

Caring for children in lower-SES contexts: recognizing parents' agency, adaptivity, and resourcefulness

Monica E. Ellwood-Lowe^{1*}, Gabriel Reyes², Meriah L. DeJoseph², & Willem E. Frankenhuis^{3,4}

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, United States

² Graduate School of Education, Stanford University, United States

³ Evolutionary and Population Biology, Institute for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Dynamics, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

⁴ Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security, and Law, Germany

* corresponding author:
mellwood@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract. From public policy to the social sciences, parenting in low-resource contexts is often viewed through a lens of deficit—there is a focus on what parents should be doing differently. We challenge this idea, highlighting the deliberate and rational choices parents with low socioeconomic status often make to navigate their circumstances and give their children the best lives possible under significant constraints. These parenting decisions may go beyond simply ensuring children's survival in harsh contexts; in some cases, they might give children the best shot at upward mobility given their constraints. This view broadens our scientific understanding of good care, and implies that children may be best served when resources are spent on meeting families' needs, rather than instructing parents on how to care.

Under the United States 14th Amendment, we are shielded from government intervention in our privacy, autonomy, and the sanctity of parent-child relationships. But there is an important exception: parents can lose the right to direct care for their children if they are deemed “unfit.” What does it mean to be a fit parent? In the courts, a key criterion is whether the parent is meeting the child’s basic needs, such as safety and nutrition. Yet this determination may be less clear than it appears at face value. Should a parent struggling to make ends meet lose their parenting rights? Does parenting in under-resourced contexts always mean parenting *worse*? Unfortunately, in the courts and in the popular and social scientific narrative, the answer has been—implicitly or explicitly—yes.¹

Here, we argue that this conflation between low socioeconomic status (SES) and worse parenting overlooks ways that parents in low-SES contexts often navigate immense barriers to provide for their children. We offer evidence that low-SES parents are not only generally making rational decisions given their constraints, but that sometimes forms of parenting viewed as deficient are actually deliberate, adaptive decisions parents make to best care for their children. These forms of parenting can equip children with skills for surviving in low-SES contexts *and* for thriving more broadly.

The idea that children need skills tailored to their contexts is, of course, not new. Longstanding theories in biology propose that experiences (whether positive or negative) early in life prepare individuals for knowledge and strategies they will need later in life.²⁻⁴ In neuroscience, brain plasticity is thought to allow individuals to adapt to a multitude of contexts.⁵ And in anthropology and developmental psychology, the human life cycle is recognized for its extended childhood, which affords children years for learning, while they depend on more experienced parents and peers.⁶

Building from these cross-disciplinary theories, we examine parenting in lower-SES contexts. We begin by reviewing differences in parenting across SES strata. How do wealthy, highly-educated caregivers parent compared with those who are lower SES? Next, we point out the widely accepted difficulties of caring for young children in lower-SES contexts, and the dominant academic theories that explain how this might lead to different—and, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, *worse*—caregiving behavior. Finally, we offer evidence that some of these presumed parenting deficiencies may actually be adaptive not only for caregivers given their constraints, but also for their children within and beyond the challenging contexts they must navigate.

To be clear, appreciating the adaptive decisions of lower-SES caregivers is not meant to justify the status quo. We believe society has an obligation to make every effort to ensure all families have access to the resources they need to thrive. In fact, by framing our understanding of parenting in constrained contexts as a display of resilience, adaptation, and rationality, the policy focus shifts from training them to behave differently to alleviating the material barriers families face.

Ultimately, understanding how care looks across contexts is critical not only for building out an accurate social science of caregiving; it is necessary for ensuring low-income parents are treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. We highlight the agency of lower-SES caregivers, and the resourceful, clever, and valuable ways in which they choose to raise their children in a highly unequal society in which they struggle to meet their family’s basic needs.

For decades, researchers have characterized differences between how caregivers with low and high SES parent. For example, compared to higher-SES parents, those with lower SES tend to appeal more to authority and talk less conversationally with their young children. Lower-SES parents are more likely to begin parenting younger, or out of wedlock; they are more likely to participate in intergenerational parenting, with more people living in the home. Of course, these coarse comparisons oversimplify the massive variation within and across SES (e.g.,^{7,8}). Yet these findings have been highly replicated and sometimes widely publicized. We describe a few of these more fully below, and return to their significance for children in later sections.

