

# **“The helping, the fixtures, the kits, the gear, the gum shields, the food, the snacks, the waiting, the rain, the car rides...”: Social Class, Parenting and Children’s Organised Activities**

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## **Biographical Notes**

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## **Abstract**

Class-related parenting cultures and ideologies have been of considerable interest to academics over the last two decades. Much of the research thus far has focused on exploring Annette Lareau’s conceptualisations of ‘natural growth’ and ‘concerted cultivation’ and the implications for outcomes in relation to education. The focus of the present article is organised activities, which are a central but as yet relatively under-researched feature of middle-class parenting. The findings are based upon 73 semi-structured interviews with parents and children from 48 middle-class families living in and around a small city in northern England. The article reveals that initiating and facilitating children’s organised activities is considered a central aspect of ‘good’ parenting in middle-class social networks. It is shown how this is a consequence of several developments within society over the past three decades or so, including the rising levels of maternal employment, the growing competitiveness of the labour market and the increasing concerns related to children’s health and safety. It is argued that these developments have heightened middle-class parents’ predisposition to not only be involved with and invest in their children’s leisure biographies, but to do so in a more deliberate, rigorous and rational manner.

## **Keywords**

parenting, concerted cultivation, generational changes, organised activities, social class

## Introduction

The role of the family in social (re)production has been a particular point of interest among sociologists over the past two decades. Amid evidence that social advantage or disadvantage is transferred to young people early on in life, often before and outside of the formal education context (Feinstein, 2003; Goodman, Gregg and Washbrook, 2011), academics have increasingly turned to family processes for answers (Ball, 2010; Birchwood, Roberts and Pollock, 2008). Consequently, there is now a wealth of research on how family level 'variables' impact upon a range of child outcomes, from getting 'good' jobs (Devine, 2004) through to sport participation (Wheeler, 2012). The role of the family has been addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and in doing so quite different pictures have been generated. Indeed, as observed by Irwin (2009) in relation to schooling, quantitative studies have identified key relationships between parent and child variables but have not allowed us to 'see' how they work, whereas qualitative studies have painted vivid pictures of family life but have problems of generalisation. Different research approaches notwithstanding, it seems that parents from particular social classes are better *able* and more *inclined* to become involved with and invest in their children. Research has generally revealed different resources, aspirations, strategies and practices among parents in Britain and other Western nations (e.g. Ball, 2003; Devine, 2004; Gillies, 2007; Irwin and Elley, 2011; Reay, 2004; Vryonides and Gouvias, 2012; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001), which there is evidence to suggest come together in a 'messy' but 'recognisable' way (Lareau, 2003).

In something of a landmark study, Lareau (2003) investigated how social class shaped family life in North America. Drawing upon data generated via in-depth observations and interviews with 12 poor/working-class and middle-class families, she found that social class impacted on three main areas of family life and differences in these areas clustered together to form 'meaningful patterns'. The first area was language use, with poor/working-class parents using 'directives' and middle-class parents 'discussion' to interact with and instruct their children. The second area was interactions with social

institutions, with poor/working class parents being reluctant to intervene in their children's schooling while their middle-class counterparts viewed it as a right and responsibility. The final area was the organisation of daily life, with poor/working class children being allowed by their parents to 'play out' whereas middle-class children were encouraged by theirs to 'perform'. In relation to the latter, it was found that organised activities 'established and controlled' by parents dominated the lives of middle-class children. When considered together, Lareau (2003) observed two distinct 'cultural logics of child-rearing' among poor/working-class and middle-class parents, which she conceptualised as 'natural growth' and 'concerted cultivation' respectively.

Parenting cultures and ideologies are socially constructed and change over time (Chambers, 2012). Indeed, Lareau (2003) noted the importance of situating her cultural logics of child-rearing in their historical context. There is evidence of increasing investment by middle-class parents in their children's cognitive and physical abilities in recent years, which have been referred to as the 'scholarisation' (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010) and 'corporealisation' (Evans and Davies, 2010) of childhood. Middle-class parents appear to be spending more time with their children and investing earlier, more heavily and diversely, and over a longer period of time (Furstenberg, 2010; Gauthier, Smeeding and Furstenberg, 2004; Vincent and Ball, 2007). As well as in Lareau's research, these changes in middle-class parenting cultures and ideologies have been captured in discussions of 'intensive', 'professional' and 'tiger' mothering (Chua, 2011; Guo, 2013; Hayes, 1996; Vincent and Ball, 2006), 'involved' fathering (Gillies, 2009; Gottzén, 2011), and 'helicopter' parenting (LeMoyne and Buchanan, 2011).

