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CHAPTER 1

"They Sure Don't Make It Easy for Parents"

Low-Income, Working Parents and Their Children

I first met Maria in September 2009. The young woman who greeted me at the door that day was obviously pregnant and, with her long black hair, glowing skin, and Beyonce t-shirt, looked all of sixteen years old. I knew from our phone screening, however, that Maria was twenty-one and in her third trimester of pregnancy. As I walked into the kitchen, the smell of breakfast and the murmurings of comfortable conversation filled the air. Gathered around a large Formica kitchen table, four adults, drinking coffee, and two toddlers were talking and sharing eggs, refried beans, and toast. The room fell silent as I entered. Maria quickly told them that I was from the university and there to learn about her pregnancy and plans for work. They smiled, offered me some coffee, and resumed their conversation. Maria gestured for me to join her in the living room, where it was quieter. This interview had originally been planned to happen with both Maria and Carlos, the baby's father, but the day before, Maria let me know Carlos couldn't join us because he had taken extra hours at the local supermarket, where he worked the deli counter.

Maria worked about thirty-five hours per week, making $8.50 an hour, in her job as a "Subway Sandwich Artist," a title whose irony wasn't lost on her. "Yup, that's my official job title—I make subs for people, and they call me an artist . . . really?" Maria had been on the job for only three months, and she was not yet sure how she felt about it. She enjoyed talking with customers, but she lamented that "it gets boring pretty fast." In addition to his job at the deli, her boyfriend, Carlos, was taking classes at the technical college in town with the goal of becoming an IT specialist. Between them, they cleared about $1,400 a month.

As Maria and I settled in for our first interview, I reiterated the main goal of the project—to learn how new parents juggle the demands of full-time work and caring for a baby—and reminded her that I would be interviewing her five times over the next year, so I could hear her story as it unfolded. After some small talk about how she had been feeling of late, I started by asking Maria a simple but loaded question: "How did you come to be an expectant mother at this point in your life?" Maria was not shy; she immediately shared that the pregnancy had been a surprise to her and her boyfriend. They had been dating for only eight months when she found out she was pregnant. She lived at home with her mother, her older sister, her sister's boyfriend, and her sister's two children. Carlos lived across town with his parents. As Maria noted, "We don't really know what we are doing at this point. The baby is due in four weeks, and the time is just flying by. In the beginning we both said we wanted to stay together because, you know, it's important for the baby to have two parents . . . but he sure isn't acting like that now." Maria was waiting for Carlos to "step up to the plate," in her words, and help plan for the upcoming year, but it wasn't happening.

I asked Maria if she had thought about how much time she planned to take off when the baby arrived. She told me that she hadn't talked with her boss about taking parental leave, nor had she really thought about how much time she would take off. "I am not sure what the rules are at work. I think I get some time off, maybe six weeks, but I am really not sure." She laughed. "Guess I should figure that out, huh?" I then asked her if she had any plans for who would care for the baby when she was back at work, "Not yet, I kind of just want to get through the birth, you know. I don't want to jump the gun; I want to have a healthy baby first."

With almost all the families we interviewed, stress about finances was an ever-present worry, and Maria was no exception. "I am always worried about money. I don't make a lot, and I pay my mom $250 a month for rent. Carlos and I talked about getting our own place but . . . then there is food, car payments, and clothes . . . my phone, gas for the car . . . whatever. I guess I am not good with money." When I asked her about the new expenses a baby would bring, she told me that her sister was giving her hand-me-downs, including a crib, clothes, and a high chair. "So, I am all set with that stuff." She then went on to raise the issue of child care. "I am thinking maybe Carlos can watch the baby when I am at work; maybe we can set up different schedules. Who knows if that will work? My neighbor has a family day care. I might try that, but she charges $2.50 an hour." Maria seemed troubled as she spoke about how she was going to find infant care that she could afford.

Hours later, after Maria had dutifully finished answering my questions and filling out all the survey questionnaires, we said our good-byes. I let her know I would be calling around the due date to see how things were going and to schedule our second interview. I thanked her for taking the time to share her story. She held up her hand and said, "No, no, I think I should thank you. All these questions have got me thinking about what I am heading into here. This is going to be . . . big, isn't it? So many decisions to make . . . kind of scary, but exciting. Time to get ready."[1]