In lower-SES households, there tends to be a greater emphasis on authority and conformity and more reliance on directive or authoritarian parenting.^{9,10} A child is more often expected to follow rules without questioning them, and to conform to the expectations of the family. Conversely, higher-SES parents often invite open dialogue and negotiation. They are more likely to nurture their children's autonomy in the context of authority; rules are subject to discussion rather than strictly enforced, leading to a parenting approach that is conversational and sparing in the use of punishment.¹¹

Similar differences show up in verbal interactions with between parents and children. All parents need to direct their children's behavior, but higher-SES caregivers are more likely to do so indirectly through questions or statements ("Do you think you can tie your shoes?", "I'd love it if you could tie your shoes.") while lower-SES caregivers might rely more on imperatives ("Tie your shoes."). Higher-SES caregivers also talk more overall with their young children, saying more words to their child throughout a day.¹² These parents are more likely to engage with their children as conversational partners, even before children are old enough to have much to say back.

In addition, while higher-SES households often conform to the stereotypical American two-parent household model, lower-SES households can be more socially diverse and complex. A child might live in a household with only one parent, but also with a grandparent, an aunt, cousins, or other extended family. Sometimes referred to as "crowding" or "chaos," this rich environment more common in lower-SES households might also be beneficial for the development of certain kinds of skills (e.g., greater social attunement and collaboration).¹³ Later, we return to some of these observed differences to ask how they affect children. First, we turn to academic proposals for why these differences exist at all.

Two dominant frameworks have offered researchers a lens with which to view SES differences in parenting: the *Family Stress Model* and the *Investment Perspective*. Both of these approaches emphasize the negative consequences of low SES for caregiving, but, as we review later, both may overlook differences that are positive or adaptive.

Originally developed to explain the behavior of rural White families facing economic hardship as a result of the Great Depression, the Family Stress Model proposes that barriers to economic or social wellbeing (e.g., reduced income) lead to the experience of pressure (e.g., economic strain), which in turn results in higher levels of distress for the parent.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ This distress might affect their parenting by leading them to engage in more harsh discipline, for example, or by reducing their bandwidth to organize their child's activities.

Nevertheless, different caregivers may be affected by different stressors, and respond to even the same stressors in different ways. For example, Black parents may be particularly likely to experience barriers related to racial discrimination. By contrast, recent Latine immigrants show less sensitivity to low incomes, perhaps as a result of having a different basis for comparison.¹⁵ Yet, the stress migrant parents feel post-migration does seem to impact their parenting.¹⁸ More highly educated parents today feel more stress related to their role in cultivating their child's achievement, for example, whereas less educated parents feel more stress related to providing for their child's basic needs.¹⁷

The other model—the Investment Perspective—is mutually compatible with the Family Stress Model, but it focuses less on stress or pressure caregivers experience. Rather, the Investment Perspective emphasizes that having fewer resources leads parents to invest less in their children.¹⁹⁻²¹ This reduced investment could take the form of material resources, such as books and toys, or the form of other resources, such as cultural experiences (e.g., trips to a museum), quality of interaction, and sheer time. It may be difficult empirically to discriminate between the Investment Perspective and the Family Stress Model. If families experience an increase in resources and also change their parenting (e.g., more joint activities), it is hard to distinguish whether this change results directly from the resource change, or is driven by a reduction in the parents' stress as a result of their increased access to resources.

Still, there is plenty of indirect support for the plausibility of the Investment Perspective. For example, when children were randomly assigned to Head Start, their parents began to change their behavior at home—engaging in more cultural, literacy, and math activities.²¹ Perhaps having one more resource at their disposal (childcare) led caregivers to invest more in their children in other ways. Similarly, a longitudinal study showed that changes in family income were related to later changes in the quality of children's home environment over time.¹⁶ On a community level, the introduction of a free book vending machine in a neighborhood with little access to books led parents to engage more in reading activities with their children.^{22,23} Evidence from cash transfers also suggests that parents often use the additional capital to invest in more resources for their children.²⁴

These two models make sense at face value: with fewer resources, parents have fewer tools, and are less buffered from stress. But they also paint the role of lower-SES parents in overwhelmingly negative terms, implying that the pressure these caregivers face impairs their parenting, or that they are simply investing *less* in their children. In other words, they share an underlying assumption about parenting in the context of social and economic barriers as implicitly deficient, compromised, or disrupted. As we argue here, this is not the whole story. We need a complementary perspective that explicitly acknowledges and leverages the agency and resourcefulness of parents in low-SES conditions that promote their children's growth.