The associations between social class, parenting and child outcomes have received considerable attention by academics. Much of the research thus far has focused exploring Lareau's conceptualisations of 'natural growth' and 'concerted cultivation' and the implications for outcomes in relation to education (e.g. Bodovski, 2010; Cheadle, 2008; Henderson, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2009; Redford, Johnson and Honnold, 2009). A far smaller number of studies have explored the

phenomenon of organised activities (also referred to as 'enrichment activities') featuring centrally in middle-class family life (Evans and Davies, 2011; Stefansen et al., 2016; Trussell and Shaw, 2012; Vincent and Ball, 2007; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016; Wheeler and Green, 2014). There is also limited research that explains the emergence of contemporary parenting cultures and ideologies. To date, changes in middle-class parenting have been linked primarily to the growing competitiveness of the labour market. Specifically, middle-class parents have been observed to be increasingly anxious about the social (re)production of their offspring leading them to invest in their children's educational and cultural development in a more deliberate, rigorous and rational manner, at the same time as a market selling just such activities has emerged (Evans and Davies, 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2007; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to firstly establish the extent to which organised activities are a central feature of middle-class parenting culture in Britain, before exploring how and why and discussing the wider implications.

## **The Study**

The findings presented in this article are drawn from a research project that sought to produce a grounded theory of patterns of parenting in relation to children's education and leisure among families from different social classes. The data for the research project were generated via 90 semi-structured interviews with parents and children from 62 families living in and around a small city in the north-west of England. Discussed below are the details related to the middle-class families on which this article is based.

### ***Recruitment of the Families***

The families were recruited through 12 primary schools, 11 state and one independent, located within a three-mile radius of the city centre. More specifically, a table detailing certain characteristics was compiled for all of the schools within the pre-determined radius of the city centre in question, then the schools that would be likely to yield particular types of families were contacted. The schools willing

to assist with the project distributed information packs to Year 5 and 6 pupils (9 to 11 years old) to be taken home to their parents. The information packs contained an outline of the project along with a Family Information Questionnaire (FIQ). The families willing to take part in the project were asked to fill in the FIQ and return it to their child's school. The returned FIQs were collected and the contact details contained at the end of them were used to schedule interviews with the families. This process was undertaken three times during the school year in which the data was collected with a different four schools each time in order for a grounded theory to be built based upon emerging themes and gaps in the findings and demographic of families. Theoretical saturation was reached after the third recruitment.

### ***Characteristics of the Families***

The characteristics of the 48 middle-class families were as follows: 41 of the families were headed by two biological parents, four by a biological mother and step-father, and three by a single mother. The majority of the parents had two children (30), though there were a number who had one child (7) or three or more children (11). The mothers ranged in age from 33 to 55 and the fathers from 37 to 66. Virtually all of the parents were White British, with only five (three mothers and two fathers) being Asian. The families lived in a mixture of rural (7), semi-rural (16) and urban (25) areas.

The middle-class families were sub-divided into three 'fractions' on the basis of family annual income, parental occupation and parental level of education. Eleven of the families were deemed to be lower-middle-class (LMC), 21 to be mid-middle-class (MMC), and 16 to be upper-middle-class (UMC). The annual incomes of the families ranged between £20,000 and £180,000; the specific breakdown of the ranges and how they generally related to class fraction is illustrated in Table 1. In terms of occupation, 11 of the mothers were housewives, 27 worked part-time and 10 full-time. All of the fathers worked full-time. Notwithstanding some gender differences, the UMC parents were generally company directors or managers or employed in professional occupations, while there was a greater variety in

the types of occupations that the MMC and LMC parents were employed. There were no great differences in the parents' levels of education according to class fraction. The majority of the parents had undertaken some form of tertiary-level qualification, indeed, 34 (71%) of the mothers and 29 (64%) of the fathers had a degree.

