

“You Gotta Let Go if You Want to Hang On”

Intensive Parenting Among Middle Class Mothers Separated from their Children

This is a study of upper-middle-class mothers who sent their teenage children to an “emotional growth” school because of their out of control behaviors. The mothers construct their decision as not a choice but as necessary to keep their children safe. The nature of children and their responsibilities as parents left them no alternative. They see the period of physical separation from their children as one during which they become mothers in a fuller, deeper sense and an intimate psychological relationship between mother and child is restored. They see themselves as good or even the best of mothers. In contrast to poorer women living apart from their children, these mothers retain a self image as “good” mothers but do not challenge the “good” versus “bad” mothering ideology that shapes their experience. I make these points using evidence from an Internet site where these mothers and (fewer) fathers of the children share their innermost feelings and ideas about their children, their parenting and themselves.

Despite the potential for being stigmatized as bad mothers, the women I study here sent their teenagers away to a special residential facility. Using evidence from an Internet discussion site that both provided qualitative evidence and enabled me to generate quantitative measures of important variables, I examine their experiences both “from the inside,” as they themselves construct it, and from the “outside,” highlighting dimensions of their experience that were hidden from their view. Diana L. Gustafson (2005a: cover blurb) and others recently described how mothers who live apart from their children are “regarded as unnatural, improper, and even contemptible” and how the cultural construction of “good” versus “bad” mothers is both cause and consequence of this labeling. Despite all this, some few mothers with considerable financial resources and social power do live separately from their children. If economics is key, we would

expect their experiences to be very different from that of poor “bad” mothers involuntarily separated from their children, but if ideology and living apart are the crucial factors these mothers would be even worse since they are separated by choice from their children. I study such unusually circumstanced women. I examine a large sample of upper-middle-class North American mothers whose teenage children live in a special residential facility because of their “out-of-control” behaviors. I examine how these mothers construct their separation from their children. Central to their experiences are their understandings of the nature of children and of their obligations and dreams as parents. (In a separate article I analyze their response to stigma.) My findings both add to and refine current understandings of links between social class, gender, and the experience of parenting. After sketching the social class of these mothers and describing the facility, I discuss these mothers’ accountings for the separation, and their understandings of the nature of childhood and parenthood.

Because the full program costs well over \$70,000 (US) per year and takes at least two years, the mothers in this study are at least middle and likely upper-middle class. They include women who are, or are married to, doctors, lawyers, engineers, executives, and business owners. Since “access to economic resources and its influences on mothers’ experiences, objectives, and strategies is a significant but understudied dimension of mothering” (Arendell, 2000: 1199) this study helps fill a large gap in research.

The “school,” located in a very isolated part of the western United States, provides both an academic curriculum and more centrally an “emotional growth” component that, significantly, is also called a “curriculum.” The word implies a set of learning objectives and steps to attain them, interconnected and sequenced in such a way as to optimize progressive mastery of what has to be learned. The goals include developing maturity in managing one’s own emotions, being honest with one’s self and others, taking responsibility for one’s behaviour, and others.

In this article I refer to the facility as EG-School, highlighting its stated commitment to Emotional Growth. While called a “school,” the institution clearly functioned in ways analogous to aspects of the juvenile criminal justice system, and families were allowed to deduct “tuition” payments as a medical expense on their tax returns.

My evidence comes from a “Parents’ List,” an Internet site where only parents of current or former EG-School students raise and discuss issues they consider important.¹ I carefully analyzed a set of 2,000 consecutive posts, often lengthy, submitted in 2000-2001 by over 100 mothers, and I also read many thousands more from later. While these posts are often articulate, as we will see what is left unsaid is very significant. The mothers come from all across North America, and their children were mostly 15 or 16 when first sent to the School.

Gender and class interact in forming the matrix within which these women do their mother work. Most of them live in households with high incomes

earned by two spouses. Given the correlation between upper-middle class income levels and women being married, one significant class effect on their parenting was that they become members of households that could afford to even consider the school for their child.

