



# Should Mom go back to school? Post-natal educational attainment and parenting practices

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## ABSTRACT

Although the relationship between educational attainment and parenting practices is well documented, it is typically examined at only one point in time. What happens if mothers acquire more education after the birth of their children: do they alter their parenting practices? Panel data models based on longitudinal data from ECLS-K indicate that changes in mother's educational attainment are positively associated with increases in parental school involvement, having books in the home, and participating in non-academic family activities, but not with attitudes toward discipline. Although post-natal maternal education does not change all aspects of parenting, our findings are broadly consistent with the theory of cultural mobility and provide insights into the extent of socio-cultural mobility in contemporary American society.

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## 1. Introduction

Social class is related to many aspects of individuals' lives, including parenting practices. From the classic works by *Kohn* (1963, 1977) and *Bernstein* (1971) to more contemporary research by *Lareau* (2002, 2003) and others, scholars have documented differences in parenting practices across social classes (*Farkas, 2003; Hoff et al., 2002*). This research typically views social class and parenting as static: studies in this tradition often examine the relationship between social class and parenting practices at a specific point in time. The implicit assumption in these studies is that parents' social class, and thus their approach to parenting, does not change substantially over the life course.

We re-evaluate that assumption. The modal sequence for young adults transitioning to adulthood is to postpone child-bearing until after the completion of formal education, but the proportion of young adults following that modal sequence has declined as life course trajectories have become increasingly variable (*Shanahan, 2000*). One particularly notable change has involved the timing of child-bearing relative to formal education. Today, more than a quarter of undergraduates at American institutions of higher education have dependents (*NCES, 2002*) and the share of American undergraduates who are single parents has more than doubled over the past 20 years (*Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen, 2010*). Given the intertwined sequences of schooling and parenting, do changes in mothers' educational attainment alter their parenting practices?

Previous research demonstrates that highly educated mothers and fathers parent differently from less-educated parents (c.f. *Attewell and Lavin, 2007; Carneiro et al., 2007; Hill and Stafford, 1980; Oreopoulos and Salvanes, 2009; Sayer et al., 2004*). These findings imply that exposure to education changes parenting behaviors and attitudes. If parenting behaviors and attitudes are a manifestation of cultural capital, these findings suggest that educational access leads to socio-cultural mobility over the life course. However, since the vast majority of previous research is based on cross-sectional data, it is difficult to separate the sources of educational attainment from its consequences.

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In this paper, we address this difficulty by tracing changes in mothers' educational attainment and parenting behaviors during their children's early elementary school years using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study's Kindergarten cohort. Since a substantial proportion of mothers in the sample continue to pursue education after their children are born, these data provide a unique opportunity to observe the extent to which parenting practices respond to educational attainment. After presenting cross-sectional models similar to those in the previous literature, we construct panel data models of the effects of changes in maternal education on change in parenting behavior. Unlike traditional cross-sectional models, our longitudinal models control for all characteristics of mothers and children that do not change over time. As a result, they generate relatively unbiased estimates of the effect of education on the parenting behavior of mothers who pursue post-natal education.

Our analyses suggest that post-natal maternal education influences several parenting practices which previous research has suggested are associated with children's academic success. In particular, we find strong evidence to suggest that post-natal maternal educational attainment increases mothers' involvement in their children's elementary schools, number of books in the home, and the frequency with which mothers and children engage in non-academic family activities. However, changes in mother's educational attainment are not associated with changes in attitudes toward discipline. These results provide new insights into the role of education in facilitating socio-cultural mobility.

### 1.1. Social class, education, and parenting

A long line of sociological research demonstrates a relationship between social class and parenting. While research in this tradition spans more than a century, employs diverse methods, and focuses on several different aspects of parent/child relationships, it has consistently reported large and robust differences between upper-, middle-, and working-class parenting practices (c.f. Lynd and Lynd, 1956; Gans, 1962; Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Kohn, 1963; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Hart and Risely, 1995; Bradley et al., 2003; Bodovski and Farkas, 2008). Lareau's ethnographic study of parenting practices of middle class and working class/poor families, in particular, has garnered much attention. Instead of examining specific parenting practices individually, Lareau (2002, 2003) describes class-based differences in parenting styles. She proposes that middle-class parents engage in a "concerted cultivation" style of parenting, which is exemplified by a deliberate cultivation of children's skills and talents, while working class parents engage in an "accomplishment of natural growth" style of parenting, which allows children to grow up in a more spontaneous manner. These differences in parenting styles help to reproduce class inequalities across generations. Lareau argues that concerted cultivation fosters a set of attitudes and behaviors among middle class children that are rewarded by institutions such as schools and thus facilitate their educational success.

Although previous studies rely on varying definitions of social class, a subset of this research tradition focuses specifically on the association between parental education and parenting practices, which is particularly relevant for our study. Time-use data from the United States and elsewhere indicate that highly educated mothers and fathers spend more time on average with their children than do less educated parents (Hill and Stafford, 1980; Sayer et al., 2004). Furthermore, there are important qualitative differences between the parenting practices of highly educated and less highly educated parents. Highly educated parents spend more time reading to their children than do less educated parents (Hill and Stafford, 1980; Huston and Aronson, 2005), and the children of highly educated parents spend more time reading to themselves and studying than do children of less educated parents (Bianchi and Robinson, 1997). Similarly, survey data suggest that highly educated parents have different approaches to parenting than do less highly educated parents. Oreopoulos and Salvanes (2009), for example, demonstrate that college-educated adults are less likely to favor spanking and other forms of corporal discipline than less highly educated adults.

Taken together, these findings indicate that parental education is closely related to parenting behavior. However, the nature of that relationship is less clear since parental education is associated with a host of factors that are likely also associated with parenting (including the practices and attitudes that parents learned from their own parents, family income and other economic and cultural resources, parental and child intelligence, motivation, and expectations.) Does formal education change the way individuals parent? Or is the relationship spurious, such that the same personal characteristics that lead individuals to pursue education also influence parenting behaviors?

Previous research on cultural stratification provides two different frameworks for considering these questions. Theories in the cultural reproduction tradition hold that schools primarily reproduce social inequalities, rather than create opportunities for social mobility (c.f. Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is perhaps the most fully articulated of these theories. Bourdieu argues that differences in family life and values lead children to develop "linguistic and cultural competencies" and "familiarity with culture" that are closely associated with their family's class background (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 494; see also Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Since educators and other socio-cultural gatekeepers typically come from relatively advantaged backgrounds, schools tend to recognize and reward the cultural inheritances that upper-class children share, rather than those shared by lower-class students (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lareau and Weininger, 2003). Upper-class cultural capital, therefore, facilitates school success for children from upper class families. In the process, it helps students from advantaged backgrounds acquire high-status careers and eventually pass their advantages onto their own children.

The cultural mobility model, on the other hand, emphasizes the possibility for individuals to acquire cultural capital outside of their families and use that newly acquired cultural capital as a vehicle for upward mobility. Drawing on Weber's (1968) work on status cultures, DiMaggio (1982) argues that an individual can acquire familiarity with the dominant culture

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