondents would be considered low-income, and a small percentage in poverty (6%).

![Figure 3. Household income of participants by race/ethnicity as collected from parenting questionnaire](image)

With regard to education, this sample includes a majority of mothers who have completed a bachelor’s degree or higher. Seventy-seven percent have received a bachelor’s degree or higher, with over one third of the total group having a graduate or other professional

---

10 Although the cited article and regional income calculator places a family of four making $50,000 to $150,000 as middle-income, many would argue that $50,000 is too low for this category. However, even if the numbers reflected a lower boundary of $75,000, a majority of respondents would still fall within this bracket (59%).
degree (see figure 4). Interestingly, many of the interviewees (which were drawn from this sample) had backgrounds in child development or education and previously or currently worked in these areas. Not only was the group highly educated, but for many, their education was geared towards topics relevant to understanding young children.

Finally, work status was an important variable to consider, given that discussions of intensive mothering often go hand-in-hand with what many consider to be competing devotions between home and work (Blair Loy 2009), or the identity struggle that has been characteristic of white, middle-class, working women who become mothers (Hays 1996; Stone 2007). As is evident from this sample of respondents, a majority of mothers (58%) stay at home full time to
raise their children, while 17 percent work part time, and 21 percent work full time (see figure 5). Out of those who worked part and full time, many often had flexible hours and could work from home. Usually, this was intentionally arranged in order to have more time to spend with their children.

Approximately two thirds of the participants had one child, while the rest had two or three, and the ages of children ranged from less than six months old to five years old, with the majority falling within the two-to-three-year range. There were slightly more boys than girls in the families whose parents participated in the questionnaire. Although several different racial and ethnic groups were represented, the non-white participants make up so small a sample—both individually and together—that unfortunately it is difficult to make any meaningful
interpretations based on race or ethnicity. The interviews, however, provide some insight into how race and ethnicity might impact participants’ experiences with programs or with parenting in general, and I discuss some of these factors later in the chapter.

The questionnaire included several open-ended questions that prompted parents to describe, in simple terms, their own ideologies of parenting. Parents were asked to free list words and phrases about what good parenting means to them (Bernard 2006). From these responses, “love” or “loving” was listed by far the most often (38 times), and “patient” or “patience” was listed 18 times

(see table 4). The next highest frequencies included “nurturing,” “supportive,” and “understanding,” each listed eight times. These responses clearly resonate with ideas of secure attachment or positive parenting. In fact, when asked to describe their parenting style, “attachment” and “positive” were the most frequently repeated words, with eight and four repetitions respectively. However, many respondents were hesitant to describe their parenting one way or another, and there were a variety of responses to this question, including some descriptions of firm expectations, references to Christianity, and many attempts to express a balance between nurturance and discipline. These open-ended items from the questionnaire allowed respondents to define parenting ideas in their own words and demonstrates what values of parenting are widely shared by this group.

Table 4. Frequencies of free listed descriptors of “good” parenting from questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love/Loving</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient/Patience</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

111 Open-ended responses were analyzed for frequencies using an online tool called textanalyser.net version 1.05.
The next section of the questionnaire, which made up the majority of questions, was intended to understand how parent respondents aligned with constructions of intensive parenting; how well supported they felt by their families, communities, and society; and whether they experienced conflict between work and family as a result of being a parent with young children. While a full analysis will not be provided here, a general synopsis of each section is helpful in understanding the participants. Generally, most respondents aligned with an intensive parenting model, in that they felt parenting was consuming and that families should be child-centered. Although most mothers said they felt well-supported by family, friends, and their communities and that they had enough resources to raise their children well, there was also strong agreement that both the government and employers should provide more support around childcare and family needs. Finally, with regard to work and family and what kinds of situations are best for babies and young children, there were some mixed responses, although a majority (68%) of respondents agreed on some level that staying home to care for young children is more beneficial than having them in daycare. Whether or not mothers felt conflicted about their work status was mixed, with just over half of respondents saying they did feel conflicted.

This cursory depiction of parenting beliefs among the sample provides a baseline for understanding who is represented by these data, and it provides an entry into parental ethnotheories, or locally informed belief systems (see Harkness 1998), shared by many in this group. Interviews and observations, however, are crucial for a more comprehensive analysis. Below I discuss some of the major themes around which parenting ideologies of the interviewees have been oriented. Although there was much consensus among parents, I will also include some of the opposing viewpoints, as not all parents were in agreement about how they related to an ideology of good parenting. I then discuss the missing voices, considering how the parental ethnotheories defined below might look different if more voices were included. Finally, I end the chapter with a discussion of cultural reproduction, drawing out the intentions of parents in this study to be active in shaping their society through parenting.
Nearly two decades ago, Sarah Harkness (1998) described the parental ethnotheories of middle-class American families as inherently fraught with tensions. In particular, a widespread source of stress for middle-class American parents was that their belief that “special time” or “quality time” for children was sacred to family life, yet it was in conflict with the demands of their work lives and other environmental factors:

So, what are these multiple agendas of American middle-class working families? From an anthropological perspective, they are cultural models relating to children and the family, the building blocks of parental ethnotheories. Such cultural models are not just representations of the way things are, but more importantly, what they ought to be. In other words, cultural models relating to the self—of which parental ethnotheories are a prime example—have strong motivating properties, both in instigating one’s own actions and in evaluating the results. For American families facing multiple demands from the external environment and attempting to fulfill a variety of culturally shared cultural ideals of child rearing and the family, parental ethnotheories play a central role in the generation of stress. (4)

A parental ethnotheory, then, is a culturally defined model that parents understand as an ideal way to raise their children. It is part of a broader system defined by Harkness and Super as a developmental niche, which also includes a child’s social and physical setting and local childcare customs (2006). In the portrayal of middle-class American families above, parents were not able to fully reconcile their desire for quality family time with actual time available; many parents felt they had to make a choice between a cultural model that upheld children’s development and achievement and one that upheld quality family time. It is possible that we are now seeing the results of this struggle from recent decades, and perhaps one of the driving factors for parents to work less or more flexible hours or to quit working all together is this previous inability of parents to fit “special time” into their lives while working full time. I argue
that, in some ways, parents from this study have merged the two cultural models, making quality family time about children’s development, and that, simultaneously, external cultural influences have shaped dominant ideologies of child development in such a way that there is an underlying developmental goal with nearly all interactions with children. I illustrate this point below using ethnographic material that represents the perspectives of participants in this study.

First, with regard to parenting and paid work, only five of the twenty-three parents I interviewed worked full-time, and three worked part-time. For the rest, the mother stayed home full-time. This arrangement may have been pre-planned before their first child was born, or in many cases, it arose from not being able to find a childcare solution that the parents were comfortable with. Brittany recalls her efforts to do so during the first few months after her daughter was born:

Anna: Were you working before?
Brittany: Mm hm. I went back to work about a month after she was born. But I couldn’t do it. It was, so when [my husband] and I talked about it, it was this like—and you know, money is not worth it, like so…
Anna: That eats up the whole salary.
Brittany: Right, yeah. My mom was coming, was going to stay with us Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and watch her here and we were going to, um, an in-home daycare—take her Monday and Friday. Well the very first day, we took her on Monday. When we went to pick her up, the babysitter was, she had three other little girls, and she said, “I can’t do it. It’s just too much work for me.” And so I was just like, “Oh my gosh!” Like so overwhelmed and it was my first baby. I’m like, “What am I doing? I’m doing everything wrong!” So, I think that had a lot to do with our decision [for me to stay home] also.

So although staying home wasn’t the initial plan, the lack of reliable childcare and Brittany’s feeling that she was “doing everything wrong” led to a different plan. This was complemented by
an emerging belief that the most important thing a parent can do for their child is spend time with them (as evidenced by Brittany’s quote at the opening of this chapter). The conflict in childcare Brittany experienced helped her to identify a scenario that she felt would be more ideal: staying home to care for her child. By doing so, Brittany was in the process of developing a parental ethnotheory as she made decisions about care for her first child. And even though this change in work status meant a financial sacrifice for Brittany’s family, their adjustment in household income would still allow for her to quit her full-time job (although she did very occasionally do paid work for her parents’ company). Importantly, however, many parents may experience this type of conflict and have the same desire to spend more time with their children, but only some can afford to carry out such a plan.

Another mother, Meredith, who was previously a teacher, realized she would probably stay home when she had to quit working because she had a high-risk pregnancy with twins and was medically ordered to be on bed rest for most of her pregnancy. The combination of these early vulnerabilities along with realizing that childcare would consume most of her salary and knowing that they would not have any other children led her and her husband to decide that it would make the most sense for her to stay home to raise them, at least until things were settled enough for her to do occasional part-time work.

Some parents I interviewed stepped away from professional or very successful careers because they felt the importance of spending time with their children outweighed their need to work, and it also conflicted with the demanding hours of their jobs. This is the tension referred to by Blair-Loy (2009), who describes competing devotions between home and work among women professionals. Similarly, Stone (2007) examines this work and family conflict through interviews with fifty-four women professionals who “opted out” of their professional careers after having children to be full-time mothers. Stone argues that what may seem like a “choice” to women in such privileged positions is often not; these women’s perceptions were that they had no real option for being both good mothers and good workers. Yet the mothers in Elmwood
consistently portrayed their decision to stay home as a choice—a decision to pursue a particular
value system and to structure their lives around an idea implicit in their parental ethnotheories:
that children’s needs come first and parents, especially mothers, are the best people to respond
to those needs. Cassandra, whose story opened this chapter, elaborates below:

Yeah, we had jobs that had really long hours, um, and we felt that we couldn’t be the
parents that we wanted to be. We knew that, you know, there were going to be things
that we wanted to be able to do with her that we just couldn’t—our jobs were really
demanding, we couldn’t get a lot of time off, and I didn’t want to be that parent having to
miss her having a play at school, or um, you know not being able to take her to activities.
Like, my heart breaks for those parents that don’t have a choice. So, we felt like we had
a choice and we could work from home and figure out a way to work from home which
we figured out a way to do it, um, and so, um, you know…and life is short, I think we saw
that with our jobs. We felt we were covering a lot of tragedy [as journalists] and seeing
how short life was and we thought, you know, we have an opportunity to spend time with
our kids and, you know, not miss those moments. So..

Throughout the interview, she emphasized that they took a dramatic pay cut from what they
were previously earning, but that it was completely worth it to them because it meant that they
could “be the parents they wanted to be,” and therefore raise their children in a more ideal way.
She also describes the sympathy she feels for parents that “don’t have a choice” to do the
same, showing that, for her, leaving a career was a choice she was financially able to make,
even if it meant less money. Similarly, another mother, Julie, who has a PhD, elucidates the
ways that spending more time with her children provides benefits that the family would likely
otherwise not see if she were working full time:

So raising them to be good—morals, values, all those things—and what’s important is
keeping them safe, so protecting them from whatever you can, um, and time. Spending
time with the kids. I’m grateful that my husband does well enough that I’m really a stay-
at-home mom and I work part time just to keep my brain occupied, um, but I don’t have
to and I’m grateful for that because I’m home when they’re sick, and I’m home to read
books, and I’m home to bring them to the zoo when they’re little and provide all those
early opportunities that make such a difference in school readiness and, you know, just
being prepared for the world, I think.