Listening to the voices of low-income caregivers themselves often reveals the conscious and deliberate ways they navigate their resources and make parenting choices. Their stories highlight caregivers' agency even in the face of systemic and structural barriers that erode opportunity.

A striking example comes from in-depth interviews with teenagers who chose to have children early and out of wedlock—something which public messaging often condemns.²⁵ But rather than paint early childbearing as an ill-thought-out consequence of teenage desire, the stories of these young women highlight that it is sometimes a result of very real considerations about their own health, the health of their parents (who are better able to provide caregiving support while they are still healthy), and economic prospects.^{26,27} For example, from a purely economic standpoint, most of these women are able to start making more money when they turn 18; having a child several years before this allows them to lose fewer years of earning potential.

Women are also well aware of the health disparities their communities face, and might prefer to have children at a younger age given their own health prospects:

My 34-year-old sister is dying of cancer. Good thing her youngest child is 17 and she seen her grow up. My 28- and 30-year-old sisters got the high blood and sugar. The 30-year-old got shot in a store. She has a hole in her lung and her arm paralyzed. Good thing she had Consuela long ago. My 28-year-old sister wants a baby so bad. She had three miscarriages and two babies dead at birth.²⁶

As this poignant quote makes clear, the decision to have children early is not always driven simply by stress or disinvestment. Rather, in certain cases, it is a practical, strategic choice given the context.²⁸

Similar stories exist about parents' apparent disinvestment in their children's education. Why do fewer low-SES parents attend parent-teacher conferences?²⁹ The answer, again, is less simple than one of mere stress or investment. For example, when fathers have online arrest records, they tend to withdraw from public parenting activities, such as parent-teacher conferences.³⁰ On the surface, this may seem like a negative response—an unproductive response to the stress of the arrest record, for example, that might harm children. However, interviews with the fathers suggested that it was a deliberate decision to protect their children. With the advent of the internet, an arrest record, even for a conviction that is later dropped, can live on forever for the public to see. Thus, these parents may steer clear of contact with the school to minimize the chances that their child is negatively labeled or associated with their arrest record. People who live in neighborhoods with heavy police presence, or racial minorities who face discriminatory policing, may be more likely to be arrested, and therefore subjected to a permanent internet record.³¹ Thus, a behavior that on the surface looked like less investment or a stress response was actually a strategic decision rooted in their investment in their child; the fathers did not want their child to face judgment or discrimination as a result of their own online arrest record.

Moreover, sometimes literacy-focused activities look different in lower-income homes. To capture a child's home literacy environment, some common measures encourage researchers to count the number of books or magazines in a child's home.³² Yet one scholar who grew up low-income reflected on how many other ways her family promoted literacy outside of books—from playing scrabble, to co-creating verbal narratives, to learning to read through prayer and Bible study.³³ Thus, while families in many low-income neighborhoods have systematically fewer access to books in their surrounding area,²³ they may find other ways to promote the kinds of skills that are valued in school.

Descriptive quantitative studies also reveal parents' strategic responses to the barriers they face. For example, neighborhood danger is related to parents' level of harshness and severe discipline.³⁴ While research tends to find links between these parenting characteristics and the long-term development of internalizing and externalizing problems,^{14,35} some environments might demand more directive and non-negotiable instruction. In these cases, harsh discipline may be an effort by the parent to protect the child from immediate danger. One mother described the need to prepare herself and her daughter for encountering violence in their neighborhood:

Just keep her out of as many stressful situations as possible, but also keeping myself ready for an event, like, any event. I live in a dangerous neighborhood, the neighborhood I grew up in, so I know what can happen. I know that it's not the best of neighborhoods. I know that you can see anything at any time, and nobody will ever know you've seen it. It's kind of like just being ready for that, being ready for those conversations, being ready for those...events to actually happen. You know, we live in a world that nobody wants to shelter you from anything, especially now.³⁶

A behavioral misstep from a child in a dangerous neighborhood is more consequential than the same misstep in a different context, perhaps necessitating the use of stricter parenting.