As they see it, gender does not appear to be a significant determinant of the experience of these mothers. Nobody provided what might be called a feminist analysis of their experiences or situations, one based on recognition of a societal structure of gender inequality. Men as well as women participated and if we altered the pronouns and removed the poster's name, we would have difficulty in guessing the writer's gender. There was little patterned difference in what they wrote about or how they wrote, a fact noted with surprise on the List. While men might write about being "fathers" and women about being "mothers," the word "mother" was almost never used as a verb while "parent" was very frequently so used. Both women and men usually wrote about "parenting" their children. (On the differing connotations of the terms, see Davis, 1999.)

However, a second look showed gender to be a salient dimension, even if unrecognized on the List. Women made almost four times as many posts as men, evidence of their taking more responsibility for the parenting. Another significant gender dimension emerges from considering the gender not of the writer but of her or his child at the school. The top five posters were all mothers, and for four of these their child was a girl. There were about twice as many boys as girls at the school, so that four of the five top posters had girls there is not coincidental. (Statistically, the odds of this happening purely by chance are less than one percent.) Beyond mothers taking more responsibility for parenting in general they get more involved with daughters than sons, reproducing gender inequality.

Accounting for the separation

These women embrace the role of mother and construct the physical separation of their child as necessary to bridge the existing psychological and emotional chasm between parents and child; the child's life as well as the mother's deeper lasting relationship with her child required bridging that gap. "You gotta let go if you want to hang on." This line from an original poem submitted to the List expresses an understanding shared by the mothers. For them, sending their child to EG-School was not a choice but a last resort. Their commitment to the child's wellbeing meant that they were constrained to do whatever necessary to keep him or her safe. Over and over, messages say, "EG-School saved my child's life!" Often, this is elaborated and the message states that without the school, the child would likely either be dead or in jail, the two outcomes seemingly equally undesirable. For List members the crucially important "distance" that separated them from their children was not the physical and geographic one while the children were away at EG-School but rather the emotional and psychological estrangement that preceded it and in

effect made it necessary. The children had to be set apart in terms of geography in order to bring them closer to parents in all the more important ways.

Accounts of the child's behavior before going to EG-School regularly use the metaphor of hell, "our home was a living hell." Descriptions of the hell can be found throughout the List, from parents' first posts introducing themselves and seeking reassurance, to accounts of what children disclosed in "coming clean" at the school, all the way to reports from parents farther along the program about how their children have changed or how much they still have to work on. Before being sent to EG-School most of the children were "out of control," another frequently used phrase. The list is replete with reports of the following behaviors: persistent drug or alcohol abuse; profanity-laden diatribes directed at parents or (more rarely) other authority figures; outbursts of rage with frequent destruction of property; defiance of parental authority expressed in myriad ways such as driving recklessly, sometimes while underage and unlicensed and while high or drunk, or running away, or girls being sexually promiscuous. School problems were almost always part of the mix of unacceptable behaviors. There were frequent reports of the child's grades quite suddenly beginning a steep downward spiral after earlier years as a top student. In all these situations, the child's cheating, lying, and dishonesty was a central part of the "hell." Complicating this entire picture for many was that their child had been diagnosed with one or more of a half-dozen different conditions such as Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), or others, and had had sometimes many years of medication and counseling. Each individual teenager had a unique story, of course, but parents often responded to some new parent's story by claiming that the newcomer's child was just like their own.

While extensive descriptions of children's undesirable conduct were common, explanations of that behavior were more rarely offered and then sometimes only in almost off-hand comments. "She became the brat I made her," wrote one mother without further elaboration. A few pointed fingers at others, especially ex-spouses, or mentioned their child's inherited predisposition to alcoholism or other addictions. Most parents described extensive but fruitless efforts to find explanations for their child's behavior. These statements illustrate the "selective denial" (Gustafson, 2005b: 42) that women can use to resist being labeled by self or others as a bad mother. Anxiety, pain, worry, exhaustion, fear—terms such as these were in nearly every account of the period before the child started at EG-School. For many, the day they had their child taken away was "the worst day of their lives."