Julie acknowledges that, even though she works part-time, she doesn’t need to, and with only
her husband’s salary this family of five living in a wealthy neighborhood would still be financially
secure. Her choice in only working part-time is very intentional and is motivated by her desire to
frequently be available for and spend time with her children.

Many of the parents used a sort of imagined vision of what it would be like if they did not
spend as much time with their children to help shape their parental ethnotheories; in other
words, deciding what was not ideal helped them to define what was ideal. From Julie’s point of
view, children who have less time with their parents and less opportunities to do engaging
activities are less prepared for both school and the world. Sometimes this vision was informed
by parents’ own upbringing. During interviews, some mothers described poor relationships with
their parents, or they felt that their parents weren’t able to give all children adequate attention, or
they were just very busy. Mothers in the study did not want to replicate the same feelings with
their own children, and they saw spending time and giving focused attention as ways to mediate
those risks. Sometimes it was work experiences that helped create their parenting ideologies.
Mothers sometimes depicted these experiences as rationale for wanting to foster strong
relationships with their children and create emotionally nurturing experiences for them. Emily, a
teacher, explains:

Emily: You want to do everything you can for them. You want to give them everything,
you want to–it makes me kind of emotional. [begins to shed tears]

Anna: It’s okay.
Emily: I think, from seeing kids I work with at poverty schools, you want to show them so much love. And, just, you want to respect them and give the support they need so that they can be productive members of society. So by reading to her, by providing her a variety of experiences, by using loving words and loving tone with her. I definitely used to see [pauses] a lot of negative interactions with kids and their parents.

Some of the difficult circumstances Emily observed in her students and their families seemed to give her a heightened sense of importance around nurturing children, which was translated into her own experiences raising a child. Her determination to “do everything she can” for her daughter may, in part, be driven by a concern that not doing so could result in some of the same risk factors that she commonly saw with children she taught. Additionally, the connection Emily makes between schools with significant numbers of low-income children and “negative interactions” between parents and children may be reflective of the way that low income or poverty is often correlated with poor parenting.

The strong desire to provide a loving and nurturing environment spanned both groups of mothers—those who worked and those who stayed home. Interestingly, most of the mothers who worked full-time were teachers or other school personnel whose jobs allowed for more time with their children than many other full-time jobs. This may speak to a common philosophy that exists among educators and child development specialists that emphasizes the importance of spending time with children and the value of participating in activities that inherently support education.

**Development is Everything and Everything is Development**

Focusing on children’s development and future success was often part of mothers’ rationale for staying home. Therefore, many of the activities that parents described doing with their children were centered around some kind of developmental outcome. Parents’ discussions of their daily routines were fairly consistent in that they typically structured the day around an
activity or outing in the morning, nap time at home, and then another activity or outing in the afternoon. Usually, an outing would include something fun like going to a park, zoo, amusement park, children’s museum, story time at a library, or a Play N Learn class, while the other part of the day would involve the mothers doing some kind of “learning activity,” “project,” or “intentional play” with their child/children. Underneath these descriptions of daily life, there was an implicit assumption that if a mother was staying home with her child, part of her role was to do developmental work with them. Even play often had a purpose, which is consistent with current US discourses on child development in which pediatricians and other experts often impress upon parents the idea that children learn through play, and that both unstructured and parent-guided play is important (Ginsburg et al. 2007; Sirota 2010).

Importantly, these parents’ interactions with Nurturing Minds reinforce a cultural model in which parents have a plethora of opportunities to nurture their children’s development, helping to establish it as “normal.” The enactment of developmentally-focused practices has become so enmeshed in many mothers’ daily routines that they see them as ordinary—they have become part of their *habitus*. It was common for a parent to spend time doing developmental or educational work with their child, and in fact, most parents interspersed these kinds of activities throughout the day alongside other routine activities, as evidenced by the following descriptions of daily routines:

Amber: And then, um, we usually go outside and play for a little bit or we do some busy bags together. Some learning activities. And then I get dinner ready.

Julie: My oldest daughter goes to piano and we read books with her while we’re waiting because it's 30 minutes. That’s Tuesdays.

Emily: Um, play together, I try to model for her like imaginative play and model for her how to do puzzles and whatever activity it is that I want her to do independently. And then, lunch.
Elizabeth: Um, at some point I read to him. A couple of books, you know 15-20 minutes of reading. However much he'll tolerate, whether it’s in smaller chunks or in one go. I talk to him, you know, throughout the day. Point stuff to him, tell him what it is. Do sounds.

Samira: Then we play again, and it’s more like intentional. Like if I want to teach him something, that’s the time that I use to try to bring colors, or read a book, or you know, I try to lead the game but just introduce new things so he could learn. And then it’s lunch time.

In these instances, the parent-led learning components of the day are just as significant as other major components of these routines, such as outings, eating, bathing, and sleep.

Furthermore, many of the parents said they learned how to interact with their children from the Play N Learn groups or from Side By Side. Sometimes the parents were quick to say that the information was common knowledge, especially if they had a background in education, but it was still a nice reminder of what they should be focusing on when interacting with their children. But other times, parents were not aware of the information and saw it as transformational in the way they interacted with their child, as with Brittany:

But [our educator] always talks about different studies and publications and stuff. And one day we were talking about how important it is, like, for us to face each other. Like while were spending time together. And like, I wouldn’t have ever thought about that! Like how much, like, she was talking about what it does for their brain and everything.

We didn’t know that.

Sometimes, the ideas parents gleaned from play groups were incorporated into their daily lives, as Samira describes below:

I mean, when they turn on the music and they start dancing, I had this, [teacher], in the [music Play N Learn class], she used to say, “always dance with your babies at home.” Because it gives you a chance to bond with your baby. So that was like–so we do that at home. Even when I am–whether it’s dancing or anything else, like when I’m doing the
vacuum, she likes to run away like I’m going to eat her with the vacuum. So I try, like
even when I’m doing, like the house chores, I try to invest those times, like creating
something that will be like I’m doing my job, still I’m having fun.

The organization’s perspective, which, in itself is a reflection of broader social influences, has
contributed to the development of parental ethnotheories that support intensive parenting. It
says that parents should carve out a significant amount of time in order to be available and
interactive with their children from birth through age five (if not longer), and that they should
spend a good deal of time cultivating their children’s development in order to promote long-term
wellbeing and success. Many parents took this role seriously, and sometimes they expressed
strong feelings about the way other parents raised their children. In the exchange below,
Jessica is responding to my question about why it is important for parents to be able to
participate in programs like Side By Side:

Jessica: …people need to realize what it takes to be a parent and what you are
expected to do. Rather than just, “Oh I have a baby and they’re going to daycare.” But
how--what part does a parent play in the development of a child?

Anna: And that’s what you feel like the program helps parents understand a little bit
better?

Jessica: Yeah, because it’s showing that parents are the kid’s first teachers. So many
kids come into the school system and they expect the teachers to teach them
everything. They don’t even know manners, they don’t know–but that goes along with
certain things going on in society. But it shows just that the basic skills that kids used to
go to school with aren’t [there]. And I think parents need to understand that--young--even
older parents. Like that’s--you’re a parent. You’re your kid’s first teacher.

Anna: You think they kind of wait and depend on society, through schools, to be the
ones to--
Jessica: Or they won’t take that time and they want to continue their own lifestyle and not work with their kids. Like not take that time to interact–like teach their kids their developments. ‘Cause I feel like they’re an infant, they can't learn this this young. But there are things you can work with your child [on] to get them to learn and then you change the activities as they develop. Like there are things you can do. You don’t just sit around and watch TV while your kid plays on the floor. Like that type of teaching.

Jessica’s experience as a teacher exposed her to a wide array of children’s behaviors and developmental abilities, and she felt that some of the challenges they face were related to parents who did not do enough to work with them when they were younger. This quote also exposes the tension that exists between working and non-working mothers, highlighting the way that a mother’s choice to work is seen as selfish, and glossing over the inability of many mothers to stay home to care for their children. Jessica characterizes other parents’ assertions that they will place their children in daycare as thoughtless, overlooking the structural barriers that prevent many parents from having a choice in the matter or the fact that many parents may simply find daycare to be beneficial to their children. Nonetheless, by participating in a more focused, intentional way of parenting in the early years, many parents in the study felt they could influence their children’s future experiences to be more positive than what they sometimes saw around them.

**Embracing Secure Attachment**

In addition to development work, an important part of good parenting also rests on establishing emotional security. As with responses from the electronic questionnaire, responses from the interview group (seven of whom were not in the questionnaire group) highlighted similar themes with regard to defining the most important aspects of parenting. Nurturing, loving, and supporting children were by far the most frequently discussed elements of good parenting. While sometimes love meant showing physical affection or giving parental attention, more often
it meant making children feel emotionally safe and secure, helping them to know that their parents would always be supportive of them. In fact, the next most frequent descriptions of good parenting included “being there” or “being responsive.” In a similar study to this one, Elizabeth Reid Boyd (2002) interviewed middle-class Australian mothers who stayed home to raise their children and found that a majority of them used this same language to explain their rationale for staying home. She argues that the phrase, “being there,” is indicative of more than just physical presence:

In these examples, “being there” is not singular or particular; it is continual, and constant. It is more than physical. It engenders a sense of not just physical but emotional presence, evoking the colloquial “I’ll be there for you” (for support) as well as “I’ll be there with you.” It implies constancy and indeed constant availability: “being there” means being there always, as well as being on demand, when needed, when called for. (464)

These are precisely the same contexts in which Elmwood mothers used these phrases. It was an emotional presence, a focused time between parent and child devoid of other distractions, as well as an offering of support when needed. It is also found in the type of discourse communicated by Nurturing Minds. Presumably, then, following this parental ethnotheory, working full time would not allow the same level of emotional presence as staying home with children. This may be one of the reasons so many respondents on the questionnaire agreed that staying home offers more benefits to babies and young children than working full time (although most stopped short of agreeing that children suffer when mothers work full time).

However, even when mothers did work full time (21%), they still valued the same kind of emotional and psychological wellbeing as a foundation of parenting. That all mothers could identify at least some of the same kinds of practices and characteristics they considered emblematic of good parenting speaks to the permeation of these ideas in wider social structures. Many parents used the same kind of language to describe societal messages about
parenting as they did to describe their own parenting ideologies. Likely, some of the ideas these parents hold fast to either come from or are reinforced by Nurturing Minds. Nurturing Minds is part of the setting that informs the developmental niche described by Harkness and Super (2006).