Becoming a Parent

Maria and Carlos's story, along with the stories of many other mothers and fathers who are having a baby and attempting to hold down full-time, low-wage jobs, are often invisible. We tend to hear, instead, about professional couples coping with the wage penalties associated with new motherhood, or women whose careers are derailed by the "mommy track" or an unequal division of housework.[2] [3] [4] When it comes to less affluent families, however, Americans most often hear about poor mothers, often single, scraping by with government support and unstable work. How low-income, employed mothers and fathers manage the demands of full-time work and new parenthood is a story we know much less about, despite the fact that this group makes up the largest portion of working parents in the country.[5] The challenges that low-income parents face are not adequately represented by middle-class narratives because low-wage workers deal with work conditions and policies that differ sharply from those of their more affluent counterparts. Nor are their stories captured in the narratives of the poor, who are often in and out of the labor force for much longer periods. This book brings the unique stories of low-income, working families to light, describes what is and is not working for them, and demonstrates that aspects of parents' work—both mothers' and fathers'—directly contribute to or detract from the healthy development of their children.

The transition to parenthood is an incredibly destabilizing life event for most people. Roles and responsibilities are in flux, priorities shift, and life must be managed with less sleep and structure. Low-income workers, in particular, often face tremendous stress during this sensitive period. They must manage the pressures of work and parenting with low wages, unpredictable and often insufficient work hours, last-minute scheduling, and few family-friendly benefits—all factors that can adversely affect their well-being and inhibit their ability to be engaged and sensitive parents.

The transition to parenthood can be particularly daunting for workers in the United States, one of the most inhospitable countries in the world to have a child, especially for low-wage parents. The United States not only offers one of the shortest parental leaves in the world but is also one of the few countries, along with New Guinea, Suriname, and a few South Pacific island nations, that do not offer paid parental leave (although this is starting to change at the state level).[6] Consequently, low-income parents, who often have few financial reserves, have little choice but to return to work very soon after their child's birth. Among the families in this study, even those eligible for unpaid leave could rarely afford to use the full twelve weeks offered through the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). In addition, nearly every parent we talked to told us that twelve weeks did not feel like enough time to recover from childbirth, establish sleep and feeding routines, and set up child care before returning to work.

The resistance in the United States to adopting policies to support low-income, working families endangers the health and well-being of millions of children in this country during their first year of life, a critical time in human development. To put this point in perspective, it is estimated that during the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections form every second in the brain of a child.[7] Sensitive and responsible care from parents and other caregivers is the single most important ingredient for supporting this dramatic surge in brain development. Researchers at the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University refer to these early years as the "bricks and mortar of brain development";[8] the basic foundation laid during this time determines the architecture for all subsequent development. If new parents are faced with overwhelming financial, relational, and personal problems during the first few years of parenthood and, as a result, are less able to provide attentive and responsive caregiving, a child's foundation becomes fragile. It is not overly dramatic or sensational to acknowledge that the current state of affairs for low-income families poses a serious risk to the well-being of our society.

The conditions just summarized, as well as conventional wisdom, might lead one to believe that Maria and Carlos's story will be just another sad tale of young parents struggling to hold down their jobs and raise a child. Rarely do we hear of low-income, working families functioning well. Yet, as we will see, their story, like those of many in this book, demonstrates the resilience that makes it possible for low-income families to thrive. In this book, I challenge the popular and monolithic image of struggling, unhappy, and depleted parents toiling away in unfulfilling and low-wage jobs. Indeed, many of the families we came to know maintained stable relationships, reported high levels of well-being, and raised children with positive social and cognitive outcomes. And yes, there were others who struggled mightily. They languished in stressful and unfulfilling jobs or moved from one job to another, experienced high levels of stress and depression, and often had children who lagged behind in social and cognitive skills. The question of why some low-income, working families do well across the early years of parenthood while others so often struggle is central to this book, and one that will be answered, in part, by focusing on the role of work.

Understanding the Problem

What about parents' work matters for child development? How do work hours, wages, schedules, and policies relate to working mothers' and fathers' stress and well-being and, in turn, to the well-being of their children? And beyond these more structural aspects of work, how do job conditions—such as relationships with supervisors and coworkers, time pressure, or autonomy on the job—shape the lives of working parents, their ability to be warm and responsive parents, and, ultimately, their children's development?

I have spent most of my career studying these issues and, over the last twenty years, working with my students, have followed the lives of hundreds of low-income, working families about to have a child. We have had front-row seats to the momentous event of becoming a new parent. We saw severely sleep-deprived parents learn to change diapers, nurse, give baths, and love their new little humans. We also watched as they headed back to work, often weeks after birth, some depleted, some resigned, and almost all conflicted about how to be a good parent and worker. Throughout these years, we talked with them at their kitchen tables and on their back porches about their experiences.

