

◆ INTRODUCTION

*No Playpen*

When I was raising my children in the 1970s, there were no baby monitors to help me hear them cry in the middle of the night, no cell phones to assist me in keeping track of their whereabouts at every moment, and no expectation that I would know any more about their educational successes or failures than they, or a quarterly report card, would tell me.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, although I thought of myself as a relatively anxious parent, I trusted a girl in the third grade to accompany my five-year-old son to and from school, and when he was in the first grade, I allowed him to walk that mile by himself. Moreover, although I thought of myself as a deeply engaged parent, I did not believe I needed to know what my children were doing at every moment once they had reached their teen years. And although I was as status conscious as anyone else and deeply interested in seeing my children get into “good” colleges, I never called a teacher to find out about a homework assignment or contested an assigned grade. In retrospect, and from the vantage point of watching my younger friends and colleagues with their children today, my parenting style seems, if not neglectful, certainly a mite casual.

I’m not alone in feeling that something about the parenting of young children has recently shifted in profound ways. The other day I ran into a woman I’ve known for years but hadn’t seen for some time. We compared notes. “Grandchildren?” I asked. “Yes,” she answered, “and moving back to live near me.” As I expressed envy because mine live four hours away, she expressed hesitation. She wondered whether she could participate in the rearing of those grandchildren according to the style her daughter, a successful attorney in her own right, had chosen. “No playpen,” I joked. “Right,” she said, “no playpen.”

Personal experience aside, contemporary popular culture is replete with descriptions of a new style of parenting that appears to prevail especially among elite parents who, supposedly, worry all the time about the safety of their children and who, it is said, hover over and monitor them more closely

than ever before, even if they are likely to eschew artificial constraints such as playpens. Parenting books, journalists, and academics comment on this phenomenon that some have dubbed “hypervigilance” and occasionally offer advice about how best to cope with it.<sup>2</sup>

I’m also not alone in feeling that the intensity that characterizes parenting today does not seem to let up when children enter late adolescence or even early adulthood. At the sixty-fifth birthday party of a colleague, I chatted with a woman who worked in career counseling at a nearby university. I asked her how her job had changed over the past thirty years. Her answer came swiftly: “They’re now so immature when they graduate, and they have to consult their parents about everything.” She added, “But that’s not the worst of it. The parents call all the time too, demanding to know just what it is I am doing for their children.”

Although this career counselor might have been overstating the degree to which the undergraduate students at her university sought parental advice and the degree to which the parents managed to intervene in the lives of those twenty-one-year-olds, hers is a common overstatement. Wikipedia defines a “helicopter parent” as a “mother or father who ‘hovers’ over a student of any age.”<sup>3</sup> Put this term into a Google search and scores of references pop up.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, it turns out that both the notion that this hovering is intense and the notion that this hovering is welcomed by young adults may not be exaggerations at all. The National Survey of Student Engagement, which “obtains, on an annual basis, information from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities nationwide,” reported in 2007 that 86 percent of first-year college students had “frequent” (defined as “very often” or “often”) electronic contact with their mothers, and 71 percent had “frequent” electronic contact with their fathers; these rates are about the same for college seniors too.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, 13 percent of first-year and 8 percent of senior students reported in the survey that a parent or guardian “frequently intervened on their behalf to help them solve problems they were having at the college,” and “another quarter of first-year and 21 percent of senior students said their parent or guardian *sometimes* intervened.”<sup>6</sup> Another recent study reports that parents of college-age children communicate with those children an average of more than ten times per week through a sum of all forms of communication, such as cell phones, email, and letters.<sup>7</sup> This study further suggests that intensive communication is initiated relatively equally by both parents and children and that both parents and children desire it:

Students reported that the contact was more often initiated by parents than by themselves, although only slightly more so. Parents reported that initiation of contact was roughly equal. Moreover, the vast majority of students expressed satisfaction with the frequency of communication, and 29 percent of those surveyed would have preferred more communication with their fathers. None of the parents surveyed wanted less communication than they had, and 13 percent would have preferred more.<sup>8</sup>