None of the mothers who worked full time expressed a desire to stay home or work less, although none categorized their work as high pressure or overly demanding of their time, and in fact, many discussed being grateful that their jobs allowed them a significant amount of time with their families. On the other hand, many of the women who stayed home full time expressed some level of identity struggle, emotional struggle, or uncertainty about their role. Some common challenges included coming to terms with their new identity, isolation and loneliness, lack of adult social interactions, carrying the burden of a primary caregiver, coping with the intensity of demands, and lack of support from family or community. These challenges are reflected by many other studies on women and work, such as Stone’s Opting Out (2007) and Blair Loy’s Competing Devotions (2009). Hays (1996) also sheds light on these struggles, and importantly, she attributes them not only to the loss of a work-self but to the increasingly intensive nature of motherhood. For many of the mothers interviewed, even though they chose to leave work to raise their children, they were still surprised by how intensive raising babies and young children was. Nearly all parents talked about challenges related to sleep—for themselves, their children, or both. Sometimes parents were reluctant to accept pediatricians’ advice about infant sleep practices if it went against what they viewed as a nurturing and gentle approach, and several parents later “blamed” themselves for this challenge, but still accepted the difficult consequences of poor sleep. Many mothers also had challenges related to breastfeeding and both the physical and emotional challenges they experienced as they committed to this practice. And finally, most parents discussed having difficulty understanding their children’s behaviors or responding to them in a way they felt upheld principles of attachment but also provided structure.
However, some of the longer-lasting struggles mothers in particular discussed centered around their identity as mothers, as well as the constant need for attention by their children and the monotony of care, as illustrated by the following examples:

Elizabeth: I guess I can be lonely, you know…and I went from having a career and, you know, to staying at home with my son, which I’m super, super thankful to be able to do, but it is a sacrifice too. It’s a sacrifice no matter which way you do it. So I think, um, I think that just the shift from being a non-parent to being a parent has been, um, the biggest struggle.

Paula: The other thing that's been hard with parenting is balancing my life as not a mom, but just my own identity. I never realized how much I would miss socializing with friends and doing things that are not mom-related. That has been hard for me.

Sadie: Yeah, um, just like the everyday, day to day kind of never getting a break? I think that's what it is. Like, you go to bed exhausted and then you wake up and you’re like, “Oh my gosh I have an entire day ahead of me.” And then the next day it’s like…it’s 365 days a year.

Meredith: But I think [a main challenge is] trying to manage both of them without losing my, like losing my patience, because it’s hard, you know…I think also, you know, relationship-wise, I mean my husband and I don’t really get any time together anymore…Yeah, finding a balance of like, not just everything revolving around them, is difficult.

Samira: [When asked if she considered her routine ideal] No, not really ideal [laughs]. I hope if it’s better, I mean like, if I can manage my time more, like, efficiently, then I think that will be like, that will give me a chance to also do the things that I enjoy doing by myself, like, for example I like, uh, to—I like reading…So, um, something like that or writing, drawing, these are things that I really enjoy doing but I don’t really get time to do that. I don’t know if it happens with all the mothers or not, but sometimes I feel if, maybe
if like I’m more efficient by using the time, I think I will be more capable of not just spending time with her, but also like spending some time with me, with myself.

Inherent in each of these statements is a grappling with what each mother ought to do, as Harkness suggests above, versus what they sometimes wish they could do. They feel beholden to a parenting ideology that, to them, outweighs their desire for socializing, for instance, or working in order to pay for child care, or even just to read or write alone. Just as Elizabeth frames her choice as a sacrifice, so too do the mothers in Hays’ (1996) study. “Love is the basis of good child rearing, according to the logic of intensive motherhood…” Hays writes (110). Love is often used as rationale for doing difficult parenting work in intensive Western parenting cultures, especially for mothers who have sacrificed careers or education, who have small support networks, or who align with a parenting ideology that favors time and interaction with children—sometimes at the expense of the mother’s psychological wellbeing.

However, some mothers were very accepting of the intensity of early parenting and felt that they had prepared themselves for a time-intensive experience, and therefore did not experience the struggle that many other mothers experienced. Amber and Olivia are friends who live on the outskirts of Elmwood in an area that is reflective of what Descartes and Kottak (2008) call “ruburbia,” or the transformation of rural, agricultural areas into suburban areas that encourage middle-class ideologies of intensive mothering and concerted cultivation. Both mothers disliked the messages they saw around them and on popular media—that mothering is a struggle—and they attribute others’ difficulties with a lack of preparedness or willingness to accept the child-centered nature of parenting:

Olivia: Well I think it’s just a lot of the message is that it’s negative, you know, it’s a strain on you, you lose your identity, if you’re a mom, like you’re “only” a mom, or you’re “just” a mom, and you know, like, if you center a lot of your attention on your child then you can’t be an individual too. I feel like you have to choose, like either I’m a mom or I’m not a mom. We don’t leave my son pretty much ever. Like if we go somewhere, like day
time, he goes with us. If we go on vacation, he goes with us. Because we had a child to be part of our family. Like if I didn’t want him to do stuff with us, we wouldn’t have a child. I think that’s a big difference because so often they say you need to leave your child somewhere and you and your husband need time together. Or the child—I see this a lot in church, you know, the kids go here, mom and dad go here, and we separate our families. And like that’s not the message I want my child to have. Like we had him for a reason, we want him in our family, and so I think that that family unity is important. To not always like separate it.

For Olivia, appropriate expectations for having children include an underlying assumption that children will be part of all aspects of family life. In a similar vein, Amber explains that one of the reasons she had so few parenting challenges was because she was prepared to have children and planned to devote herself to family life:

   Amber: I mean, there’s like, there’s day-to-day challenges. There’s days where, you know, things are more difficult than others. But I don’t think I had any huge challenges in parenting. I mean, it’s something I knew I wanted to do. Um, I lived single before parenting. I did whatever I wanted. I was totally selfish and I feel like I got all of that out of my system. So when I got married, it was because I wanted to share my life with somebody and do for them. And then we talked about having a child; I wanted to, you know, devote that part of my life to raising this little person. So I wasn’t really—I didn’t really have the struggles that I see a lot of other women that come in, have. Where they want to be, you know, they still want to put themselves first. Or still struggle with their individuality. That wasn’t something that I really had because I felt like I lived the single life to its fullest and I got all of that out of my system. So now I’m like 100% committed into being a mom and into being selfless.

For these mothers, there is very little room for challenging intensive motherhood—for themselves and for others. It is worth mentioning that they both reported household incomes of between
$75,000 to $100,000, and both were available full-time to their children, although Olivia worked part-time from home in the evenings while her son was asleep. Interestingly, although Olivia fully embraced the idea that mothering should be time-intensive, it was also a reason that she was not ready to have another child, as she felt unable to give the time necessary to more than one. We can see here how parental ethnotheories shape the very way families are formed.

The idea that it is important or beneficial for a mother to work full time in the labor force seems to have fallen out of fashion with many families, especially as ideas of attachment have permeated wider society through advice books, media, and family service organizations (Faircloth 2014; Bobel 2003; Barnes 2008; Schön and Silvé 2007). Even when mothers in this study did work full time, they often had childcare arrangements other than paid daycare. For instance, some had their own parents care for their children, one had a husband who worked from home with flexible hours, one was initially a stay-at-home mother and had to go back to work after divorce, and one was able to take a year of leave from her teaching job. The general consensus about daycare was that it was not a first preference, even among families who could easily afford it, and it was not equivalent to a parent or family member. However, families with stay-at-home mothers did feel comfortable with their children attending part-time preschool when they were over two years old, and usually just two to three mornings per week. Several families had a child who had already started elementary school, and most seemed to be comfortable with the idea of older children being in school, with the exception of three mothers who expressed interest in homeschooling. As these families absorb mainstream child development discourse, they seem to embrace the idea that the first three years of a child’s life are the most important time for parent interaction and responsibility, and it becomes a key part of their parental ethnotheories. And when organizations like Nurturing Minds structure their programs in such a way that the greatest focus is on birth through age three, and the programs are mostly available during the week days, they, too, send a message that parents should find a way to have availability with their children during that time.
But how and whether parents are able to find time for their children is another matter. On one hand, we have seen a wide array of childcare arrangements that do allow for more intimacy and flexibility, as with family members who have time to care for children full time, or with parents who can work flexible or reduced hours, take a long leave without penalty, or step away from paid work altogether. On the other hand, these kinds of arrangements are outside the reach of many—if not most—families. According to a census report, approximately 45 percent of US households earned less than $50,000 in 2015 (Proctor et al. 2016). To put US family income in perspective, the Economic Policy Institute advises that a two-parent, two-child family in the region of study needs $63,96612 “to secure an adequate, but modest living standard” (Gould et al. 2015). But household earnings may include two parents who earn together; individuals who earn this desired salary typically fall within the “management, professional, and related occupations,” a sector that makes up only a portion of all US jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Most parents, therefore, cannot afford to have a parent stay home to raise their children, and it is rare that workplaces allow anywhere near one year for parental leave, as most larger companies allow for up to three months (though it may be partially or wholly unpaid), and even this is not mandatory (Cruse et al. 2016; Livingston 2016). Our expectations for how to raise children are clearly at odds with our expectations for how Americans should work. And those parents who cannot spend significant amounts of time with their children may be outside the realm of what is otherwise considered “good parenting.”

Missing Voices

Although I have argued that the time-intensive approach embraced by the majority of parents in this study is also a mainstream approach to parenting, there are certainly many other parents whose beliefs and practices do not align with this approach, regardless of income.

12 This figure varies regionally, with a national range of $49,114 to 106,493.
Those voices are not represented here, but we can see evidence of them from other studies, which have begun to elaborate on ways mothers challenge the intensive mothering model based on their intersecting identities with race, class, age, marital status, work status, and motherhood (Christopher 2012; Elliot et al. 2015; Romagnoli and Wall 2012). Some studies show how the interplay between race, class, and mothering is more complex, as with Riché Jeneen Daniel Barnes’ (2008) study of black middle-class stay-at-home mothers who both challenge and support the ideologies of intensive parenting, or Sofia Villenas’ (2001) study of Latina mothers’ simultaneous espousal and refusal of education as a meaningful factor used to define parenting. Out of all the parents I interviewed, using the organization’s categories, only one was black, two were Asian, and one self-identified as Caribbean; all others were white, while three were Hispanic. And, although there is not a category in the Nurturing Minds data collection forms to represent them, two interviewees were of Middle Eastern descent. Sometimes the insights these parents shared derived from their experiences as a member of their racial or ethnic group or as an immigrant.

For instance, Alma, who is black, felt that many parenting articles seem to be written by and for white women or attempt to be for a universal audience but don’t show an awareness of cultural differences; “that stuff wouldn’t even fit who I am,” she said. Furthermore, she described her feeling that sometimes the programs at Nurturing Minds seem somewhat belittling:

Alma: When it comes to like, maybe how, you know, you’re talked to, or the info—like super basic information that you’re given, I don’t know—

Anna: Almost condescending?

Alma: Yeah, I’m not saying it’s bad—like a bad, whatever, but, yeah, I guess that’s what I mean by it seems like the expectation is like, you don’t know anything, or…I don’t know.

Alma contrasted her experiences in Play N Learn groups with her recent participation in a local black mothers’ group where she felt a more natural fit, being among mothers with shared racial identities and similar experiences. But to what extent can I say that her impressions of these
parenting programs as somewhat condescending are common among other black mothers in Elmwood? The relatively small number of black parent participants in Nurturing Minds programs may be meaningful in itself, and in fact, one staff member (Marisa) said that she felt African American parents were who the organization typically had the most difficulty engaging and keeping in programs:

…what I’ve noticed, though, throughout all the programs we have, is that the population we have struggled the most to have is the African American ones because they don’t stay in the programs for some odd reason. They are the hardest to engage. They are the hardest to keep. Um, when you look into our system, and you go around asking our educators, how many African American families they have, it’s not as many. And when we try to engage them, it’s always not as many that keep—that um, stay in the program with us. We do have some of them but there—it’s not the norm. The same thing happened even when I was in [previous social work job]. That’s why we have the Leeford site.