Of course, even if caregivers are making the best of their situation, or at least attempt to do so, this doesn't necessarily mean their choices are also best for their child. The same applies to the choices high-SES parents make, of course; they too may engage in forms of parenting that, though well-intentioned, are not actually the best for their children, such as overparenting³⁷. Indeed, while many of these stories contradict the idea that lower-SES caregivers need to be taught or trained to do "better" given the resources available to them, they leave open the question of how these decisions ultimately affect their children. To put it simply: would children be better served if lower-SES parents were doing something different?

To pretend there is one obvious best way to parent in any particular context would be to minimize an indelibly complex issue. What counts as "best" depends in large part on our societal values and expectations about how children should develop and what kind of people they should become. But academic perceptions of ideal parenting do not always align with what the evidence shows works best for low-income children, children of color, or those facing intersecting marginalized identities.

Let's begin with a straightforward example. Parents in poverty are more likely to have their children earlier and out of wedlock.³⁸ As we have discussed above, this is sometimes a deliberate and carefully thought-out decision on the part of parents.²⁶ But does it ultimately harm children? Though the empirical record is mixed overall, several studies suggest that it does not. One study that focused on Black families in particular found that while Black children in high-income environments benefited from living in a two-parent household—they showed better educational performance—there were no benefits for those in low-income contexts.³⁹ Another study looking across race found that while divorce was linked to lower educational attainment for White children, this was not true for non-White children. In fact, the biggest impact of divorce on White children seemed to come from the sudden loss of financial resources.⁴⁰ One possibility

is that it is the effect of loss of resources that is harmful, rather than the family structure itself. Regardless of the mechanism, these studies make clear that encouraging young women in poverty to marry before having children—something which has been a target of policy over the years⁴¹—may be ineffective or even harmful, introducing another opaque barrier with which these young people must contend.

Other studies complicate the picture of the ideal parenting style. For example, authoritarian parenting—marked by a focus on authority and obedience⁴²—has been linked to negative socioemotional outcomes for White but not Black preschoolers.⁴³ Similarly, the use of physical discipline has been linked to more externalizing problems for White but not Black children.⁴⁴ In a cross-cultural study, authoritarian parenting practices were only associated with worse self-esteem among children from individualist (Western European), but not collectivist (e.g., Egyptian, Iranian, Indian) backgrounds.⁴⁵ While these studies compare across race and culture rather than SES, they show the effects of parenting style on child outcomes might depend on context.

An underlying assumption is often that appeals to authority are harsh; indeed, White upper-middle class parents often prefer to give choices or allow for negotiation on disciplinary issues, and only appeal to authority as a last resort. But for parents in some contexts, appeals to authority may be more aligned with warmth and care. For example, Black children are much more likely than White children to face a set of systems and societal structures that do not work for them, limiting their safety and opportunity as a result of historical legacies of slavery and racist policy.⁴⁶ In these contexts, in which children must learn how to contend with injustice, their parents may be offering care by steadfastly ensuring their obedience. Supporting the idea that children are sensitive to caregivers' intent and not just their actions, a study of Latine teenagers growing up in more violent neighborhoods found they actually viewed *less* authoritarian parenting as worse parenting, since it failed to respond to the lack of safety in their environments.⁴⁷

Indeed, parents with marginalized identities who didactically prepare children for encountering bias might give their children advantages later on. Converging evidence points to the benefits of messages about racial discrimination and preparing children for bias for Black children's psychological and educational outcomes.^{48,49} The benefits of racial socialization are also evident for Latine children.^{50,51} For these children, racial socialization helped to develop a "secure base," which in turn may promote healthy parent-child attachment.⁵² Yet this parenting profile would clearly not have the same value for an upper middle-class White parent, where preparing to understand racial discrimination is not crucial for a child's success (though it helps them to become informed citizens⁵³). This is an example of parents going beyond simply fostering children's success in their home environments; these parents are helping to prepare their children for the school environment, but doing so through different means than those often observed in higher-SES households.