Few can be unaffected by the message that children are products of their parenting. Mothers especially are likely to be judged by reference to a cultural ideal that sees a good mother as "preternaturally attuned to her children's needs" (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998: 6), and "omnicompetent, omnipresent, benevolent and selfless" (Davis, 1999: 251). Avoiding in-depth discussion of

reasons for the child's misconduct is one way mothers (and fathers) can maintain acceptable self-identities. EG-School validated the mothers as good parents by emphasizing that many of the children come from homes where siblings were high-achieving and well-behaved. "We may not be perfect parents but we are good enough and we do everything we know how to save our child," was a conspicuous theme.

If the parents are normal and good enough and their children are not to be blamed (see below), then how account for the problems? One way was to portray the child as unusually special. One parent used the phrase "severely gifted" and referred to "the problems talented kids face who don't fit the expectations of others." Another tack was to describe the difficulties kids faced in growing up today with bureaucratic schools, pervasive media images of violence and materialism, and easily available drugs, and then to admit that "we couldn't keep our child safe." Sending him or her to EG-School was necessary to keep the child safe, the *sine qua non* for any success as a parent. In the mothers' view this was their way of embracing the role of parent, with all the responsibility that implied for self-abnegation and sacrifice. List members adamantly reject any suggestion that they abdicated their parental responsibilities.

We didn't send our kids away to get fixed or throw up our hands saying "I don't know what else to do with him/her, you do it!"

Though nobody on the list recognized it, the program at EG-School can be seen as a systematic attempt, in a safer setting, at the "concerted cultivation" of their children characteristic of middle as opposed to working class parents. (Lareau, 2003).

The good child and parenthood as moral transformation

Sociologist Sharon Hays (1996) asked mothers of preschoolers to describe the differences between a "good" and a "bad" child, and was told repeatedly that there was no bad child. By their very nature children were good. This was also the view of parents in this study. Despite their children's often illegal, destructive, violent, and dangerous behaviors, parents did not see them as evil or bad. They had made bad choices but there was a distinction to be made between the child and his or her behavior. The children were not written off. These parents, confronted with the undesirable behavior, focused on the potential within their child and sought a way to nurture the good they assumed was present. Faith in the good child, the "emotionally priceless even if economically worthless child," (Zelizer, 1985), the "sacred child" (Hays, 1996), was pervasive. The mothers accepted responsibility to give the child life not just in a physical sense but in a fuller sense of giving him or her the foundation to have a meaningful, satisfying, fulfilling life of his or her own. A lasting deep relationship with parents would be part of such a life. Repairing and strengthening the mother-child bond that had been shattered by the child's behavior before EG-School was

a reason for sending their children to this school, although getting the child somewhere safe was a more urgent reason.

Our kids are not defective... They just hurt.... And their (and our) hurts are ... being healed.

Parents proudly reported successes to the List, eliciting congratulations from other members who used positive outcomes to keep up their own hopes and faith in the program, in themselves as parents, and in their children. The language of new life for the child is very frequently combined with a statement that “EG-School gave me my child back” and the two formulations are intermingled as if one implied the other. It is as if for these parents, a “new life” for the child necessarily implied a restoration of the parent/child relationship.

“Dominant representations of women’s character.... so tie women to caring, and in particular to caring for their own children, that it becomes unthinkable for a woman not to act in a responsible way toward her child—to be an irresponsible mother” (McMahon, 1995: 159; Gustafson 2005b). There is abundant evidence on the list to support but also to qualify this claim. The women certainly draw upon such cultural representations in constructing their identities. They sent their children to EG-School because they cared; because they cared, they knew they were good mothers. However, fathers on the List too endorsed this view of parenting and, like mothers, applied it to both women and men. (But of course, fewer fathers participated.) If we study women only, we are blind to at least some men’s receptivity to similar cultural messages.