Although this pattern may relate in part to differences in parenting ideologies, it could also be a matter of not being very well connected with black families in the community or being seen as irrelevant to their needs. It is also noteworthy that, from my observations, there were no black Play N Learn facilitators at Nurturing Minds, except at the Leeford site, which was located in a low-income neighborhood with a majority of black families. As indicated in Marisa’s quote, the Leeford site was often seen as “covering” the organization’s efforts to serve black participants, yet the site and neighborhood are not representative of middle-class or wealthy black families. If black participants continually see Nurturing Minds programs as representative of either middle-

---

13 This was not the case for the Side By Side program, although out of the two black educators I knew—one who was the first educator for my own participation in the program and the other whom I interviewed—both had left for other opportunities by the end of my research period.
/upper-middle-class white families or low-income black families (or even Latino communities),
then it is not surprising that there has not been more engagement among this demographic.

Two mothers who had recently immigrated to Elmwood remarked on the lack of social
support they felt with not having their families nearby. Daniela, who is from Cuba, describes the
difference between the cultural model of raising children that is innate to her versus the one she
perceives in the United States:

Anna: And how well do you feel that your family or friends or any other community that
you’re a part of–how well can they provide support in raising your children?
Daniela: This is a very difficult question for me because I don’t have family around. [My
husband’s] side of the family doesn’t provide, um, the support that I would expect from
them.
Anna: Are they local, or…?
Daniela: Kind of. They’re local enough to do more. Yeah, um, and it’s hard because I’m
coming from a very different culture regarding how to be involved in each other’s–like in
Cuba, people are very involved in each other’s lives, especially when there is a
child…And American society is very different, like people are very much in their own
lives–even the nicest–they just don’t take–they just, “oh, that’s your child, that’s your
decision.” It’s been very hard for me, though. That’s the hardest thing for me.

Daniela’s perspective offers an interesting comparison of family support and highlights the
societal dimension of intensive parenting. What makes intensive parenting intensive is that it is
often done in isolation; if many family members are expected to help raise a child, then this very
ideology loses ground. While her experience alone is not enough to make a widespread cultural
comparison, it is enough to give us pause and consider the implications of supporting an
intensive parenting model without intensive family (or community) support.

Another important group that is missing from the parenting discussion is fathers. This is
true both in my study and many widely cited works on parenting (or often just mothering). I have
written about the parenting beliefs and experiences here, often using the noun “parent” because there were some father’s voices included in my study—one in a formal interview and two through limited casual conversation. Also, the mothers sometimes spoke about their ideas as a united perspective from both parents. But make no mistake, the vast majority of participants in this study—and in Nurturing Minds—are mothers, and it is their viewpoints that are being represented. We have some idea of how fathers in Elmwood would respond to the ideologies expressed by Nurturing Minds based on their fathering programs, but these programs are small and dwindling. During the course of my research, the contract for one of the main fatherhood programs had not been renewed, and therefore the program ended. As I mentioned in the methodology section, I attempted to interview some fathers in the fatherhood program, but I was ultimately unable to. All of the fathers in the interview sample worked full time, which contrasts greatly with the mothers in the sample. How a time-intensive parenting ideology affects them is important to understand, yet frustratingly, this was not an integral part of my research in the end.

Additionally, an important insight that can be elicited from the narratives in this chapter is that when parents define their ideologies of “good” parenting, their ideas of what it means to be a “bad” parent are thrown into relief. For instance, when parents choose to work part-time or not at all for the benefit of their children, this implies that it is worse for children when both parents work full-time (if there are even two parents at home). Parents who yell at their children, don’t take their children to activities, rely heavily on full-time daycare, or watch TV while their children play are the kinds of parents study participants strived not to be. These are, inherently, ways of describing “bad” parenting and are equally important to ideas of “good” parenting in the development of parental ethnotheories.

It is important to note, as well, the economic and cultural differences that may exist in terms of valuing some of these parenting practices. For instance, participating in extracurricular activities at all involves a certain level of financial ability as well as time, which many working class or low-income families simply may not have (but does this make them bad parents?).
Furthermore, the child-centered nature of intensive parenting neglects values deemed integral in parental ethnotheories not discussed in this study. For instance, Vesley and colleagues (2014) note that many parent education programs fail to understand the idea of *respeto* in many Latino immigrant families, a concept that is *adult*-centered in that it requires children to be obedient or respectful towards adults (and as evidence of how this concept is absent from the parenting ideologies expressed by study participants, the words “obedience” and “obedient” were not uttered at all in any of the interviews with staff or parents, although “obey” was mentioned once). Although parents in this study did not label other parents or parenting practices as “bad” simply because of income level or race/ethnicity, their perceptions of what counts as “good” reflect the extent to which widely approved parenting ideologies are situated in white, middle-class, American values.

**Good Parenting Leads to Good People**

Concerted cultivation, a form of cultural reproduction, is an ideal lens through which to examine parenting; what is parenting if not a process of cultural reproduction in itself? And more specifically, concerted cultivation comes with the intention of reproducing a certain kind of society. In this case, I have argued that parents in this study see their role as producing developmentally healthy, successful, and emotionally secure people. Parents have the expectation that by adhering to what they deem “good” parenting practices, they will, in turn, raise children to be “good” people. Amber alludes to this cycle when summarizing her ideas on the purpose of parenting: “It’s all out of love and it’s all out of doing what’s best for the child. And making sure they do grow up to be a functioning member of society and they do grow up to be another good parent and know what love looks like and know what parenting should be.” Other mothers described their vision of raising “good citizens” and “responsible human beings,” or their hopes were for their children to grow to find their place in their community and help others.
What parents want for their children is reflective of what they want for their society. For the parents in this study, realizing this vision means parenting with intentionality and selflessness.

Parental ethnotheories are complex, and here we have seen an example of the way multiple personal and environmental factors influence a group of parents differently, yet their parenting beliefs still converge to have unifying themes and justifications. The common thread for them is their adherence to an intensive parenting ideology that is reinforced by their participation in Nurturing Minds—and by extension, child development specialists and mainstream society. For Cassandra, whose story opened this chapter, the way Nurturing Minds has influenced her parenting will provide lifelong benefits to her children:

Would we have been good parents without [Nurturing Minds]? Yeah. But are we better? Absolutely. Um, every program we’ve taken, anything that has educated us has made a contribution to [our daughter’s] education, and probably who she’ll be one day, you know, and the same with our son. I mean, um, I feel that we have done things and [taken] steps to learn things that I think will impact them as people in society.

Cassandra, like many other parents in the study, felt that there were plentiful resources in the community to help parents in raising their children well, and all they had to do was look for them and take advantage of them. All of the parents here felt that “good” parenting was within their grasp. Not only did they agree with a time- and nurturing-intensive ideology, but they were able to make it work in their daily lives—some more easily than others. I will argue in the concluding chapter that the very capability of parents to uphold and intensive parenting ideology or participate in concerted cultivation rests on a societal framework governed by the logics of neoliberal labor ideologies.
Chapter 6: Deconstructing and Reimagining Parenting

“Nobody has ever before asked the nuclear family to live all by itself in a box the way we do. With no relatives, no support, we’ve put it in an impossible situation” (Margaret Meade 1970).

The findings I have relayed in the previous two chapters have derived from two distinct groups—professionals and parents. Yet both are interconnected in numerous ways, and these identities I have ascribed to them are not one-dimensional. Many of the staff I interviewed were parents—some had grown children or grandchildren, and some had young children like the families they served. Likewise, many parents who were part of the study had child development backgrounds and were highly familiar with professional discourse on children’s needs. In these cases, ideas about parenting practices were sometimes discerned through both a personal and professional lens. It does not seem to be a coincidence that the parental ethnotheories of the parents had so much common ground with the professional ideologies about parenting and that both centered around time. When parents sought out resources, they chose those that already resonated with their beliefs, experiences, and desires. When Nurturing Minds decided to become an open access organization, providing services regardless of defined “need,” they sought ways to appeal to middle-class and wealthy families who previously saw their services as for “other” people. The dialogue between these two groups is comfortable because they have many values, experiences, and social networks in common.

However, it would be shortsighted to say that Nurturing Minds programs only benefit middle-class parents who are able to spend more time with their children. By their own accounts, several staff spoke of families who had what they saw as traditional risk factors—like being low-income and having lower education levels—who were fervent in their commitment to the program and showed more engagement than many higher income, low-risk families. One
administrator describes some of these (otherwise nondescript) moms as “doing a great job attaching to their infants,” in contrast to what she perceived as career-focused moms who don’t have time for their children. By the same token, many of the interviewees and questionnaire respondents who had low household incomes were very positive about the programs and saw them as relevant to their needs. Of course, my sampling strategy depended on recruiting participants who were interested in speaking about their experiences, so it is difficult to say whether there are very many families who have had negative experiences or felt that the programs were not relevant to their lives or parenting ideas.

I attempted to learn more about these disparate perspectives in a couple of strategic ways. First, one of the interview questions I asked each parent was whether they disagreed with any advice from experts, including Nurturing Minds staff. While I received many stories about clashes in opinion with doctors on issues spanning sleep, feeding, and developmental or behavioral challenges, I received almost no responses that indicated disagreement with Nurturing Minds (one exception is with Alma’s story in the previous chapter, in which she felt the tone of the programs were somewhat condescending). I also asked staff interviewees about their experiences with parent disagreement, and most responded with examples of parents who were resistant to accept services in general and didn’t fully engage in the way staff thought was most beneficial (these parents were usually referred through DCF or part of the substance abuse program, none of whom participated in this study). Or facilitators described parents who were on their phones or chatting with each other in play groups, rather than interacting with their child or absorbing information facilitators provided. Two administrators described rare examples of when they received a phone call from a parent who was unhappy with some element of the program, but they could not provide contact information for any of these parents when I asked if I could reach out to them for the study. However, I personally knew of one mother in my social network who did not continue Side By Side programming because she was unhappy with the educator’s advice about weaning her two-year-old daughter from breastfeeding simply because
of her age—a suggestion this mother felt was uninformed. Most likely, more parents like this exist, and doing a follow-up study of parents who quit services early might be a good way to elicit more critical views of the programs. So although I attempted to discover some of the divergent viewpoints between parents and the advice they received from Nurturing Minds programs, what was revealed, instead, was a rather harmonious picture of participants who were happy with the programs and employees who faced little challenge from parents, especially among those who sought out the services on their own.

One of my key research questions for this research was, how do parents and employees at Nurturing Minds define what it means to be a “good” parent? Although parent and employee study participants understood “good” parenting in strikingly similar terms, especially with regard to nurturing, attachment, and “being there,” there were some consistent points of divergence. For instance, it was unique to staff to discuss specific strategies they felt parents should engage in, such as reading, talking, and playing with children. While parents mentioned doing these things, they didn’t frame them within a context of what matters most. Staff from Nurturing Minds were trained to disseminate child development research, and they discussed how better long-term outcomes for children were often correlated with frequent parental interaction. This kind of advice also elucidates the academic orientation the organization has. Many of the funding initiatives Nurturing Minds has been involved with—much like other family service organizations—are directly linked to education. “School readiness” was discussed by both staff and funders as a key element of parent education programs. One funder puts it simply: “So it’s a very important, very well researched—parent engagement generally shows that the kid is going to do a little bit better in school.” Because organizations and funding bodies are more concerned with broader community issues, they have more of a focus on large scale patterns that affect many children. From their perspective, if all parents can be on par with the kinds of parent/child interactions they view as most important during infancy and pre-school, then many social problems will be solved. By keying in on this seemingly golden time period of infancy and the toddler years and
opening up services to all parents, the organization believes it can right some societal wrongs that have perpetuated inequality for decades.

