



Good Parents or Good Workers?



How Policy Shapes Families' Daily Lives

EDITED BY JILL DUERR BERRICK AND BRUCE FULLER



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Jill Duerr Berrick

and

Bruce Fuller

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FOREWORD

Policy makers and scholars have engaged in heated debates ever since the nation's welfare system was dramatically recast in 1996, especially on the question of how these reforms are touching the lives of parents and children. Too often these debates have simply reflected prior conceptions about the nature of poverty. Some look at the lives of the poor and say, "there but for the grace of God (or good luck), go I." Others look at the same reality and say, "I made it. Why can't they?" For those interested in a deeper understanding of poverty, we sorely need up-close studies of how the poor actually live, and how they cope with a lack of resources each and every day.

This book offers a wide, clear window into the lives of low-income families and shows how their pathways have been altered by welfare reform. The new requirement that mothers work in exchange for public assistance has produced new stresses in their lives, resulting in less time with their children and creating new work-related expenses for child care, transportation, and clothes. But the news is not all bad. As documented in this volume, these stresses are balanced, in many cases, by enhanced self-respect felt by women, serving to mitigate the possible negative effects of work on their children. Where both employment and family income have increased when mothers are able to find stable jobs or receive wage supplements from government the children appear to benefit as well.

What makes this volume especially valuable is the way it combines quantitative and qualitative data. We hear about the lives of these families from the parents themselves, through their own eyes. And their voices are compelling. Most of the mothers are simply exhausted from trying to juggle work and family. Moreover they tend to value their role as parents more than their role as workers. This produces enormous anxiety when they cannot find adequate and trustworthy child care or when their absence from home is extensive due to the need to work long hours, sometimes at more than one job. To improve the lives of these families will require not just a focus on work but on other supports: First and foremost good child care for their children. It also will require solid health care, shorter or more flexible hours, a higher minimum wage, or a more generous earned income tax credit. Although children are better off when they grow up with two

married parents, promoting healthy marriage may not be as important as encouraging good parenting by fathers and mothers alike.

Another striking fact is the extent to which the more things change, the more they stay the same. Welfare reform has not altered the lives of these families as much as its proponents would like to believe. They still have extremely limited resources and a multitude of social problems, from drug abuse to depression, which complicate their lives. Their children do poorly in school and still display limited life chances. When researchers randomly assigned one group of families to a work program and the rest to a control group, what is striking is how little difference interventions focused on encouraging or requiring employment made.

As this book goes to press, the Congress is still debating what to do about the welfare bill that was enacted in 1996 and which now needs to be reauthorized. The big debates are about how much funding to provide for child care, how many hours single mothers should be required to work, and the extent to which encouraging marriage should be a priority. Those interested in learning more about how such measures would affect the way low-income families actually live and their ability to cope with their daily realities will find much valuable material in this volume.

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Introduction

New Family Policy: How the State Shapes Parents' Lives

JILL DUERR BERRICK AND BRUCE FULLER

Parents in America, until quite recently, crafted their daily lives according to their own moral commitments and economic interests, free of government intrusion. Yet these lives, especially those led by poor and working-class mothers and fathers, have become the subject of sharp public debate over the past generation. Following closely behind, increasingly aggressive policies have been enacted aimed at improving how parents lead their lives at home or work, even where and by whom their children are raised. Americans have rarely been so divided over the government's proper role in "fixing" the practices of families that don't seem to fit the mainstream.

Contradictions abound. While most Americans continue to worship the classically liberal motto, "Don't tread on me," when it comes to government meddling in their own private lives, they are equally ready to reshape the employment or parenting practices of those who are impoverished or somehow different. In this opening chapter, we examine the suddenly public engineering of parents' lives, assessing its causes and detailing its policy manifestations.

Few question that powerful economic and social forces are at work. The starting question is how policy makers interpret these forces and mobilize public institutions to support or tinker with the lives of parents and children. Take, for instance, the resurgent feminist movement in the 1970s, prompting the question of whether women should focus on being mothers or also pursue careers. European states have long shared the responsibility and cost of child care, paid family leave, and have provided help for single mothers. But the private aspirations of women and the public sector's role continue to be debated in America.

Still the revolution in women's roles contributed to the government's ability to turn family welfare policy upside down. In 1996, for instance, President Clinton and the Republican Congress eliminated low-income mothers' entitlement of minimal cash assistance, guaranteed for some since

the Civil War. Being a good mother is no longer the moral imperative. The publicly sanctioned goal now is to turn mothers into workers. Raising one's infant or preschooler at home might be best for well-heeled families in the leafy suburbs. But for poor families, children should be moved into child care as their mothers search for a job. And the regulation of poor women's lives continues to intensify. As we finish this book, the Congress is debating a proposal, from a conservative president, under which the government would determine if taking one's child to the library or volunteering at the preschool is an allowable "work activity" to meet escalating employment requirements.

Certainly the steady incursion into parents' and children's lives is not explained by the victories of feminists, ironic as these dynamics have become. A growing public perception that millions of single mothers had grown dependent on welfare lent popular support to presidential candidate Bill Clinton's campaign slogan in 1992, "To end welfare as we know it." The wider push by New Democrats to move the party toward the center through "tough love" and "personal responsibility" proved enormously popular (DeParle, 2004). Indeed it was the political left that pioneered the supposition, back in the 1930s and then in the 1960s, that government "intervention" could improve the lives of poor families. And the booming economy of the 1990s provided necessary tax revenues to fund dramatic expansion of child care programs and allied work supports which contributed to shrinking welfare rolls and helped to legitimize more intrusive regulation of poor women's work and marital and child care behaviors.

Equally important, political conservatives have exhibited a new willingness to take the culture wars to Washington, shaking their Jeffersonian roots and crafting centralized policies that aim to right a society they believe is lurching toward moral decay. The domestic policy revolution—including welfare reform, child care legislation, child support enforcement, and new initiatives to encourage marriage—is as much about symbolic messages as it is about real economic and social support for families. Looking across these policy shifts, detailed later, the messages for women have become clear: Leave home, go to work, marry, and limit your child bearing. For men, the messages are a bit different. Men are urged, and now receive government incentives, to stay or head back home, get married, and exert themselves as responsible fathers.

These are obviously virtuous social goals. Few citizens or policy makers feel good about the dismal conditions confronting poor families in America. The starting questions are: How will policy makers frame the problem and how can government act efficaciously? The growing political will to engineer parents' moral beliefs and daily behavior implies a particular conception of the problem. Siding with President George W. Bush by voting for an even tougher set of work rules for mothers and against additional child care support in 2003, Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pennsylvania) said, "Making people struggle a little bit is not necessarily the worst thing" (Shogren, 2003). What he failed to mention is that the economy has only been creating