The approach taken by this study charts new territory in a number of important ways. First, this project focuses explicitly on the work and family issues of low-income families, with no attempt to compare them to their more affluent counterparts. Much of the public narrative on social class in the United States highlights the inequities that exist between the "haves" and the "have-nots," too often oversimplifying and homogenizing the experiences of both groups. Yet the mothers and fathers who participated in my project were far from a homogenous group. Some loved their jobs, while others hated them. Some worked too many hours, others too few. Some had great autonomy at work and experienced tremendous satisfaction on the job, while others felt overly supervised, bored, and frustrated. I saw some families manage this transition beautifully, while others, quite literally, split apart. By focusing exclusively on low-income families, I was able to better understand how and why some low-income families thrive and others falter. Doing so also provides a new lens for evaluating how both policies and interventions designed to support working parents are relevant and effective for low-income families.

Second, I examined these work-family challenges during a critical time in families' lives—the birth of child. Although there is a vast literature on the transition to parenthood, little of this literature examines the second transition most parents experience, that of returning to paid work soon after birth. Even less of that research addresses the experiences of low-income parents as they make these transitions. Relatedly, this project is distinctive in that it looks outside the family, to the workplace, as a critical social setting that shapes child development. Given the latest research identifying the first years of life as fundamental to healthy child development, along with the low probability that low-wage jobs in the United States are going to disappear any time soon, it is imperative that we identify the work conditions under which parents experience positive mental health and children thrive.

Finally, my approach to understanding these challenges relied on information from multiple family members—mothers, fathers, and children—as well as teachers, to explore the short-term and long-term implications of low-wage work for parents and children. By following families over a six-year period, from pregnancy to when their child entered the first grade, I am able to describe different pathways connecting work to child outcomes. Ultimately, the hope is that these numbers and stories will highlight the specific ways in which good, low-wage jobs can enhance parental well-being and child development, and inform policies at workplace, state, and federal levels to bring about the best supports we can provide for low-wage families.

Following families over an extended period of time also allowed my team to capture the ever-changing dynamics of family life, and nothing brings these changes to light more than the real stories of parents living through these transitions. The story of Maria and Carlos, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, illustrates not only the particular challenges of making a living and becoming a parent on limited income, but also the surprising twist and turns that emerge as new parents find their way.

Maria and Carlos: The Rest of the Story

My second interview with Maria and Carlos took place four weeks after their baby, Matilde, was born. The aim of this interview was to hear about the birth, monitor how things were going, and see if Maria and Carlos had started to plan for their return to work. I sat down to start my conversation with Maria and noticed how tired she looked. As she cradled Matilde in her arms, she shared with me every detail of the birth, from her water breaking to the crowning of her baby's head. According to Maria, "It went well, just long. My water broke on Sunday afternoon, and she wasn't born until Monday evening, but once I had an epidural it got so much better. Carlos was there the entire time, and he was great. It was so much more than either of us expected. She came out, and it was just overwhelming. Just love. Carlos decided to come home with us, and he has been here ever since."

We started talking about their future plans. She told me that Carlos had taken a second job and quit school to help make ends meet, so she could stay home with the baby longer. Their latest plan was that Maria would take care of Matilde, as well as care for her sister's two children, for which her sister would pay her. Her mother was allowing her and Carlos to stay with her while they saved some money for an apartment, and Maria said the birth had brought her and Carlos closer together. She was hopeful. Carlos was also optimistic. "Being a dad is just amazing. She is totally dependent on us and so cute." He told me how he still had his part-time job at the deli, but he was also working more than thirty hours per week at McDonalds. He was tired but also proud that he was providing for his family.

The third interview, which was set to occur after new mothers had been back at work for about a month, allowed us to learn how the first few weeks of this second transition had gone. By this time, Matilde was four months old, and things were not going well. Maria was tired and stressed. The baby wasn't sleeping at night, and, during the day, Maria was caring for her sister's two boys, who were four and two, as well as the baby. "You have no idea how crazy two little boys can be. They aren't good nappers, so I never get a break. My mother and Carlos think that because I am the one that is home I should be doing laundry and keeping the house clean. Yeah, right." As I talked with Maria, my graduate student was interviewing Carlos in the kitchen. He was equally exhausted working two jobs and getting little sleep at night. Both were struggling, and their responses to our questionnaires confirmed our concerns: both parents had depression levels above the clinical cutoff on our standardized measure, indicating they were at risk for clinical depression, and both were reporting high levels of relationship conflict. Carlos wondered out loud if it would be better if he moved back home for a time to give the two of them a break from each other, but he was worried about leaving the baby. They had also had little success saving money for an apartment, as their income went almost entirely to formula, diapers, rent, gas, and other requirements of daily life. Maria was feeling hopeless. "We try to save, and then the car needs a new starter. Formula costs a fortune. And I am stuck at home with three babies." As we said our good-byes, my graduate student and I wished them well and said we would be in touch when Matilde turned six months old.