In contrast, parents were more concerned with their individual circumstances and their personal relationships with their children. This was especially evident when parents contrasted their families with other families. While all parents had many positive remarks about programs and staff—some glowingly so—for several parents, the program was less an all-encompassing philosophy and more something positive to do to fill the long days with their children. Play N Learn groups, especially, were one type of activity among many that could be done during the implicitly structured “interaction time” in the mornings. Several mothers felt that the benefits of the program were to have another trusted adult observe their children’s development, or to brainstorm ideas for addressing particular issues. Some facilitators said that many parents like them because they do messy activities with their children that the parents are unwilling to do themselves. In these instances, we can see the value in programs like Play N Learn and Side By Side in countering the isolation that comes from parenting alone for a majority of the day. In this way, parents might derive a different purpose from the program than what is overtly intended, but it reflects a need that many of these families have when they have little other social or caregiving support.

Even still, in order pinpoint some of the structural ways that class and inequality are reproduced, the processes through which child development knowledge is transmitted should be part of that examination. To illustrate the process of cultural and class reproduction as it relates to parenting for the study participants, I summarize the main components of widely shared parental ethnotheories and how each component unfolds, based on the perspectives embedded in this study. For instance, many middle-class and wealthy families who have been influenced by intensive parenting ideologies in their social networks may choose to have one parent, usually the mother, stay home to care for children, or they may arrange flexible or part-time work schedules in order to spend more time at home, since they view parental time as
crucial to children’s needs. As a way to both fulfill ideologies of good parenting and to structure time doing educational, meaningful activities, they may participate in programs geared towards enhancing their children’s developmental abilities throughout the preschool years. These children, then, will have had ample opportunity to “practice” developmental skills and grow up in responsive, low-stress, highly cultivated environments, the combination of which presumably contributes to long-term academic success, social and emotional wellbeing, and maybe even financial stability. As these children become adults, then, they are in a position to repeat the process with their own children. Although this is a simplified version of social reproduction “happens,” and there are many points at which the cycle may be interrupted, it also reflects the initial patterns of many families in this study, as well as the underlying parental ethnotheories involved.

Child development research is what many professionals rely on, not only to interact with children, but to assess parents and their capabilities. Health professionals, educators, community providers, and case workers are just some of the individuals who have authority to make judgments about whether or not children’s needs are being met, and they base these judgments on the same material that organizations like Nurturing Minds uses. It is important to note that some of these materials, such as developmental screenings, have been critiqued within the medical community for being irrelevant to all children and for being misused for political purposes (Dworkin 1992; Lee et al. 2015), yet they serve as a strong source of validity or scrutiny with parenting practices, depending on whether children do well on the assessments or not. Furthermore, parents who have been inculcated with professionally substantiated child development knowledge may be more likely to raise their children according to these standards, or at least be aware of them, giving them greater ability to build cultural capital (Lareau 2001 [2003]). But it is not simply access to knowledge that creates acceptance of particular parenting philosophies, it is social networks, resources, and time—time to provide frequent interaction and response, time to work on development, and time to just “be there.” Parents who do not have
this time or knowledge are already disadvantaged, and therefore, their children are too, at least according to the intensive parenting or concerted cultivation models.

However, there are many academic and social spaces in which these “ideal” views of parenting are challenged. One study suggests that there are no indicators of stronger developmental outcomes in children of parents who practiced intensive parenting (Schiffrin et al. 2014) and others indicate that the intensive mothering model may lead to poor maternal mental health (Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla 2016; Rizzo et al. 2013). Olga Mecking’s Washington Post article entitled, “No, Applying Neuroscience to My Baby Won’t Make Me a Better Mom” (2017), discredits the view that neuroscience is all-encompassing, suggesting that support systems and cultural values are more important determinants of parenting and that it is important to understanding that there are many “right” ways to parent. And from social media, posts on attachment parenting receive a wide range of resistance and criticism (as well as support). Throughout this study, I have made comments on attachment-based or “natural” mothering social media posts, sometimes testing out my ideas for this study, and sometimes challenging others by asserting that time-intensive or attachment focused parenting is inherently privileged. These comments always receive pushback with a level of defensiveness I have come to expect from these online communities, but they also receive replies from other mothers who agree with my statements and who add their own input. For instance, on a Facebook page called Evolutionary Parenting, I posted the following comment on a discussion about a blog post that posits that attachment parenting practices are strongly supported by neuroscience, and practices that advocate otherwise are akin to child abuse (such as letting a baby “cry it out” as a sleep training method):

…Also, the neuroscience on which the science for this is based is often made up from white middle-class samples and do not include ideologies or experiences from other kinds of families. I have parented this way, but I also think it's important to understand it better and to understand that not all parents have the opportunity to spend a lot of time
with their children, and I think there is probably room to say that parents who CHOOSE not to parent this way are not always guilty of child abuse or neglect.

Four people (including the owner of the page) responded to my comment defending the initial argument of the blog post and asserted that practicing attached, responsive parenting did not cost anything, and therefore anyone could do it, regardless of economic status. This is typical of these responses, in which mothers seem reluctant to give up their view that the way they see ideal parenting is accessible to everyone. Otherwise it would mean they are possibly privileged—a term that many recoil against (even when it’s perfectly clear they have more resources than others). One person, however, added to the argument I made with her own input:

That's great, [commenter] that in some countries in Africa & Central/South America women get to full time breastfeed & 'wear' their babies. They probably fit it in between their other household duties. I dunno, I'm kinda proud that in the west we've so many university educated women. It's harder to wear your baby under your surgeon's scrubs. Or full time breastfeed in between drafting legal contracts. Be careful what you wish for. I'm sure a lot of those women would swap places with us in a heartbeat.

As is evident from this exchange, these discussions often devolve into comparisons between parenting practices cross-culturally, which posters may or may not have in-depth knowledge of. And as I discuss below, this is an important place to locate the conflicts that exist between modern Western, post-capitalist interpretations of attachment parenting and what is possible or typical in other societies.

Reflecting on Attachment

The matter of whether secure attachment must be a time-intensive process is up for debate, although it is often depicted this way among child development professionals. As it turns out, Bowlby’s theory (1982 [1969]) was not the end of the attachment story. Many anthropologists have scrutinized attachment theory’s ability to stand as a universal theory of
early parent/child bonding by reexamining cross-cultural ethnographies of child rearing, finding mixed results (Chapin 2013; Fouts and Lamb 2005; Hirasawa 2005; Hrdy 1999; Konner 2005; Lee et al. 2014; LeVine 2007; Quinn and Mageo 2013; Seymour 2013; Small 1998). One of the more important findings within these analyses is the contrast between the society on which Bowlby’s theory was based and the society in which it was placed. Bowlby’s inspiration for attachment theory was likely based on the !Kung, a foraging substance-based ethnic group living in Southwest Africa in which mothers are more active in childcare than in some of the other foraging societies studied by anthropologists (Blaffer Hrdy 1999; Konner 2005). However, there are stark differences between the caregiving environment and social structures of !Kung parents and parents in the United States. Most significant is the multiple caregiving environment of !Kung families and many other foraging societies, in which extended family and community members assume significant responsibility in raising children, compared to the isolated family emblematic of the United States, with only the parents typically responsible for children. Attachment, therefore, was taken out of context and applied to a society in which familial and structural functions did not allow for strong support in raising children. So when attachment-based practices are encouraged in families that lack the social support found in groups like the !Kung, it is not surprising that feelings of isolation and intensity arise among stay-at-home mothers trying to fulfill responsibilities on their own (or even with equal support from their spouse) that otherwise might be fulfilled by many. Viewing attachment from this perspective also highlights the ways that daycare can be seen as filling in this social network, and therefore highly beneficial.

Yet the theory persisted, and regardless of whether or not we can say it is “right,” we can see that many families in Elmwood choose to align their parenting practices with ideas of attachment, as evidenced by interviews and questionnaire responses that frequently included references to “attachment.” Recently, neuroscience has contributed to perceptions of intensive parent/child bonding by demonstrating the way infants’ and children’s brains respond to parental
interaction (Macvarish 2013; Gopnik 2016). Although many staff at Nurturing Minds consider this science to be straightforward and affirmative of the best ways to parent, I never heard anyone say that parents (or mothers) should stay home and not work in order to care for their children. But the emphasis on frequent responsiveness, the advice to spend focused time with infants and toddlers, and the anxieties that are instilled in parents to ensure their children are developing “on track” leave little room for alternative interpretations, at least for those who participate in the Nurturing Minds programs.

The implications for this type of parenting in a society that depends on dual earning households are extensive. First, parenting roles continue to be transformed as this ideology takes hold among more institutions and child development professionals. Ideas about career trajectories and workplace norms are becoming more complicated for many parents—both mothers and fathers. In some ways, it may that if more intensive parenting becomes accepted as a norm, as it has for many parents in this study, the more new pathways may be opened for greater workplace flexibility and stronger social policies that benefit families with young children. For women who struggle to reconcile work and family, greater family support may alleviate some of the stress from this conflict, allowing them to stay in the work force longer, rather than “opting out” for several years or more. However, a more structural focus on family-friendly policies would mean a significant shift in what many consider to be foundational American values. More comprehensive social supports, such as longer paid parental leave, subsidized childcare, universal and free healthcare, and more paid leave would fly in the face of deeply engrained principles like self-reliance, limited government, and free market economics (Davis 2013; Larner 2000; Marzullo 2013; Palley 2011). Marzullo (2013) describes the way these neoliberal values obstruct efforts towards social policies that benefit all:

Those advocating neoliberalism use it as a political doctrine to cast social problems emanating from economic policies as “nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need a technical solution” (Ong 2006:3). In doing so, those advocating this ethos
purposefully obscure the inequities it causes by rhetorically repurposing core American concepts, such as our “boot-strap” ideology that honors rugged individualism, in order to place the total responsibility for poverty, disease, dilapidated towns, and failing schools onto private individuals, families, and businesses (Apple 1996; Duggan 2003; Marzullo 2011). (84-86)

Many of these concepts are highly relevant to family, social, and work patterns that enable or inhibit parents in raising their children in particular ways. It is this kind of neoliberal ideology that allows for individuals who are in positions of privilege to be unaware of those who are restricted by lack of adequate time off, for instance, or reasonable working hours that allow for family time. The false ideology that all families have access to the same resources and practices is allowed to exist because of the success of neoliberal policy and discourse in the past several decades (Larner 2000; Marzullo 2013).