Much commentary about this new style of parenting notes that it appears to be accompanied by, enacted through, and perhaps even rests on a series of technological developments.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the common baby monitors and cell phones, it turns out that parents can buy a GPS tracking device to put in a car to monitor adolescent driving practices, attach a transponder to a child's wrist to ensure that they can locate children who venture farther than a pre-programmed distance, purchase a drug testing kit to use at home, place a program on their computers to record their children's every keystroke, and install a piece of software to prevent access to designated Internet sites.<sup>10</sup> Parents can also activate the blocking capacity of the V-chip that is now mandatory on larger televisions. Some of these devices rely on the cooperation of children; this is true, for example, of cell phones. But it also turns out that parents can implement controls, spy on their children, and monitor their children's behavior, especially their driving, from a distance without the active participation of their children at all.<sup>11</sup>

### Studying Parenting Styles

Curious about the hovering and curious about its possible link to new technology, I designed a research project that would allow me to explore and explain the roots, dynamics, and class location of a style of child rearing that I have come to call "parenting out of control" as it affects attitudes toward and behaviors directed at adolescent children. This book represents the results of that research. I both holistically examine parenting in the contemporary United States amid social, cultural, and technological changes and focus particularly on the contrast between parenting out of control and a different style of care—found within a different social milieu—that I call "parenting with limits."

I draw on intensive interviews that my research assistants and I conducted with a total of ninety-three parents (of whom three-quarters were mothers). These interviews took place in respondents' homes in thirty-seven different locations in eleven different states representing seven of the nine major regions of the country: New England (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont), the Middle Atlantic (Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York), the South Atlantic (North Carolina), East South Central (Kentucky), West North Central (Missouri), West South Central (Texas), and the Pacific West (California). The vast majority of the parents with whom we spoke had at least one teenage child at the time of the interview. (A complete discussion of the methods and sample can be found in appendix A.)

In what follows, I compare the parenting styles of what I refer to as the "professional middle-class" parents with those from the "middle" and "working" classes.<sup>12</sup> Since class status is in some ways an arbitrary designation, let me take a moment to address how I define it and why I use the awkward term "professional middle class." Because social class has material, cultural, and social elements, no way of designating the social class position of an individual is perfect. Relying on just income as a measurement of class status taps into the material component of social class but often misses the cultural and social elements, especially insofar as these are reflected in (or components of) occupational position and the activities of daily life. Although an individual's job constitutes an important determinant of daily life, relying on it as an indicator of social class is an especially unsatisfactory approach for women who may be staying at home with their children and who may have deferred or halted career aspirations and opportunities to care for a family. Moreover, elite jobs that build on professional training do not always yield high incomes (and thus cannot invariably be identified as upper middle class or upper class); academics can testify to that fact, as can lawyers and doctors who put public interest above financial gain. Education often offers a better measure than income for assessing cultural issues and, because of the strong association between education and occupation, for explaining those issues of job flexibility and authority connected to occupational status. Education, through its association with occupation and income, can also determine to a great extent the milieu in which one lives, whom one takes as a reference group, and the kinds of values one holds.<sup>13</sup> These are all important determinants of what one defines as good parenting.

Consequently, education is the key to how I identify class status in this study. I define the “professional middle class” as people with educational credentials beyond a bachelor’s degree and, when employed, as people holding professional occupations: this grouping includes such individuals as an Asian American college professor from Berkeley, California, a white attorney in a Boston suburb, and a white woman with a PhD who is, by self-definition, a “stay-at-home mom.” The people in the middle class with whom I spoke have a bachelor’s degree, but nothing higher; usually they are in what have been referred to as “semiprofessional” positions. This group includes a Latino policeman from San Antonio, Texas, and a white high school teacher from Louisville, Kentucky. None of the working-class respondents have a bachelor’s degree, although many of them have attended some college (including occasionally having received an associate’s degree); they hold a vast range of occupations. Among the working-class individuals are a white man employed as a sheet-metal worker, a first-generation immigrant from Italy who lives on Staten Island, New York, and is a stay-at-home mom, and an African American woman who works as a teacher’s aide in Philadelphia.

