

**Strategic Parenting: Making the Middle Class Through
Distinction and Discipline**

by

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Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	iii
List of Appendices.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Chapter	
1. Background Literature.....	1
2. A Theory of Strategic Parenting.....	19
3. Research Methods.....	43
4. The Role of “Family Time” in Strategic Parenting.....	62
5. Orchestrated Achievement.....	73
6. Disciplined Self-Management.....	119
7. Cleft Habitus and Dual Habitus.....	164
8. The “Middle Class Gaze” and the Need for Recognition.....	182
9. Hidden Collaborations: Child Achievement and Parent- and Expert- Boosting.....	208
10. Conclusions, Discussion and Implications.....	217
Tables.....	231
Appendices.....	235
Bibliography.....	238

List of Tables

Table

1. Logic about Success vs. Parenting Strategy.....	231
2. Key Practices vs. Parenting Strategy.....	232
3. Annual Family Income vs. Parenting Strategy.....	233
4. Family Organization and Parenting Strategy.....	233
5. Parents Assess Kids' Innate Ability/Motivation.....	234

List of Appendices

Appendix

A. Thematic Codes Used for Analysis.....	235
B. Subjects List.....	236

ABSTRACT

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Parents play a critical role in shaping children's opportunities. In order to understand the role the family plays in reproducing and transforming the social world from one generation to the next, this research builds on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to develop a theory of strategic parenting, exploring how parents strategize to advantage their children.

Based on 47 interviews with parents in 25 white, two-parent, middle-class families in Ann Arbor, and ethnographic observation of three families, I conclude that parents followed two different patterns of strategic parenting, based largely on their middle class occupations. Parents with professional jobs were most likely to practice *orchestrated achievement*. These parents had learned through their career experiences that their children required *distinctive achievements* to succeed in life. They believed that children could best acquire distinctive achievements by developing their *passions and gifts*, which

parents felt responsible to help identify and foster through orchestrating an array of individually tailored and constantly shifting activities.

In contrast, parents with fewer credentials and less career autonomy were most likely to practice *disciplined self-management*. Through their career experiences, these parents had learned that their children needed to *work hard* to succeed in life. In order to succeed, they felt their children needed to develop *personal responsibility*, which parents tried to foster through enforcing systems of *discipline*. Parents also learned from their careers that children needed strong *social skills and networks* to succeed, and steered their children towards team sports in order to build both discipline and social networks.

In addition, two other factors shaped parenting strategies. First, professional parents raised with disciplined self-management were more likely to combine elements of both strategies. Second, couples who came from different professional or childhood backgrounds were also more likely to practice contradictory strategies.

Families practicing these two strategies were not viewed equally. Parents practicing disciplined self-management were more likely to feel judged and inadequate as parents. And both groups of parents were more likely to view children raised with orchestrated achievement as more “motivated” and “gifted,” and to view children raised with disciplined self-management as “lazy” or “unmotivated.”