On the other hand, many of the parents represented here are reflective of those who have the means to parent according to their ideals, regardless of greater support from employers or the government. Many middle-class and wealthy mothers have the ability and are choosing to arrange their lives in a way that allows for more time and interaction with their children, so perhaps there is little impetus for them to be concerned with policy changes that would allow them to both spend a significant amount of time with their children during the early years and remain employed. Yet interestingly, the majority of parents who responded to the electronic questionnaire (n = 55) agreed or strongly agreed that the government should provide more financial support for childcare (55%), that employers should provide more support for childcare (65%), and that employers should offer more time off for parents (80%) (and many others “somewhat agreed”: 31%, 20%, and 11%, respectively). This scenario provides a contrast to the one described by Arlie Hochschild in The Time Bind (1997), in which parents employed at a Fortune 500 company held an ideology of child-centered family similar to the one engaged by the parents in this study, yet in many ways they felt the realm of work was more
rewarding than their family lives and they often chose to work longer hours even when it was not necessary. So what has changed since the 1990s to make parents choose home life over work life? The mid- to late-1990s was the time period in which the neuroscience of infant development soared, leading to further legitimization of the child development field, specifically to the widespread acceptance of secure attachment, as neuroscience was seen as providing evidence for its validity. This was also the turning point for Nurturing Minds, when they shifted their organizational focus from child abuse to positive parenting. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the effort among child development researchers and practitioners to establish an intensive model of parental care for children cannot be overlooked in its relationship to parents’ employment decisions.

It may be that employers are the ones who see the detriment to their workforce if parents continue to quit or seek out more flexible opportunities when they have children. The individual choices that families make can impact social patterns by virtue of their employment decisions (or lack of choices), and vice versa. This point is drawn out in Lamphere et al.’s Sunbelt Working Mothers (1993), in which the authors state: “Entering the labor force (that is, allocating one’s productive labor to wage work) further structures one’s reproductive labor: the particular times that can be allocated to eating, sleeping, child rearing, and other activities that reproduce one’s own and one’ family’s labor power” (19). Again, however, Lamphere and colleagues’ study was published in the 1990s, and in the case of the Elmwood parents who participated in this study, an opposite pattern is evident. I argue that, for them, staying out of the labor force is what structures family life, and adhering to particular ethnotheories of parenting is what structures decisions about work. This is also a good example of how practice theory is useful in understanding human agency (one’s decision about how and where to work) within the realm of structure (how economic and labor forces constrain time and ability to care for one’s family and self) (Bourdieu 1995 [1997]; Lamphere et al. 1993; Ortner 1984). This juncture of family life and
work continues to be an important site that is ripe for observing personal and structural negotiations and making interpretations based on wider cultural phenomena.

My own decisions about parenting and work have developed partly in response to my interpretations of what is best for parenting and child development. Through this research, I have come to oppose many aspects of intensive or developmentally-focused parenting practices, and many of my previously-held beliefs about what good parenting looks like have been relaxed and expanded. But my desire to spend time with my children and ensure a close and secure relationship with them has not changed. I have made it a priority to ensure that whatever work I enter into after I complete my degree allows for a schedule in which I can pick my children up after school and be available in the afternoons to either allow them unstructured play time, organize an outing or play date, or to occasionally participate in extracurricular activities (the current choice for both daughters is dance classes). This simultaneous acceptance of intensive or attached parenting and concerted cultivation and an ideological resistance to it is something I frequently grapple with. But, perhaps because of my own adherence to these values, I feel strongly that any parent should be able to parent in a similar way—if they choose. And those who do not choose to should be free from judgment by other parents and by institutions who often encourage intensive practices of parenting.

**Implications for Parents Without Time**

I have argued that time is a central factor to perceptions of good parenting, as evidenced by the narratives of parents and employees who interact within the same family service organization. Many of the parents from this study have made life altering decisions around work and family structure in order to be able to spend more intensive and intentional time with their children in the first several years of their lives. Their choices have been reinforced by Nurturing Minds through the programs they have attended and the advice they have received, and many found other popular parenting advice to be in alignment with secure attachment or intensive
parenting. Time is also a key component of child development discourse, which maintains that the first three years of a child’s life is crucial for their growth, and if parents do not provide the right kind of stimulation and attention then children may be at risk for poor long term developmental, academic, or social outcomes. However, if time is something that parents need to do a good job raising their children, then how can we reconcile this with a society that depends on most parents to work full-time jobs, many of which have very little flexibility around family needs as defined by child development specialists? This question is particularly salient amidst a dominant political milieu that celebrates individual accomplishment, hard work, and “doing what it takes” to realize one’s goals (Davis 2013; Larner 2000; Marzullo 2013). For low-income parents, this often means working multiple jobs or working in service industries, caretaking, agricultural, or other industries that are typically low wage and offer very little flexibility, or hours incompatible with children’s schedules. While this study became mostly an exploration of middle-class and upper middle-class families, several of the parents who participated were from low-income households, yet they generally shared the same parenting ideologies as those with higher income. And while the sample of low-income parents from this study is too small to derive broad meaning from, it is not enough to say that parents from different classes have different expectations for parenting and child development; both are influenced by professional and mainstream ideologies that embrace an ideal kind of parenting. All parents are judged by institutions that are part of an interconnected system that shares common knowledge, and whether there is resistance to this ideology or not, it has started to define what is expected by schools and other institutions.

The practice of concerted cultivation may very well lead to social and economic inequality, as suggested by Lareau (2003). Even if all parents are exposed to some of the same ideas of child development early on, it is the ones who ultimately have time and other resources who are able to more intentionally guide their children’s development toward more predictable
positive outcomes. Carol Vincent and Claire Maxwell (2016) underscore this point in their recent analysis of concerted cultivation in the U.K.:

We have also argued that we are moving towards the normalisation of concerted cultivation as a parenting strategy for all, and, as a result, there is a risk that parents not able to or willing to engage in such activities will be positioned as offering inadequate parenting. The majority of activities have some associated costs and parental labour, so children from the poorest families will continue to miss out. (278)

This statement helps to problematize the idea embraced by many staff at Nurturing Minds, that any parent—even very poor parents—can do what it takes to be “good” parents and have positive long-term outcomes for their children. But many poor and working-class parents do not have an abundance of time to spend either with their children or with parent education programs to help them learn how to interact with their children.

Furthermore, the social network of parents who voluntarily seek out programs at Nurturing Minds is connected among many levels—income, education, experiences, and to an extent, race and ethnicity. Many parents in the study gave examples of what they saw as undesirable parenting practices among poor families they have seen through their previous (or current) work. These perceptions were often informed by their work in low-income schools, and it is necessary to unpack that description because in Elmwood, as in many other urban and suburban areas in the US, schools that are made up of a majority low-income students are also heavily represented by minority students—mostly black and Latino. Therefore, when parents (and employees of Nurturing Minds) refer to their observations of “poor” or “low-income” families, this is also likely an indicator of race or ethnicity. While interrogation into parenting ideologies that explicitly address racial and ethnic differences would be warranted, we can extrapolate from the narratives presented here that it is not only poor parents who stand out as being unable to fit the ideal parenting model, but specific minority families as well.
From my observations, despite a philosophy that emphasized equal relevance and access for all families, some of the beliefs and practices of Nurturing Minds were much more in touch with middle-class families than low-income families or racial and ethnic minority families. The location of what is consistently referred to as the “main” site (The Playroom) as well as the administrative offices cannot be overlooked. They are in the wealthier neighborhood of Bayview, situated among parents with time, money, and high levels of education. Also, the upper-level administrative employees are all white, and this kind of homogeneity is inconsistent with an outreach philosophy that is frequently described as diverse. Even still, employees at all levels expressed their belief that the organization took significant steps to be representative of and relevant to diverse families, as Casey describes below:

Casey: I mean, with the any baby, any family [philosophy] we try to meet our families where they are and understand them and know that some families do things very differently. Um, we can omit questions. I know–um, we have an educator who has a family who eats with their hands. It’s in their culture and so the questions [about whether children are eating with] spoons can go away, um, for an ASQ. And we try–

Anna: And that doesn’t affect the score if they do that?

Casey: No, we’ll just omit the question completely. So it won’t affect the score because we won’t be introducing that. So we try to be very culturally sensitive. We have probably half of our educators speak Spanish. We have [an educator] who speaks Creole-French so I know that she has a few families that she’ll translate our curriculum for and talk to them about it, which is super awesome.

These recognitions are not insignificant, and in many ways they may speak to the way that “front line” employees may be more diverse than administration in terms of ethnic and racial

---

14 I did not have the opportunity to interact with the site that provided intensive services to a low-income, majority black, struggling community, but the staff discussed their work with this site as successful, so this statement is only reflective of what I observed.
background. And similarly, I can think of examples that emphasize the unique appeal programs may have to low-income families, such as their belief that activities can be done with simple household items or at very low cost, or the fact that almost all their programs are free, and that they have programs in sites that are accessible to different communities. These inherent contradictions within the organization between constituent network and program philosophy speak to the difficulties of providing “any family” programming while relying on somewhat privileged ideas of parenting.

**Advocacy for Structural Change**

One of the key goals of this research has been to understand the structural role and purpose of organizations like Nurturing Minds. Nurturing Minds is not like other family support programs in which multiple risk factors must be present in order to participate in programs. Financial insecurity is probably the most common risk factor among all kinds of programs, based on my interviews with employees who had previously worked with high-risk families. In fact, many scholars have argued that the purpose of non-profit organizations is to fill in the gaps of a consistent lessening of government services over the past several decades, many of which benefitted families (Lipsky and Smith 1989-90; Trudeau 2008; Wies 2013). Although Nurturing Minds started out helping families who were traditionally high-risk, the shift to a positive parenting and developmental approach, as well as a broadening of which families could participate in services changed their role in the community. While they have been able to reach more families with less intensive programs, this strategy of pursuing work with families who exhibit fewer “deep end” kinds of risk factors, as one administrator refers to them, may also be seen as leaving behind the families who are in or near crisis.

It is clear that the structural role and perceived value of family services has fluctuated over the past couple of centuries and still remains ambiguous in many ways. What does seem to be evident is that there has been a significant lack of universal, practical supports to help
parents “help themselves,” as neoliberal ideology calls for. The problems of inequality are widely being blamed on neoliberal policy, as indicated in this opinion piece by Martin Jacques in *The Guardian* (2016):

> But by far the most disastrous feature of the neoliberal period has been the huge growth in inequality. Until very recently, this had been virtually ignored. With extraordinary speed, however, it has emerged as one of, if not the most important political issue on both sides of the Atlantic, most dramatically in the US. It is, bar none, the issue that is driving the political discontent that is now engulfing the west. Given the statistical evidence, it is puzzling, shocking even, that it has been disregarded for so long; the explanation can only lie in the sheer extent of the hegemony of neoliberalism and its values.