In general, I make no distinction between working-class and middle-class parents. Throughout the comparisons, it should be remembered that these inclusive groupings—of all three social classes—contain within them individuals who deviate from the general patterns of parenting I ascribe to each group. Moreover, because my central focus in this study is the professional middle-class parents who have adopted the style I call “parenting out of control,” middle- and working-class parents who follow what I call “parenting with limits” often serve as a touchstone rather than an equal focus of analysis.<sup>14</sup>

For well over a decade my own research has been with people less privileged than myself and with those in vulnerable positions. This is the first time I have focused on individuals close to me in background, occupation, and interests. Indeed, a few of the people my research assistants and I interviewed I count as friends and colleagues; some of them are one step removed—the friends and colleagues of friends and colleagues. The spotlight I turn on the professional middle class may be all the more self-conscious, and maybe even harsher, for my awareness that, were I somewhat younger than I am, I too might well be “parenting out of control.”

The spotlight through which I examine parenting styles can be thought of as having four lenses that are sometimes overlapping and sometimes distinct.

One lens simply reveals the major features of the professional middle-class style and how it differs from that of the less privileged parents. A second lens seeks to uncover some of the root causes of the professional middle-class style. A third lens examines how these styles are enacted in conjunction with technologies. And finally, yet another lens links parenting out of control to other contemporary theoretical (and social) currents.

### A Descriptive Lens: The Importance of Class

When I compared parenting styles among the professional middle-class respondents with those of their less privileged peers, I found quite distinctive differences. Among the former, parenting includes a lengthy perspective on children's dependency without a clear launching point for a grown child, a commitment to creating "passionate" people who know how to find a "proper" balance between working hard and having fun, personalized and negotiated guidance in the activities of daily life, respectful responsiveness to children's individual needs and desires, a belief in boundless potential, ambitious goals for achievement, and an intense engagement with children who in previous generations might have been encouraged to begin the process of separation. Privileged parents also put child rearing front and center: even in the midst of extremely busy lives, they highlight the significance and meaning they find in this activity, and they avoid shortcuts (such as playpens) that could make their job easier. Parents who view themselves as being much alone in the task of raising children and as having sole responsibility for their children's safety and psychological well-being readily embrace these burdens.

As the following chapters show, in some ways these characteristics make for an approach to parenting that is filled with tensions and enduring dilemmas. For example, professional middle-class parents want both to protect their children from growing up too quickly and to push them to high achievement at an early age. The latter impulse often leads to treating their children as peers and to claiming that those children can be trusted to make decisions on their own; the former impulse often leads to hovering and to concealed surveillance. And while the contemporary style of parenting rests on an approach that has been found among privileged parents for some time—an emphasis on being permissive rather than authoritarian or even authoritative, a reliance on internalized constraint rather than punishment and external control—the

intense negotiation that often results from a commitment to loose reins and to trust takes place along with what appear to be relatively new patterns of vigilance and connection.<sup>15</sup> All of this makes for the much noticed distinction between the current parenting style and that which characterized child rearing among the elite as recently as twenty or thirty years ago. This distinction is commented on by the parents interviewed for this study who see themselves as forging a new model.

By way of contrast, the working-class and middle-class parents assume that higher education will prepare their children to live on their own; they are more concerned with skills that will ensure self-sufficiency than they are with passion and fun. Working-class and middle-class parents are also less interested in intimacy and engagement than they are in clear rules of authority within the family. While they too find satisfaction in raising children, they do not believe they need to be involved in making every decision about their children's lives, and they welcome shortcuts that can ease their burdens. And although they too view themselves as having sole responsibility for their children's safety, limited resources of time and money shape day-to-day decisions and strategies. Finally, middle-class and working-class parents experience fewer internal contradictions in their parenting approach, and they are less conscious of carving out a new mode of parenting that differs radically from that of their own parents. Although they understand that more isolation for individual families and what are seen to be greater dangers might require more intense vigilance, they refer more often to continuity than to difference. Both attention to external constraints and attention to having children who obey family rules are central to my dubbing this approach "parenting with limits."