Some mothers on the list argued that they were not only good mothers but even better than others precisely because of the difficulties they faced to save their children. In a study of another group of middle to upper-middle class mothers who encountered unanticipated roadblocks on their parenthood journey, Helène Ragone (1994, 1997) showed how infertile women who hired surrogates to have babies for them came to see themselves as mothers in a more fundamental sense than if they had given birth. The baby was conceived in her heart before it could be conceived in the surrogate’s womb, was how they conceptualized this “deeper” motherhood. Similarly, some women in this study saw themselves as ultimately better mothers than those who hadn’t been tested by the detour and the struggle along the alternative route. The parents could take more satisfaction for standing by the child through the hard journey. “Like climbing a mountain, raising an EG-School child, brought deeper satisfaction because of the hard trial involved,” said one mother. “The harder they (kids) fell, the greater the rise,” wrote another. Another mother, describing a visit with her EG-School child wrote:

Our kids have matured so much, have come so far. I wish our other children had the ability, or the inclination to talk to us the way our EG-School kids do!

The mothers saw parenthood as an ongoing relationship, a continuing journey. A couple reporting that their EG-School son was entering college put "End of the Tunnel" on the Subject line of their post but started their message by writing, "But it's the start of a new journey." That particular post was greeted with a great deal of jubilation on the List because it encapsulated some of the most relevant and meaningful issues for parents. It highlighted the child's journey to redemption and new life through EG-School and other institutions. The son, two years clean and sober, was off to college after a childhood filled with ADHD and

- 1 suicide attempt
- 2 arrests
- 3 years of drug abuse
- 4 high schools
- 5 treatment facilities and EG-School
- 27 months away from home
- 2 frazzled siblings
- 2 almost exhausted parents, and
a second mortgage.

Messages such as this one had a very important role in enabling mothers to allay any doubts they might harbor that they were doing the best for their children. They justified their sending their child away to EG-School and gave them hope for a successful outcome. Among the many congratulatory replies was one from a mother who said she would keep the message and read it over and over for inspiration.

Gendered parenting?

Hays described mothers of preschoolers who believed that children by their very nature required intensive parenting. Because they considered men incompetent as parents (Hays 1996: 101-103), by default they were committed to intensive mothering. This study provides evidence both to confirm and to question some aspects of Hays' thesis. We have already noted that parents here wholeheartedly accept the "sacred child" ideology. However, there is little evidence that women in this study consider men, as men, incompetent parents. Some mothers reported they had earlier believed this but had changed their understanding. There is no patterned assumption on the List that mothers make better parents. Perhaps the ages of the children involved, teenagers in this study as opposed to preschoolers in Hays' research, is one reason for the difference. A more likely explanation, however, is that given the challenges and problems their children presented, mothers could not assume the unquestioned identity of competent parent. If anything, the children's "struggles" raised doubts about the competence of all involved, mothers as well as fathers.

Despite this evidence of mothers explicitly rejecting the assumption

that women make better parents, one likely factor contributing to the gender inequality in participation on the list already noted is the implicit notion that “mothering” more than “fathering” requires the physical presence of one’s child. This long-established “separate spheres” ideology shapes the experiences even of the “successful” relatively well-off women in this study. Being physically separated from their children is much more a threat to the identity of a “good mother” than to that of a “good father.” Thus with more to lose, the women were more involved in maintaining their mother status and identity; communicating on the List was one way to do that. In the process, they reproduce the cultural construction of mothers as either “good” or “bad,” while their social class advantages and a safe setting allow them to position themselves on the “good” side; they never challenge the accuracy of this too simple binary. Even while rejecting the understanding of parenting as women’s work, these mothers do not transcend the cultural construction of “good” mothering.

Other explanations may be proposed for the different rates of participation on the list. Deborah Tannen (1990) argued that women’s communication patterns emphasize “rapport” while men’s stress “report,” but her critics have documented that both women and men are capable of using either style and that which one they use is a function of power in a given situation (see Kimmel, 2000: 12ff). It might be argued that women are more likely to engage in “emotion work” of the type that leads them to connect with others through the list and to seek emotional intimacy through sharing their stories (Hochschild, 1982). Notice, however, that any such alternative explanation of men’s lower participation rates on the List ultimately resorts to saying that a structure of gender inequality is still operative, only in some other way, affecting if not effecting the lives of these middle-class and professional mothers. Exceptional in being middle-class mothers separated from their children, they are the exceptions that prove the rule about the power of ideology.

¹All the evidence in this chapter that is not otherwise attributed comes from parents’ posts to the list. Longer quotations are indented while shorter phrases are included between quotation marks.

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