So how do we counter such crippling inequality? Although organizations like Nurturing Minds make up a large, and arguably, necessary industry, it is important to interrogate their frameworks and philosophies to better understand how society in general, and parents in particular, benefit from their services, or how those services may be missing the mark or could be improved. Might there be a better way to provide families with the types of financial, employment, and emotional support they need to be better able to care for their children? Although steps have been taken to secure formal governmental protection for children and families over the past centuries, these measures have been at odds with economic and social structures that are deeply embedded in systems of inequality. There has been little choice but for family services to operate in subordination to the movements, policies, and funding decisions of government entities. And because more structural supports like childcare, health care, and employment opportunities have not fallen under the umbrella of family protections, independent non-profit organizations like Nurturing Minds have been restricted to offering supplementary services like one-hour monthly in-home visits, or programs at sites during times that may or may not be feasible for families to access.
Organizations like Nurturing Minds are ideally suited to advocacy work. When I asked an administrative-level employee about whether the organization had engaged in advocacy around policy related to families with young children, she said they had not, but that they were considering doing so in the near future. The organization is strongly rooted in the Elmwood community and upper-level employees are not unfamiliar with community leaders or individuals with influence or decision-making power. If the organization is going to stand behind the idea that all children require plenty of time and interaction from a parent or other nurturing caregiver in order to be developmentally healthy and academically successful, then they can also lead the way in advocating for policies that foster scenarios that would allow time for all families to meet this ideal. Of course, one organization in one community is not enough to change national policies, but just as the organization started from a small grassroots collective, the path towards structural change can too, by focusing on municipal or regional policies and institutions. In fact, child development specialists, in general, should make abundantly clear the kind of environment in which their standards are intended to be met. At minimum, this environment includes significant parental or caregiver time, a low-stress environment, emotional security, and financial stability. If these expectations are going to be widely accepted among child development professionals and major institutions, then structural supports for struggling families must also be expected.

Another way we can participate in ensuring that adequate social supports exist is by reimagining some of the current ways organizations provide support, or imagining new systems of childcare all together. Childcare, after all, is at the heart of many of the challenges and conflicts surrounding the intensity of parenting. For instance, what if some of the sites at Nurturing Minds also provided childcare without parents needing to be present, at least occasionally? That all programs center around the requirement that parents and children are both part of the program undermines the needs many parents have for basic childcare. Or what if, in addition to parents receiving increased parental leave, other family members could receive
this leave to care for family members’ young children? When the onus is always on the parent to provide or arrange support, we lose out on involving the wider community in participating in raising children. On a parenting podcast called *The New Family Podcast*, one guest discussed the possibility of a national service program like Americorps creating positions for childcare, in which young adults would receive childcare training and be placed with a family who needs full-time childcare, in return for a small living stipend and health insurance. These ideas are not outside the realm of possibility, but efforts to seek new supports through policy and structural means has been suppressed by ideologies of neoliberalism in which many embrace the idea that, even in nuclear or single-parent families, we should be able to take full responsibility for our family needs without help.

**Unique Contributions of This Study**

Although I have tied together multiple bodies of research that focus on the various parenting concepts I address throughout this dissertation, there are several attributes of this study that make it unique among other parenting research, particularly within anthropology. First, if anthropological studies of parenting are lacking, as I have argued, then those within the United States are even more scarce. It is specifically because of the embeddedness of neoliberal policy and values that the US—the so-called “Land of the Free”—is such a suitable setting for studying social and economic reproduction. Social science scholars well know that discourses about freedom and opportunity are rife with contradictions and exclusions, yet these complexities can be difficult to discern in everyday practices, like parenting, without in-depth study. This ethnography is one example of how comprehensive qualitative methods can help unmask mainstream expectations of childrearing and draw out the inequalities that may follow from those beliefs.

Furthermore, although it was more or less an unintended focus, this study examines many facets of privilege with regard to parenting, including income, race and ethnicity, and
education. The attributes of being white, middle- or upper middle-class, and having a bachelor’s degree or higher all carry with them significant social and economic power in the US. More than just naming that these characteristics exist among study participants, I have pointed to ways that they may buy into and benefit from a time-intensive ideology of parenting more than parents who do not share similar characteristics. Exposing power dynamics as they play out in ideology and practice is important in understanding how people gain social and economic capital, and thus how that capital is used to raise children within the same framework.

Finally, this study is unique in that it is an analysis of an organization and its structural role in society, as depicted by both internal employee perspectives and external parent participant perspectives. Many studies of family service organizations from disciplines like social work and public health are intended to evaluate specific components of programs, or to determine whether particular efforts are effective (Croake and Glover 1977; McCurdy and Daro 2001; Roberts, et al. 1991; Schlossman 1976; Weissbourd and Kagan 1989). But the concerted effort in this study to hone in on the relationship between a family service organization and individual parents provides a more complex and comprehensive examination of how social structures impact parental practices and beliefs as well as how these structures are simultaneously informed by participants’ desires and capabilities. This more ideologically-driven strategy allows for a better understanding of the underlying values and assumptions that are held about parents and children in the first place, and from there, the process of interrogating the benefits and drawbacks of social structures becomes clearer.

**Applications of this Research**

Having been heavily influenced by ideas of engaged research when I began this project (Hale 2008), I plan to openly discuss the outcomes of the study with stakeholders, including Nurturing Minds employees, parents, and possibly funders. Thus far I have presented the findings of the ASQ data analysis I conducted to a workgroup at the organization who regularly
engages with these outcomes. For this component of research dissemination, I analyzed rates of assessment completion by zip code, gender, site, race, and ethnicity, both for the organization overall and for individual sites and programs. With their prompting, I also examined differences in children whose scores fell into the Gray or Black categories (and thus needed to be re-screened), in order to help the organization understand what patterns were present. The findings showed that the majority of children across all sites were in the assessment's White, or no-risk category. While the group seemed attentive to the information, there has not been any follow up dialogue and I’m not sure what value it had beyond the presentation.

During my interviews with administrative employees at Nurturing Minds, I discussed the idea of presenting findings to staff, board members, or any other members they felt might benefit from the information I gathered, and they expressed interest in this idea at the time. After all, I gathered important information from parents and employees about the value they saw in the organization, and of course, I also formed critiques about the organization’s practices. I am currently in the process of setting up a presentation to discuss these results.

I have also been a guest speaker on a podcast hosted by University of South Florida graduate students called AnthroAlert. While the podcast is new and still developing, the developers are continually working to increase the listener base, and importantly, they hope to acquire a strong non-academic base and strive to make the topics and discussions relevant to multiple interests. The content of this interview will be made available on the website, www.anthroalert.com. I have also done a poster presentation on this research at USF’s annual Graduate Symposium in the spring of 2017, which helped me to work through the findings while I discussed them with fellow graduate students.

With regard to disseminating results to parents, I have plans to create a very abbreviated version of my findings and make it available to all parents who participated in interviews or the electronic questionnaire. Several parents indicated their interest in learning about the results
when the study was completed, and for those who wish to see more than a summary, I will
direct them to the published dissertation online.

Finally, as a way to more actively procure interest in further developing an anthropology
of parenting, I plan to publish articles based on the data collected in this study in peer-reviewed
journals that are relevant to the topics discussed here, but especially those from within
anthropology. I will also send a link to my published dissertation to the American
Anthropological Association interest group listserves that best represent the subjects of this
study, including the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group and the Interest Group
on NGOs and Nonprofits.

The Future of Parenting Studies

This study has unveiled many areas in which future research would be valuable. First,
the parents I was unable to reach in the study may provide accounts of parenting that run
counter to the parents who were included. For instance, voices from more parents of color—
especially African American parents—low-income parents, working mothers, and fathers were
all, despite my efforts and frustrations to the contrary, underrepresented in this research.

Literature on participant interactions with family service programs has demonstrated that ideas
about parenting styles vary by class, race, ethnicity, age, and other factors (Coard et al. 2004;
Johnson 2009; Perriera et al. 2006; Roche et al. 2007; Garner et al. 2014; Weaver et al. 2001).
For example, what may be considered harsh or strict practices by some may be interpreted as
protective by others (Coard et al. 2004), or the extent to which maternal involvement gives
children advantages may depend on environmental factors like neighborhood safety (Roche et
al. 2007). Fathers, especially, are underrepresented in social science literature on parenting, as
are LGBTQ parents, although anthropologists have taken some steps in the past decade to
understand parenting experiences as they relate to gender and sexual identity in the US (Gallo
2016; Pelka 2010; Shwalb 2013).
Additionally, because the realms of family life and work life are so interconnected, research on employers’ perspectives of employees with families would be a necessary part of the conversation about how to support parents and care for children in the United States. This would also extend to employers’ understandings of current and potential family-related policies that impact the workplace. The current status of these kinds of policies for the US is dismal; we are one of four countries in the world that does not systemically guarantee paid parental leave (Cruse et al. 2016), and this is not to mention drastic differences in allowances and expectations for other kinds of paid time off like vacation and sick leave between the US and other industrialized countries (Cruse et al. 2016; Zillman 2017).

The impact that maternal age and reproductive health has on parenting choices would also provide insight into the changing patterns of family life that have occurred throughout the past century. Some women from the study discussed the way that age was a factor in determining how many children to have and whether to stay home or continue working. Also, some mothers connected their previous experiences of miscarriage to their resolve to dedicate as much time as they could to their children. This was a point I could understand on a personal level, as I had two previous miscarriages before having my daughters, and I have no doubt that the experience of loss informed my dedication to intensive parenting ideology I felt committed to early on.

And importantly, alternative narratives to the ones represented here are warranted in having a more robust understanding of parenting ideologies in the United States. Some guiding characteristics to consider for this would be parents who do not buy in to the inherent messages of secure attachment or concerted cultivation, such as self-professed “free range” parents (Skenazy 2010); those who hold a more “natural” view of child development similar to some of the ideas espoused by the working class and poor parents in Lareau’s (2003 [2011]) Unequal Childhoods; or those who simply find the intensity of mainstream parenting ideas problematic or undesirable (Gibbs 2009).
Finally, families who rely on multi-family or community caregiving may provide much-needed counter examples to the isolated nuclear family. For instance, some studies point to an increase in grandparents providing intermittent and primary care for grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2001; Settles et al. 2009; Vandell et al. 2003). Sometimes this pattern is representative of cultural values where it is the norm for grandparents to live in their adult children’s homes, as with many Asian families, according to Settles et al. (2009). Fuller-Thomson and Minkler (2001) suggest that this increase in grandparent care is accounted for largely by parental substance abuse, teen pregnancy, AIDS, unemployment, and incarceration. However, Barbara Settles and colleagues note that, while many families’ reliance on extended kin and grandparent support has always been integral to many communities in the US, there is a re-emergence of this pattern across a wider array of families (2009). In my own social network, I have seen multiple examples of primary grandparent care spanning class and race, and most striking have been the instances in which dual working professional parents arrange to have their parents live with or near them, or the grandparents themselves follow their adult children across multiple states for the purpose of providing help or care for grandchildren. Whether these situations arise by choice or out of necessity, ethnographic observations and first-hand accounts from individuals with these family caregiving scenarios would help organizations and policymakers understand the experiences, influences, and needs of families with young children in order to determine the most effective structural supports for all family members involved. For grandparents who can comfortably retire, for instance, the level of stress they experience in this childcare endeavor would differ significantly from those who have little means to raise young children later in life.

As a point of closure, I return to a consideration of the ways this work contributes to the development of an anthropology of parenting. As I scan through archives of research on anthropology and parenting in the United States in the past decade, I note the various sub-disciplines the studies emanate from, which are mostly educational and psychological.
anthropology. Furthermore, of all the sites of study included in this body of research, schools and the home easily top the list. The two realms represented by these sub-disciplines of self and structure or the sites of home and organization are complementary to the framework I have drawn from within this work. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the intersections of individuals and institutions—whether it be a school, workplace, or nonprofit organization—provide fertile ground for examining interaction between structure and agent and teasing apart the multiple influences that inform cultural ideologies. For a heightened focus on parenting, then, we need to delve further into the various ways that raising children both reflects and shapes social structures. Parents absorb societal messages around them at the same time that they may consciously direct their practices toward a particular outcome. The extent to which social and economic inequality is reproduced in a society depends largely on whether parents are in a position to support or resist dominant ideologies about what is best for children and a society at large. Anthropologists have abundant opportunities to shed light on these patterns through an array of parenting issues in the US and around the globe, and it is my hope that others will join in this pursuit of elaborating on our understandings of family life by contributing more studies on parenting with the explicit goal of creating a more formalized anthropology of parenting.
References


Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a Different Voice*. Harvard University Press.


