
Childcare, Choice and Class Practices

Middle-class parents and their children

Carol Vincent and Stephen J. Ball

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Childcare, Choice and Class Practices

How do parents find and choose childcare for their young children?

The contentious issue of childcare has enjoyed a recent and meteoric rise up the social policy agenda. The topic is frequently in the media spotlight, and continues to spark heated debate in the UK and around the world. *Childcare, Choice and Class Practices* is based on the findings of a substantive study which investigated the childcare markets and the choices made by middle-class parents in two London localities. In this account of the research the authors explore the complexities of the relationship between locality, childcare choice and childrearing. They highlight processes of social reproduction, the continuation of gendered responsibilities and conceptions of 'good' parenting.

The book considers the development of the UK government's childcare strategy from 1998 to the present day, and highlights the critical debates surrounding middle-class families' choice of childcare. In doing so, a number of themes develop, including:

- how parents balance paid work with the responsibilities of childcare
- what role modern fathers play in caring for and organizing care for their children
- how the childcare market operates, and what kind of care is available
- whether it is possible for parents to find care that complements their own views on childrearing
- the similarities and differences between middle-class fractions in relation to the care and education of young children.

This important study will be of great interest to anyone concerned with understanding the development of the childcare market and the fears and aspirations of middle-class parents.

It offers invaluable insights into a complex subject, and will be essential reading for all those working in or studying early years provision and policy, and students of sociology, class, gender and work.

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To Madi and Daniel

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All material has been reworked for this book.

Abbreviations

ACORN	A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods
B	Battersea
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
CACE	Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education
CPI	Consumer Price Index
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
HE	Higher Education
HMT	Her Majesty's Treasury
IT	Information Technology
LEA	Local Education Authority
NCT	National Childbirth Trust
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NDNA	National Day Nurseries Association
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
SN	Stoke Newington
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
WTC	Working Tax Credit

Introduction

Childcare today

MPs want affordable care for all

(Nursery World, 16 September, 2004, p. 8)

Parents pay inflation-busting cost of childcare

(Press release dated 27 January 2005 from the Daycare Trust on their annual cost of childcare survey. Over the last year costs had risen three-and-a-quarter times the rate of inflation.)

Nurseries peg pay to NMW (National Minimum Wage)

(Nursery World, 5 August, 2004, p. 4)

Day Nursery market grows 20 per cent in one year

(Nursery World, 17 March, 2005, p. 4)

Private nurseries are valued at £2bn

(Nursery World, 12 August, 2004, p. 4)

This is a book about childcare, but it also a book about families, social class, gender, education markets and education and social policy. We explore these wider issues through a focus, through the lens, if you like, of the choice and management of childcare arrangements. Thus this book has three interrelated themes. One highlights substantive issues around childcare choice: how parents make a choice, their views on different forms of childcare, the relationships they develop with carers, how they ‘juggle’ the demands of their children with other domestic and workplace demands, and how mothers and fathers experience this ‘juggling’ to different degrees. In a second theme we analyse policy around childcare, and situate it within a wider policy context of markets and education. A third theme highlights a set of sociological concerns around social class, particularly the middle classes, and gender, particularly the gendered division of domestic labour and childrearing. These three themes may seem to

appeal to very different audiences, but we argue that they need to be thought about together, in order to gain analytical purchase on the role of the state, the market and the family in caring for young children, and the classed and gendered nature of 'family practices' (Morgan 1996).