### An Analytical Lens: Finding Causes

It would be thrilling to announce that I had found a single reason for the new approach to rearing children among the professional middle class. But no *single* cause could possibly explain such a complex shift in orientation toward parenting; moreover, particular aspects of this new approach in all likelihood have multiple and overlapping causes. These realities frame my analysis of how the differences between the groups of parents can be linked to the diverse ways adults in different social classes envision the future, remember

their own histories, and evaluate present concerns. I search for explanations rather than *the* explanation; I explore the manner in which many different strands of influence feed into specific elements of the new distinctive style of parenting out of control.

I start with a consideration of how parents think about their children's futures. I argue that parents from all social backgrounds worry about contemporary conditions of acute economic uncertainty.<sup>16</sup> But, not surprisingly, the content of the worries and the responses to these concerns are different among the more privileged than they are among those with fewer resources at their disposal. Anxious to secure their children's competitive advantage in a world that is marked by increasing anxiety about college acceptance and increasing economic inequality (and perhaps shrinking options for elite status), professional middle-class parents seize opportunities for educational success and enroll even their very young children in a dazzling array of "extracurricular" activities. They assume that their children are, if not perfectible, blessed with boundless potential. In response, they nurture children to become the best they can possibly be; they also provide them with the "best" social, cultural, and economic capital.<sup>17</sup> However, because contemporary professional middle-class parents do not know which skills will be most appropriate and useful in a rapidly changing world, they hope to encourage a broad range of skills and the readiness to be flexible. The delayed launching of children into adulthood may well be tied to concerns about not settling too soon in a world undergoing major transformations. The professional middle-class parents are also well aware of the personal costs of their own success: most have sacrificed a fair degree of leisure to get where they are; many also have sacrificed their youthful idealism. These are pains from which they hope to protect their own children as they guide them toward the future. These pains are also reason for parents to find in their children companionship that they do not otherwise experience in their busy lives. From a different social and economic milieu, and out of both economic necessity and inclination, middle- and working-class parents envision a shorter educational future, clearer career goals, and an earlier launch.

Understandings of the past are also relevant to how parents make choices about child-rearing strategies. Some professional middle-class parents who adopt the new approach of a high degree of connection with their adolescent children do so not just in response to something missing in their lives but also

in response to what they regard as problems with how they were treated during their own teenage years and to what they recall as having been an essential distance between parents and children. This is true of those who experienced authoritarian parenting. It is also true of those raised in the more permissive mode advocated by Dr. Spock.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, some of the loudest claims for the beauty of intimacy between parents and teens come from a generation of parents who themselves once proclaimed that it was foolishness to trust anyone over thirty. Over and over professional middle-class parents told me, with pride in their voices, that it was now very different in their homes—that an adolescent child was their “best friend.” Less privileged parents also told me that they saw reasons to be more vigilant than their parents had been, but they also said that they knew well the difference between being a parent and being a friend.

The professional middle-class parents who hold their adolescent children close are not just responding to and reversing the lessons of the past or anticipating future concerns. They are simultaneously responding to what they see as the threats to their children’s present well-being. These perceived threats include what they describe as media images of violence and, what they speak of with even more urgency, as media images of sex. Over and over professional middle-class parents told me—in this case less with pride than with anxiety—that they want to protect their children from too much exposure to the images around them and from growing up too fast. Professional middle-class parents have additional daily concerns that stem from the actions they have taken to prepare their children for the future and to help them compete on a daily basis with their peers. Having purchased devices such as cell phones and laptop computers so that their children will not be left behind in the race to the top, and having encouraged their children to participate in scheduled activities from morning to night, elite parents then worry that they have overindulged, overscheduled, and overpressured their children. Some of the hovering they do is thus to keep track of the consequences of patterns of child rearing they have created. Middle-class and working-class parents also said they were concerned about what it was their children were exposed to in the media, but they stressed even more concrete dangers in their neighborhoods and schools. Over and over these parents told me that they worried about their capacity to keep their children safe from physical harm.