Appendix A: Electronic Questionnaire Content

Introduction
Hello! I am a PhD Student in the Anthropology department at USF. I am doing research for my dissertation to understand local ideas of parenting and to understand what role programs like [Side By Side] play in supporting parents in our society.

Participation in [Side By Side]/[The Playroom] Programs
1. How many children do you have who are participating in the [Side By Side]/[The Playroom] program?
2. Please indicate how many children you have who are 5 years or younger, and what sex they are.
3. How long have you been participating in the [Side By Side]/[The Playroom] program?
4. How much do you consider the advice you receive from [Side By Side]/[The Playroom] to be expert advice?

Defining “Good Parenting”
1. Please list some words or phrases that come to mind when you think about what being a good parent means to you.
2. Please list some words or phrases that come to mind when you think about what being a good parent means to experts (i.e., doctors, childcare professionals, books, etc.).
3. If you feel that you have a certain kind of parenting style, please name or describe it below.
4. What main people or sources of information do you receive parenting advice from?

Intensive Parenting
Adapted from the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (Schiffrin et al. 2014). Response options will be a 6-point Likert scale.

Please answer the following questions about how intense you feel the work of parenting is. If you are unsure of an answer, please choose the option that best fits your opinion.

Challenging
1. Parents never get a mental break from their children, even when they are physically apart
2. Parenting is exhausting
3. Child rearing is the most demanding job in the world
4. Being a parent means never having time for oneself
5. It is harder to be a good parent than to be a corporate executive
6. To be an effective parent, a person must possess wide ranging skills

Child-Centered
1. The child’s schedule should take priority over the needs of the parent’s
2. Children should be the center of attention
3. Children’s needs should come before their parents
Alternative Notions of Intensive
Responses will be on a 5-pt frequency scale.

1. I worry about the safety of my child/children.
2. I worry about providing basic necessities for my child/children (food, housing, clothing, transportation).
3. I worry about being able to get good medical care for my child/children in times of need.
4. I worry about whether my child/children are developmentally on track.
5. I worry about whether my child/children will be accepted by others.
6. I worry about the future academic success of my child/children.

Parenting Supports
Some questions adapted from or modeled after General Social Survey (2014). Response options will be a 6-point Likert scale.

1. I have most or all of what I need to be a good parent.
2. Family, friends, or other community members are able to provide support in caring for my child(ren) when I need it.
3. My family has enough money to care for our child (children) well.
4. Programs like Parents as Teachers/Baby Bungalow help me to be a good parent.
5. I use the knowledge and tools gained from Parents as Teachers/Baby Bungalow to help me with my parenting.
6. It is easy to find opportunities for social interaction for my child/children.
7. The government should provide more financial support for childcare.
8. Employers should provide more financial support for childcare.
9. Employers should offer more time off for parents.

Work and Family
1. Staying at home to care for babies and young children provides more benefits than having them in daycare.
2. I feel conflicted about my decision to stay home or work while my child is (children are) young.
3. Preschool children suffer when the mother works full time.
4. Being employed outside the home has important benefits for parents aside from making money.

Demographics
1. Sex
2. Marital Status
3. Race
4. Ethnicity
5. Work Status
6. Household Income

Comments
If you have any additional comments about this survey, please feel free to add them below.

Request for Interview
Your input is greatly appreciated! I am looking for parents who are willing to be interviewed to discuss these topics more. If you are interested in being contacted to participate in a voluntary interview, please provide your contact information below.
Email: ______________________________________________________________
Phone: _____________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Parent Interview Protocol

This is a semi-structured interview (so questions may not always be asked of participants in the same order or may be slightly modified in wording to best fit the perspective of the interviewee.)

Introductory Information
7. What is your name?  
8. Please describe your participation with [Nurturing Minds].  

Routine Parenting Practices
1. Describe a typical day with your child/ren, starting from when you wake up to when you go to bed.

Cultural Knowledge of Parenting–Individual/Community
1. What are some of the most important things you think you should do to raise your children well?  
2. How have family and friends influenced your beliefs about parenting?  
3. Discuss how well prepared you felt to raise children when you became a parent.  
4. How well do you feel your family, friends, or community can provide support in raising your children?  
5. What are some of the main challenges you have had with parenting?

Cultural Knowledge of Parenting–Expert
1. What are some of the main books, websites, or other media you’ve used to learn about raising children?  
2. What are some of the messages you’ve received from books or media about parenting?  
3. What parenting topics do you feel you need the most help with?  
4. How have doctors, teachers, program staff, and other experts influenced your beliefs about parenting?  
5. What kinds of advice have you received from experts that you don’t like or disagree with?

Interactions with [Nurturing Minds]
1. Why do you participate in programs with [Nurturing Minds]?  
2. What do you think about the parenting messages [Nurturing Minds] staff talk about during programs?  
3. How well do you think [Nurturing Minds] understands what you need as a parent?  
4. Are there other programs or services that [Nurturing Minds] can provide to better meet your needs as a parent?  
5. Why is it important for parents to have programs like these?

Other
1. Are there any comments you’d like to make about any of the topics we discussed in this interview?
Demographic information
1. Sex
2. Marital Status
3. Race/Ethnicity
4. Household Income
5. Sex(es) of Child(ren)
6. Age(s) of Child(ren)
Appendix C: Employee Interview Protocol

This is a semi-structured interview (so questions may not always be asked of participants in the same order or may be slightly modified in wording to best fit the perspective of the interviewee.)

Introductory Information
1. What is your name?
2. How long have you worked for Nurturing Minds?
3. Position and Educational/Professional Background
4. Review of consent form.

Work Routine
1. Describe a typical day at your job, including interactions with other staff and with constituents.

Cultural Knowledge of Parenting - Organization
1. How would you describe the mission of your organization?
2. What kinds of materials or knowledge have informed the programs in your organization (i.e., research, media, community initiatives, funding, constituent feedback)?
3. What are some of the main messages that programs send to parent participants?
4. What role do you think your organization plays in supporting parents in your community?
5. In what ways does your organization address the diverse needs of families in your community?

Cultural Knowledge of Parenting - Employee
1. What are some of the main things you think parents can do to raise their children well?
2. What are some of the main risk factors parents have for not raising their children well?
3. What are some of the main challenges you have with parents in your programs?
4. To what extent do you consider yourself to be an expert in parenting?
5. Are there other ways you think your organization could support parents?

Interactions with Parents
1. How would you describe your interactions with families you work with?
2. What does it look like when interactions are going well?
3. If there are negative interactions with parents, what are some typical reasons?
4. What do parents say about the programs they participate in?

Other
1. Are there any comments you’d like to make about any of the topics we discussed in this interview?

Demographics
1. Sex
2. Race/Ethnicity
3. Number of Children (Optional)
Appendix D: Funder Interview Protocol

1. Please describe your background as it relates to work with children and families and your current role.

2. How would you describe the mission of your organization?

3. What societal or structural role does your organization play in meeting the needs of parents with young children?

4. What kinds of resources or other materials have shaped employees’ understanding of parenting young children?

5. How are decisions made about what programs or services are important for parents with young children?

6. Can you think of any policies or local or national movements that have shaped funding for families in the past couple of decades?

7. Do you feel that most parents have their needs adequately met? (Either through funded programs or their own means)

8. How does the funding of programs and services contrast with or complement more structural policies that benefit families (like paid leave, increased minimum wage, FMLA, etc.), and is one method superior to the other?

9. Are there any kinds of programs or services that currently don’t exist that you think are needed to better serve parents with young children?
Appendix E: Qualitative Analysis Codes and Definitions

FAMILY: PARENTS

- **Introduction**—description of how parent became involved with the agency and how long they've been in programs
- **IRB**—any discussion of IRB process or concerns
- **Routine**—description of a parent’s daily routine with child/children
- **Ideology**—discussion of what parent thinks is important to raise children and how beliefs have been influenced by others
- **Support**—discussion of ways that parent felt/feels supported in raising children, including material, economical, structural, and emotional support - also includes preparedness
- **Constituents**—discussion of the types of constituents the agency is perceived to serve
- **Challenges**—discussion of challenges parents have faced while raising children
- **Resources**—discussion of the materials parents use to inform ideas about parenting
- **Messages**—description of inherent messages in agency programs or broader society
- **Experts**—discussion of interactions with child development experts or ways they have influenced parenting ideas, positive or negative
- **Rationale**—discussion of reasons for participating in programs at the agency
- **Needs**—discussion of how well parents’ needs are met by the agency
- **Gaps**—discussion of gaps in family services or specific ideas for what kind of programs or structural supports could make parenting young children easier
- **Demographic**—description of demographic information relating to parent and family participants in the agency
- **Work Status**—amount of time parent works or cares for child/ren and type of work
- **Other**—discussion of concerns or issues that are not covered by other codes
FAMILY: EMPLOYEES

- **Introduction**—discussion of employee’s role with the agency, including background and education and number of years with the agency
- **Routine**—description of employee’s typical day at their job
- **Mission**—discussion of the agency’s mission, including changes from the past to present
- **Program Development**—discussion of research, ideas, policies, and social movements that have influenced the development programs
- **Messages**—discussion of the explicit and inherent messages in programs that encourage a particular ideology of parenting
- **Role**—discussion of the role the agency plays in society with regard to helping families with young children—may also include comparisons to other programs and services
- **Diversity**—discussion of the way the agency’s programs address needs of diverse families, in terms of race, ethnicity, language, income, education, and access
- **Ideology**—discussion of what employee thinks is important for parents to do to raise children well
- **Risks**—discussion of perceived risks that can occur if parents don’t raise children well
- **Challenges**—discussion of challenges that employee has had with parents in programs
- **Expert**—discussion of the extent to which employee considers herself to be an expert
- **Gaps**—discussion of gaps in programs and services, including ideas for supports that could better help parents with young children
- **Interactions**—descriptions of positive or negative interactions with parents
- **Feedback**—discussion of parent feedback about programs or critiques employee has regarding programming, infrastructure, or internal communication
- **Demographics**—demographic information related to employee
- **Other**—discussion of concerns or issues that are not covered by other codes

FAMILY: FUNDERS

- **Introduction**—description of participant’s background and current role as it relates to working with family service agencies and programs
- **Mission**—discussion of the funding agency’s mission
- **Role**—discussion of the funding agency's societal or structural role in serving families with young children, including comparisons to other agencies or programs/services
- **Ideology**—discussion of resources, materials, movements, or ideas that have shaped the direction of the funding agency's work
- **Decisions**—discussion of the process by which decisions are made when funding family programs
- **Gaps**—discussion of the gaps in programs and services for families with young children and opportunities for other supports
- **Diversity**—discussion of the diverse constituents, including race, ethnicity, language, income, education, and access
- **Other**—discussion of concerns or issues that are not covered by other codes