We first discussed researching childcare in 1997. At the time it was possible to agree with Denise Riley (1983) when she noted that childcare was not seen to be a glamorous or exciting policy issue; indeed 'the very term "child care" has a dispiriting and dutiful heaviness hanging over it ... it is as short on colour and incisiveness as the business of negotiating the wet kerb with the pushchair' (cited in Brennan 1998, p. 3). However in the eight years that have passed between our preliminary discussions and the writing of this book, childcare has been transformed as a policy issue. It has shot up the government agenda, with the National Childcare Strategy appearing in 1998, and the first ever Ten Year Strategy for Childcare being published in December 2004. Childcare became a key issue in the 2005 general election, receiving the attention of the Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Chancellor Gordon Brown, both eager to draw the electorate's attention to the expansion in childcare places, the government's attempts to increase parents' access to 'affordable, good quality childcare' (Baroness Ashton, cited in Mooney 2003a, p. 112), the promises of moves towards a universal offering of childcare through Children's Centres, as well as a number of other changes (increased maternity leave, increased levels of child tax credit: see Chapter 3) which will result in what Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, called 'a welfare state that is truly family friendly for the first time' (Brown 2004). As we discuss in Chapter 3, childcare as a policy issue has been the subject of increased attention under New Labour because of its apparent ability to address a number of New Labour concerns: increasing social inclusion, and in particular combating child poverty, revitalizing the labour market, and raising standards in education. The provision of childcare is seen as having the potential to bring women (particularly those on benefits) back into the workforce, modelling childrearing skills to parents understood as being in need of such support, and giving children the skills and experience they need to succeed in compulsory education. It thus plays a key role in both New Labour's economic agenda (the maintenance and improvement of a skilled workforce) and its social agenda (especially its pledge to end child poverty).

As indicated earlier, a study of childcare also encompasses a number of other policy issues, in particular, the respective roles of the private and public sectors in providing social provision. Until the advent of Sure Start¹ and Children's Centres, public sector provision in childcare was under the auspices of the local authorities, aimed at three- and four-year-olds only, and was usually minimal (although with considerable variations between authorities). Thus the expansion in childcare places during the 1990s has been in the private and voluntary sectors, with particularly rapid expansion in the former, leaving the UK with a large private sector relative to other modes of provision (for more details, see

Chapter 3). The OECD has raised questions about the likelihood of achieving accessible and equitable care in a private market (OECD 2001). However, the current government shows no signs of departing from its commitment to a mixed economy of private, state and voluntary sector provision.

Whilst this blaze of policy activity and recognition is clearly welcome, the question of why childcare as an issue took so long to come to prominence also deserves attention. Jennifer Marchbank (2000) notes that feminists have been slow to organize around childcare issues, unlike the sustained attention given to equal pay, or abortion rights. She argues that there are a number of reasons for this: that in the late 1960s and early 1970s some feminist writing displayed an ambivalent attitude towards motherhood, seeing it as a source of women's oppression, that younger women activists may not have had children, and that motherhood itself leaves little time for campaigning. She further argues that women's views on 'appropriate' childcare are highly differentiated, and also that many women are ambivalent about seeming to relinquish family and domestic responsibilities which appear to be a source of female power.

Later chapters in this book show clearly the ways in which responsibility for children, and for organizing and managing childcare, continues to lie with the mother, illustrating the robustness and longevity of traditional gender roles. Indeed this became one of the key sociological concerns of the project. Initially focused more on the operation of the pre-school market and the ability of middle-class consumers to engage with that market, the experience of doing our first round of interviews led us to focus more attention on the gendered division of labour around domestic issues, the role of mothers and fathers in childcare and childrearing more generally, and the efforts made by parents to achieve a work/life balance with which they were more or less happy.

A convergence of theoretical interests led us to focus the research on middle-class families. We were interested specifically in ideas of class fractions within the middle class, 'in practices of distinction and closure' (Ball 2003, p. 175) *within* class groups, and the relationship between class and space. There was also a practical rationale for focusing on the middle classes, namely, that in order to access the private childcare market in inner London, families had to have the levels of income normally available through employment in middle-class professional/managerial occupations.

We turn now to consider the structure and content of the book.