At the six-month mark, couples filled out questionnaires that we sent in the mail. Soon after Maria returned her questionnaire, I received a teary phone call from her. Carlos had moved back to his mother's house. Her mother and sister disliked having him in the house, and there had been a lot of conflict, so he left. Maria was also miserable in her role as a child-care provider and had informed her sister that she wanted to find a "real" job. According to Maria, the tension in her house was palpable. Her sister was angry with her for changing her mind about child care, while her mother chastised her for not maintaining the house. Maria felt completely isolated. Her depressive symptoms had escalated well above the clinical cutoff for depression. "I am not sure how I got here, but something has to change. I love the baby, but, to be honest, it is hard to get up every day to the same thing. I don't really have anyone to talk to." Meanwhile, Carlos was not faring much better. He missed Maria and

Matilde. His mother had convinced him to quit his job at McDonalds in order to go back to school, and he still had dreams that he could get a better job with an associate's degree, which would allow him to afford an apartment. Unfortunately, his reduced income meant that he was giving Maria less money for the baby, creating even more friction between them. Both Maria and Carlos talked about being at the "breaking point." Things were dire.

I had low expectations when I called, six months later, to set up the final, in-person interview with Maria and Carlos at the twelve-month mark; I was surprised to learn that Maria and Matilde had joined Carlos in his mother's house. Holding a beautiful, brown-eyed baby girl wearing a pink shirt with the words "Daddy's Princess" on the front, Carlos greeted us at the door for our interview. Maria walked in with a big smile on her face and said, "What a difference, huh?" She may have been referring to Matilde, but the difference was noticeable in the parents as well. They were smiling, warm, and relaxed.

Much had happened in six short months. Maria's best friend, who was making $12 an hour caring for a woman who had suffered a stroke, had encouraged Maria to become trained as a home health aide. The certification required seventy-five hours of training, including sixteen hours of practicum, and Carlos, his mother, and Maria's mother all helped care for Matilde during Maria's training. After completing her training, Maria immediately landed a job caring for an older man recovering from hip replacement, as well as one caring for a woman recovering from a stroke. She found the work extremely rewarding. Her clients were friendly and appreciative, and she felt a degree of independence and purpose at work that she had never felt before. "It feels good to get out in the world. When I come home, I really have missed Matilde, but I know she is fine. I know I am a better mom, and to be honest, I am just a nicer person." Importantly, Maria's depression score had dropped well below the clinical cutoff. She had full-time work with a consistent eight-to-four schedule, as well as some weekend work. Since Carlos often worked during the evenings and weekends, they were able to work out some opposite shift hours, and they used a family day care for about fifteen to twenty hours per week. Finances remained tight, but they were managing, in part, thanks to the support from Carlos's mother, who was charging them only $200 each month to live with her.

Carlos was also doing better. While he was still frustrated about his low-paying work at the deli, he needed only four more courses to complete his associate's degree and was feeling hopeful about finishing school. His depression scores had also dropped below the clinical level. He reported that he and Maria were fighting less and going on occasional dates to the movies and out to dinner. They had even begun to talk about marriage. As Carlos said with a chuckle, "To be continued."

This ending is hardly the one we see portrayed in the popular press about low-income, unmarried parents, and, of course, it is hardly "an ending." It is also only one story of many in our project. Some couples have an easier course, some harder. Some stay together; some separate. For both Maria and Carlos, work played a critical role in how the year went. Maria found a job she enjoyed and learned that she was a better parent and partner when she had the opportunity to leave the house and engage with others. The pay was still too low, but the job left her feeling good about herself, rather than depleted; she could come home and be an engaged mother. Once Carlos returned to school, he felt hopeful about the future. He could handle his minimum-wage job at the deli knowing that he was working toward a degree that would get him a "real job." Of course, Maria and Carlos could pull this off only with the help and support of their families—a consistent theme in our study. If new parents have a support network, they fare much better on all counts than those with no support. What else have we learned from the experiences of new parents like Maria and Carlos?