How parents talk to children to best promote learning needs to be reexamined as well. Language researchers have classically assumed that certain kinds of speech provide the most suitable input for children to learn from. Speech that is directive in nature ("Put your shoes on.") is thought to convey less helpful information linguistically than speech that follows the child's attention, comments, and labels ("I can see you don't want to put your shoes on."). Indeed, higher-SES families are more likely to use the latter relative to the former; the proportion of directives in these young children's

language environment negatively relate to their word learning over time.¹² But an in-depth study of directive use in lower-SES Black families found a different effect. For these children, in fact, the more directives they heard the *more* words they learned over time.⁵⁴

Finally, traditional parenting measures may fail to capture the breadth of strategies parents use to nurture their children. Sometimes surveys will measure parent responsiveness with questions like, “do you help your child with your homework?” But one close examination found that Latine parents who scored low in responsiveness on these forms of standardized academic measures were indeed quite responsive in unmeasured ways. For example, when they couldn’t help their child with something directly, they enlisted the help of others inside or outside the family.⁴⁷

Our takeaway here is that “good” care is often context-dependent. Of course there are dimensions of parenting that are uniformly positive or negative—all children need a baseline degree of safety and care. But some of the parenting behaviors that research has classically labeled “maladaptive,” “undesirable,” or “low quality” may in fact be perceived quite differently within the contexts where it happens most—and actually be positive for children in those contexts. Research shows that children’s *subjective* experience of events predicts their wellbeing^{55–58}; thus, even if a researcher deems an event or way of parenting stressful, it may not be experienced that way by a child.

Where do we go from here? As a society, we espouse the goal of helping lower-SES children, but we have much more divergent attitudes toward helping lower-SES parents. Even people who are lower-SES themselves often subscribe to the narrative that emphasizes individual responsibility and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.⁵⁹ Implicitly or explicitly, this narrative has permeated our approach to understanding parenting in lower-SES contexts; it has spurred interventions that focus on changing parents’ behaviors, more so than changing their contexts.

A number of these interventions are meant to train low-income people to behave like high-SES White people. But these individual-level interventions have a history of limited effectiveness or even backfiring.⁶⁰ A clear example comes from a multimillion dollar initiative that sought to teach couples in poverty communication skills in the hopes that this would lead to better marriage outcomes.⁶¹ Among couples with lots of resources, relationship satisfaction improved when husbands withdrew less from their partners’ demands, as the intervention promoted. But the opposite was true for couples with low resources. For these couples, meeting high demands with withdrawal led to *greater* relationship satisfaction. Perhaps withdrawal is adaptive when a couple doesn’t have the means necessary to address the demands, or perhaps there is a different mechanism at play. Regardless, this example points clearly to how individual-focused interventions can miss the mark, overlooking systemic challenges these families face.

Another example of how individual-level interventions may fail to have the desired effects comes from financial literacy programs. The goal of these interventions is to improve lower-SES parents’ ability to manage their finances, for instance, by reducing engagement in “risky” financial behaviors like taking out high-interest loans. Importantly, however, they often fail to consider the economic realities of low-SES families. When families take out high-interest loans, they may have no alternative. These financial literacy programs do not address the root cause of low-income families’

struggles with money. These programs are not sufficient to promote healthy financial behaviors; rather, access to cash is essential.⁶² Indeed, when you ask low-SES caregivers what their biggest parenting stressors are, they almost uniformly answer, “money.”⁶³

Perhaps not surprisingly, attempts to intervene directly on the systemic barriers families face are more successful. These interventions have two main strengths. First, they alleviate some of the stressors associated with economic and material hardship. Second, they give parents agency to focus on the exact needs they have to provide quality care for their children in *their* specific context.

Indeed, simply giving parents access to more resources may be the most effective intervention of all. For example, Universal Basic Income Programs have demonstrated considerable success in providing financial stability and overall wellbeing to low-income families (for reviews, see ^{64,65}). In fact, a study in rural Kenya found that giving people money improved people’s economic and psychological wellbeing more than a mental health intervention.⁶⁶ These types of systems-level approaches contrast with individual-level interventions that do not address the root of people’s needs. Converging evidence across randomized controlled trials of cash transfers, natural experiments, and analyses of policy changes points to the positive effect of increasing families’ resources on both parent and child wellbeing.^{24,67–70}

Access to childcare is another critical issue that needs to be addressed at the systems level. Childcare directly impacts parents’ ability to work and pursue education. Children from low-income families, in particular, benefit from high-quality childcare.^{71,72} However, for low-SES families, the high cost and limited availability of quality childcare options act as a major barrier. Thus, policy changes to make high-quality early childcare more universally accessible should be a priority.