## The Lens of Technology: Enacting Parenting Styles

When I began this research, I assumed naively that the hovering professional middle-class parents would opt for all the help technology could offer to help them keep track of and even spy on their children. In fact, I began this project in part because I thought that it would allow me the fun of exploring novel technologies such as GPS tracking systems for teen drivers and their use within the home.<sup>19</sup>

As I show in part II of this book, I was wrong. The elite parents I interviewed do opt for some of these technologies, and, in particular, they purchase both baby monitors and cell phones. These devices are viewed as desirable by professional middle-class parents because they fit well with the style of parenting they have adopted: these devices enable parents to be aware of and intimate with their children. But the professional middle-class parents decidedly do not seek out technologies that offer either constraint (such as child locators) or surveillance (such as GPS tracking systems in cars). Indeed they appear to find some of these morally repugnant. Why, they say, would I want a machine to tell me where my child is? Why would I want them to track their driving? I *trust* them, they say.

This professional middle-class resistance to new technologies that could assist hovering turns out to be a complex phenomenon because it hinges on the technology itself and not on the practices of either constraint or surveillance. In fact, the professional middle-class parents who make significant claims of trusting their children actually forgo neither constraint nor surveillance. Rather, they engage in quite thorough and quite careful attempts to limit and monitor their children's daily activities. They *do* hover. But instead of relying on technological assistance (beyond baby monitors and cell phones) for these practices, they rely on their own presence and on the intimacy that is a hallmark of their parenting. As a result, both constraint and monitoring are highly individualized and subject to negotiation. Thus, what the psychologist Barbara Hofer has called the "electronic tether"—the cell phone and email that connects parents and children at a distance—proves to be quite elastic, and often quite unpredictably so.<sup>20</sup>

The situation is quite different among middle-class and working-class parents. These less privileged parents prefer clear rules and the assistance of more

technology. Hence, rather than lurking in a doorway to sneak a look at what a teenager is doing on the computer, as a professional middle-class mother might do, a working-class mother installs a piece of commercial software that blocks unwanted Internet sites. Or, rather than watching videos with a teenage son to ensure that images of violence are subject to detailed discussion, as a professional middle-class father might do, a working-class father simply activates the V-chip on the television. The less elite parents, then, rely on limits rather than subtle control.

### The Lens of Theory: Parenting Out of Control

My findings of intimacy and hovering combined with elastic constraint and covert surveillance are central to my dubbing the professional middle-class approach “parenting out of control.” Clearly intimacy and hovering lay the groundwork for control in the commonsense meaning of the word: parents are carefully guiding, shaping, and determining the contours of their children’s actions. Because so much of teenage children’s daily lives is subject to observation, discussion, and negotiation, those who are subject to this kind of parental oversight may experience their parents as being “out of control.” And the parents who implement these strategies may feel that the time required to raise children has gotten “out of control.” Indeed, if the jury is still out on the effects these strategies will have on the independence and autonomy of young adults, a considerable body of evidence (including this book) suggests that the new parenting style consumes the lives of the *parents* who adopt it, often at the expense of other meaningful relationships.<sup>21</sup> This is another way that parenting has gotten “out of control.”

