Good Parents or Good Workers?

Good Parents or Good Workers?

How Policy Shapes Families' Daily Lives

Edited by

Jill Duerr Berrick

and

Bruce Fuller

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GOOD PARENTS OR GOOD WORKERS?

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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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