While low-SES families clearly need access to housing, healthcare, high-quality education, and general financial support, we argue that parents also deserve agency to simply “play” with their child. When one study asked parents in poverty what would help them, they encountered the usual suspects of policy-related debate: housing, education, transportation, financial support.⁷³ But there were other dimensions that are less often discussed. One parent said:

Once a year...a program that could let a family go on vacation together, spend that quality time, because I think for a lot of us, our biggest issue is we’re working jobs...we just don’t have that time to really bond with our children.⁷³

This quote raises the question: who, in our society, is afforded the agency to simply play? A parent’s desire for a family vacation to bond with their children highlights the importance of play, something which is often denied to low-SES families with financial constraints or inflexible jobs. What if we envisioned a policy that freed parents from these shackles? For example, we could imagine government-subsidized family vacation programs, mandated family leave policies that extend beyond the usual scope of medical or parent leave (if such opportunities are available to low-income families), or initiatives that provide local and low-cost leisure opportunities, such as during summer when children are on break from school. We offer this perspective to challenge us to consider the value of leisure and play—as well as considering *who* has such access to such activities. These moments could promote connections among family members and

positively influence child development beyond merely satisfying the bare necessities of life.

The idea that optimal parenting might depend on a family's context, while contentious in the social sciences, aligns with theories from evolutionary biology. These theories first acknowledge, of course, that it is generally better for organisms to grow up in favorable conditions. However, *if* organisms are confronted with unfavorable conditions, they may benefit from acquiring knowledge and strategies early in life that prepare them for their adult environment.⁷⁴ Thus, children who see their caregivers worried about buying food, paying rent, fearing police, being discriminated against, and having little control over their circumstances, might acquire useful information needed to deal with their harsh and unpredictable realities; information we wish they didn't need to learn. The currency of biology is survival and reproduction, not wellbeing; and these two need not align. For instance, if children develop hypervigilance in a dangerous (family or neighborhood) environment, this might reduce their risk of physical harm, yet lower their wellbeing.

Yet the evidence we have discussed goes one step further. Low-income parents are not only preparing their children for surviving low-income environments; in some cases, they are cultivating environments in which their children can flourish. This evidence stands in contrast to pervasive views about low-income parents in popular culture and public policy. In the United States, it is estimated that 37% of children have Child Protective Services called on their behalf; for Black children—who are more likely to face racism and conditions of structural oppression—this estimate rises to 53%.⁷⁵ It is an open question to what biased social scientific accounts of “good parenting” have influenced the policy and practice that lead to these statistics.

As others have convincingly argued, poverty is a policy choice.^{76–78} Pandemic-era policies in the United States bring this point home. In 2020-2021, the United States offered a number of provisions that shrank the poverty rate (a threshold meant to represent the percentage of families not making enough money to meet their basic needs) to only 5%. In 2022, when pandemic-related provisions ended, poverty rose to 12%, perhaps the sharpest rise in decades.^{76–78} These data suggest that if the goal is for lower-SES parents to have resources, we could design policy that gives them resources. Yet despite this, many social scientists have instead focused on how parenting itself replicates inequity: they have focused on what they think low-income parents are doing wrong and should be doing differently.

The focus on individual parenting behavior has shifted attention from a structural problem toward individual-level solutions. The result is that theories of caregiving in the social sciences have often advanced certain forms of parenting as ideal—specifically those forms that are more common in upper-middle class White contexts.

We have argued instead that theories of caregiving should consider the broader context of caregiving—front and center, not as an afterthought. In the face of daunting barriers, caregivers often navigate their circumstances adaptively and resourcefully to promote their children's survival, success, and wellbeing. Practically, if we lose sight of this fact, we risk not only demonizing parenting styles more common among low-income parents, but also misallocating resources to individual-level solutions and even limiting a parent's basic rights. Indeed, these deficit-focused narratives may in some cases have created grounds for unfair legal rulings on fit parenting, excessive involvement of child

protective services, and other invasive intervention. Theoretically, we risk minimizing the adaptive and context-dependent nature of care to a unidimensional spectrum from “bad” to “good.” Both science and policy are best served by a capacious view of parenting in low-SES contexts—one which recognizes and leverages parents’ agency and strengths, while also addressing vulnerabilities.

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