What We've Learned and What We Might Do

Perhaps the most important lesson learned during this study is that our efforts to improve and sustain the healthy development of children in this country cannot focus solely on how well parents care for their young—an approach that places the full onus of the well-being of the next generation on the shoulders of parents alone. Job conditions, workplace policies, parental leave policies, and child care create a complex web of resources and limitations that directly shape working parents' ability to care for their children. The right combination of circumstances and policies can lead to positive outcomes for parents and their children, while the wrong combination can be toxic. While I describe these conditions in detail over the course of the following chapters, I want to highlight a few general findings at the outset, before briefly describing the road ahead.

One recurrent theme is that small interventions can make a big difference. For instance, simply having twelve weeks of leave, along with some minimal scheduling flexibility—like being able to leave work for a doctor's appointment—resulted in positive implications for new mothers' mental health. Similarly, when mothers faced looming deadlines or had productivity goals to meet, a supportive supervisor buffered the effects of this stress. Mothers in high-pressure jobs with unsupportive supervisors, by contrast, had not only higher levels of depression but depression that worsened over time. Dealing with a stressful job with little support from a supervisor proved very costly for working mothers.

Another central finding is that work experiences matter for parenting. Job conditions—whether coworker relations, amount of control and autonomy at work, or levels of job stress—affect the ability of parents to care for their children. A lack of autonomy in the workplace, for example, led mothers to report a more generalized lack of control and efficacy in their life, which we found resulted in a decline in parenting quality. By contrast, we found that when employees are satisfied with their jobs, even if demanding and stressful, it can spill over to home life and result in higher-quality parenting. As we will see, the pathways through which work influences a person's ability to parent can be both direct and indirect and are often complex, but the evidence of their impact is undeniable.

Finally, the evidence suggests that, for both mothers and fathers, work experiences during the first year of their child's life were related to the child's behavioral outcomes six years later. For instance, when mothers and fathers experienced a sense of control and efficacy at work during the transition to parenthood, their children displayed better social skills and fewer behavioral problems in the first grade. These long-term effects point to the salience of the first year of life in setting the stage for both parents and children.

As I have presented our findings over the years at conferences and policy meetings, almost everyone I have spoken with agrees that we need to provide better support to working parents, but the big concern is always the price tag. How can we afford to institute policies at the federal, state, and workplace levels? As one legislator said to me, "We are the richest most successful country in the world because we don't act like our people need our help. They can do it alone; Americans always have." In fact, Americans have never "done it alone," and what we are doing now, having both parents work full-time with barely a break for childbirth, is relatively new territory in this country, a social experiment only about fifty years in the making. Nor is it true that new policies are unaffordable. Some states have already started to institute one of the costliest of policies—paid parental leave—and early data suggest it is a "win-win" for employers and employees. As the findings above indicate, other potential interventions—such as increased flexibility, supportive supervisors, and positive work environments—are surprisingly affordable, and, here again, data suggest, result in less employee turnover, better employee health, and fewer sick days. I will return to these possible solutions in the final chapter of the book, but first we have much to learn about the challenges and rewards of becoming a parent in the United States while holding down a low-wage job.

In the following chapter, I look at what we know about social class, and how income, education, and occupational status shape the transition to parenthood. I also provide a deeper dive into the study itself by describing the sample, our data collection procedures, and the rationale for focusing exclusively on low-income families. In chapter 3, I address workplace policies, such as paid leave, flexible schedules, and sick time, as they relate to the well-being of new parents. I couple quantitative findings with a number of stories that bring to light the pain that unsupportive policies inflict, and the relief that even minimal workplace supports can offer new parents. Chapter 4 turns from the importance of workplace policies to the importance of job conditions. I explore how various aspects of one's job—including stress, autonomy, and workplace relationships—can shape parental well-being across the first year of parenthood. In chapter 5, I discuss the role that work policies and job conditions play in the quality of parenting that employed mothers and fathers provide to their new infants. I describe, in particular, how stressful work can impinge on parents' abilities to be sensitive and responsive caregivers to their new infants. In chapter 6, I turn to the long-term impact of parents' work experiences on children's development and explain the direct and indirect pathways through which parental work influences children's social and cognitive outcomes. In the final chapter, I provide an overview of the lessons I have learned from this project and draw on these lessons to formulate recommendations for policy makers, employers, and researchers.

Much has been written about the challenges of managing work and family life. These challenges are not fairly distributed, nor are they always obvious. In the following pages, I lay out the myriad ways that parents' jobs can affect them, their parenting, and their children. As you will see, things do not always go as we might expect. Supervisors intervene, promotions happen, coworkers help out, workers are fired, and schedules change. These experiences are then carried home, where they affect workers' well-being, relationships, and children, for better or worse.

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