The phrase “parenting out of control” is also linked to a more nuanced meaning. In the abstract world of social theory, a distinction has emerged between strategies that shape individuals by relying on disciplinary techniques and strategies that accomplish those ends through mechanisms of control. French social theorist Michel Foucault is the premier authority on the former approach. In his groundbreaking study of discipline, Foucault analyzes the structure of a prison that was designed like a panopticon with an always-present, elevated guard whose presence was apparent but whose direct gaze was concealed from the prisoners.<sup>22</sup> Because the inmates

would always be visible but would not know when they were being watched, Foucault argues, they would come to obey the rules, to discipline themselves. That is, self-discipline emerges from uncertainty about whether one is being watched at any given moment. As the contemporary theorist of surveillance David Lyon says, “[This uncertainty] creates the desire to comply with whatever is the norm for the institution in question. Through the process is developed an inner compulsion to ‘do the right thing’ as prescribed by the organization, which produces the desired ‘docile bodies.’”<sup>23</sup> Here, then, is a model of shaping that relies on clear constraint, on hierarchy, on overt judgments about what is and is not appropriate, and on acknowledged surveillance. This is also a model that assumes that at some point the guard is no longer necessary because the subjects have become “docile.” And this is the model assumed to be in use in the full range of contemporary institutions, including the school and the army, each of which is “producing” its own distinctive product: in the school one becomes a student; in the army, a soldier. This also is the model used in the family by parents who emphasize hierarchical authority and clear limits.

By way of contrast, what can be called a strategy of control relies less on enclosure and confinement than on constant communication, less on clear rules than on shifting possibilities, less on hierarchy than on intimacy, less on acknowledged surveillance than on the denial that it is necessary (because of trust), and less on the finished product than on the ongoing processes of shaping “inmates.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in this model, there is no “finished product” or launch into self-discipline. This new model of shaping corresponds well to what I see going on within the professional middle-class families. And, as has been implied, this model is quite different from the (older, disciplinary) approach to child rearing found in middle- and working-class families who understand and experience the past, present, and future quite differently than do the more privileged parents.

Most investigations of the new model of control, and especially of its uses within the fields of criminal justice, refer to the state or occasionally the community as a smaller unit of analysis.<sup>25</sup> However, I suggest that these concepts of control and discipline might be an interesting medium through which to contrast parenting practices in different social classes. In so doing I link fam-

ily “styles” to broader cultural trends and suggest that the family is not all that different—or distant—from other institutions with authority over, and involvement in the shaping of, contemporary subjects, including the criminal justice system.<sup>26</sup>

### Brief Overview

I divide this investigation of parenting strategies into two parts. In part I, I demonstrate how parenting out of control emerges from the ways in which professional middle-class parents make sense of their position in the world. I show that although parents from the working and middle classes share some concerns with parents from the professional middle class—especially about safety issues and parental isolation—the more privileged parents have a quite distinctive (and sometimes inconsistent) approach to child rearing. In part II, I begin with a brief discussion of how the family has been ignored in discussions of surveillance technologies and then turn to how parents in different social classes enact child rearing in response to the new range of technologies for connecting to, constraining, and spying on their children. Once again, I demonstrate that in spite of some shared interests in new technologies, the professional middle-class parents approach these in ways that are quite different from their less privileged peers. The last two chapters offer some final thoughts. In chapter 8, I review the sources and dimensions of the two parenting styles discussed in the book, and I demonstrate how care can shade into control; in the conclusion, I consider the consequences of different ways to approach the care—and control—of teenagers.

### Coda

These days as I walk across the opulent lawns of the private, liberal arts college where I teach, most students passing by have a cell phone, seemingly glued to one ear. They are so deeply engaged in their conversations that they barely notice anyone around them, and they are startled when I call out a greeting. Often, it seems from the words I overhear, those conversations concern plans to meet a friend for lunch, for a study date, or to go for a run. But at least as often, it seems from the words wafting in the wind, these are con-

versations with “mom” or “dad.” How did it happen, I wonder, that college students became so willing to talk with their parents that they would call—or answer calls—en route to classes and the gym? This certainly wasn’t the case for the members of my generation, who dutifully made a call but once a week, and whose parents rarely, if ever, called us. Unraveling this mysterious new behavior—and the mysteries surrounding other forms of connection, as well as those of constraint and surveillance, found within the milieu in which my elite students were hatched—is what this book is about.