The structure of the book

This introductory chapter explores why we see childcare as being a key issue in both contemporary policy making and sociological terms. **Chapter 2** describes the qualitative research on which this book is based. We consider the respondents in terms of their education, occupations and place of residence. The two London settings for the research – Battersea and Stoke Newington – are described and the reasons for choosing them explained. The literature on

the gentrification of urban areas, particularly work on the gentrification of London by Tim Butler and colleagues, is used to justify the importance placed on locality in the study. The final section of this chapter contains a reflexive account of the research process. **Chapter 3** focuses on policy. It draws on theoretical frameworks offered by Esping Anderson which seek to analyse and compare post-industrial welfare regimes. Such analyses emphasize the extent to which childcare in English-speaking countries, particularly the USA and the UK, has been regarded as a private, not a public issue, one to be resolved by individual households (except for those in extreme situations of need). In the second part of the chapter, we ask what effect the vigorous policy focus on childcare, maintained by the UK government, is having. Thus we consider the development of New Labour's National Childcare Strategy, from its birth in 1998 to the time of writing (summer 2005), noting that the major role played by private sector 'for-profit' providers is unlikely to change. We link national developments with the provision in our research localities. We identify the characteristics of the two local childcare markets in Battersea and Stoke Newington, and consider how the development of provision on the ground relates to the aspirations of national policy makers. In **Chapter 4** we turn to consider class theory and analysis, focusing on the middle classes. The key debates here turn on the extent to which there is a unitary middle class or a set of distinct fractions marked off from one another by values, lifestyle and political preferences and social relations; whether, if these differences are significant, they relate back to occupational divisions – professionals and managers, state- and private-sector employees and so on. In this chapter we briefly review the literature in this field, and argue that a focus on individuals' occupations alone is too blunt an instrument to provide a correlation with values, attitudes and lifestyles. Drawing on our earlier focus on locality (see Chapter 2), we consider how this can be productive in mapping nuances of difference and similarity between middle-class fractions.

The following chapters (5–7) go on to consider the differences and similarities between the middle-class respondents of Battersea and Stoke Newington, focusing in particular on their choice of childcare and education, but also considering the gendered divisions of care responsibilities within households. In **Chapter 5** we demonstrate the key roles of mothers in choosing childcare, and the sense of responsibility and anxiety that pervades the process. We also analyse the respondents' attempts to reconcile the demands of paid work and childcare, and consider the position of those within our sample who chose to stay at home full-time. Finally, we focus on the fathers, to try to understand their attempts at finding a balance between their work and family commitments. We conclude that despite the social and economic advantages of the respondents, despite the cultural power of the 'new man', that these mothers and fathers are not in the main presenting a serious challenge to a traditional understanding of family relationships. In **Chapter 6** we explore parents' experiences of childcare and their relationships with carers, using data from both

parents and carers. The relationship has a potential fault line, as carers are required by parents, and also by their own occupational and professional cultures to show affection for their young charges, a very intense form of emotional labour. However, the interaction is also a financial one, and love and money are at times in tension with each other. In this chapter we also consider the extent to which parents feel they can exercise their 'voice' and achieve a 'fit' of values between themselves and the carer concerning the care of the child. In **Chapter 7** we argue in accordance with Stephen Ball's (2003) earlier work that education is of prime importance to the middle classes. Educational success ensures social reproduction of the middle classes as a whole, and offers individuals access to the 'right' universities, and particular points of entry into the labour market. As such education is an investment against 'the fear of falling' (Ehrenreich 1989), a mechanism through which the middle classes can close themselves off from the working classes. In support of this argument we offer three types of settings with which middle-class families engage in search of social reproduction: nurseries, primary schools, and 'enrichment activities'. With regard to the first two we identify local differences between the middle classes of Stoke Newington and Battersea and the types of nursery and school with which they feel comfortable. Finally we draw attention to the role of the increasingly ubiquitous classes and drop-ins in music, sport, art, drama, and dance, and their role in 'making up the middle-class child'. In **Chapter 8** we review the issues arising from our study; in particular the role of childcare in attaining social advantage and in maintaining social divisions, the contribution of our work to the understanding of middle-class fractions, the effectiveness of a mixed-market system of childcare in satisfying families' needs, future developments in childcare policy and provision, and the view of contemporary gender relations which emerged from the research.

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