**Table 1.** Income ranges of the families and relationship to social class

Income (£)	Number of Families	Total	Social Class
20,000 – 29,000	5	10	Lower-middle-class
30,000 – 39,000	5		
40,000 – 49,000	5	22	Mid-middle-class
50,000 – 59,000	5		
60,000 – 69,000	4		
70,000 – 79,000	4		
80,000 – 89,000	4		
90,000 – 99,000	3	16	Upper-middle-class
100,000 – 109,000	3		
110,000 – 119,000	1		
120,000 – 129,000	3		
130,000 – 139,000	1		
140,000 – 149,000	1		
150,000 – 159,000	0		
160,000 – 169,000	2		
170,000 – 179,000	2		
<i>Total</i>	<i>48</i>		

### ***Interviews with the Families***

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the research tool to explore social processes and dynamics at work within families. The interviews had three central foci: (1) the ways in which the parents' were involved in their children's education and extra-curricular and leisure-time organised activities; (2) the factors that shaped the parents' involvement; and (3) the generational changes in the parents' involvement. The issue of parental involvement was approached biographically and holistically, in that the interview guide was designed to progress from pre-school to the end of primary school and the interview questions were generally open-ended to allow the interviewees to provide

direction to their interviews. In order to discuss parental involvement a detailed account of the children's education and leisure lives was first obtained. Thus, the data from the study is highly suited to exploring the place of organised activities in middle-class children's lives.

The interviews were conducted in the families' homes. Where applicable and possible, two parents and the Year 5 or 6 'target' child were interviewed. There were several instances where only the mother was interviewed as the father and/or child were not available or willing to be interviewed, which is not an uncommon scenario in research involving families (for example, see: Devine, 2004; Vincent and Ball, 2006). The parents' interviews lasted between one and three hours and the children's approximately 15 minutes. All were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional typist. The transcripts were analysed on a weekly basis during the course of the study in order to build the grounded theory. NVivo software was used to manage and explore the data, which were coded in three main phases: (1) initial coding; (2) focused coding; and (3) theoretical coding (see Charmaz, 2006).

## **Findings**

The findings presented below are organised into four sections. The first demonstrates the central role of organised activities in middle-class children's lives, before sections two and three present findings related to how and why such activities feature in middle-class parenting. The final section highlights some important consequences related to the growth of children's participation in organised activities.

### ***The Prevalence and Primacy of Organised Activities***

As illustrated in Table 2, all of the middle-class children participated in at least two organised activities at the time of the interviews, and many did a lot more. A wide range of organised activities were undertaken – artistic, educational, social and physical. A number of the children participated in more than one organised activity in a day and this, combined with siblings' organised activities, meant that



they often came to dominate family life. Indeed, several of the parents reported that there were times when their children's participation in organised activities had become so intense they had had to take steps to resume a 'balance':

Father: It starts to get kind of crazy, because he did rugby for a while, so it would have been training for rugby on a Wednesday, training for football on a Thursday, playing football on Saturday morning, playing rugby on Sunday morning, and he was in Stagecoach for three hours on a Saturday ... and then he gets about an hour's homework a night from school.

Mother: I think kids can do too much, can't they, too many activities ... I think you've got to find a happy medium. (Family 21, UMC)

On their part, the parents reported that their children's participation in organised activities required a considerable amount of time, money and energy, especially for those with more than one child:

With three of them it's becoming quite powerful, you know, it's a lot of time on us ... and it's expensive, you know, I've just spent £150 on Tae Kwondo, you know, for the outfit, the gum shield and the fees, the rugby you have to pay rugby club fees, you know, the cricket you have to have the cricket gear ... so I'd say it's money and time and commitment and trying to be fair with each of the children. (Mother, family 5, UMC)

The data clearly indicated that there was a demand for organised activities within the families' social networks and that it was increasing. For example, many of the parents talked about waiting lists for organised activities:

There are plenty available I would say, and they are increasing (*laughs*). So sometimes I find it's really hard for you to make a choice, really, and you can't get places in many of them, it's ridiculous! (Mother, family 31, UMC)

**Table 2.** Organised activities of a random sample of the ‘target’ children during a typical week at the time of the interviews by class fraction

Family Number	Child's Gender	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Lower-middle-class</b>								
17	Male	Scouts	Running club*	Dodgeball* Guitar lesson*	Drama*	Junior club		Hockey
25	Female		Running club* Guides		Netball*			
39	Male	Ukulele lesson	Football		Football*		Football	Church group
40	Female	Football	Swimming club		Guides		Football	Swimming club
51	Male	Drama* Football		Swimming club	Football*	Swimming club	Swimming club Football	Swimming club
<b>Mid-Middle-class</b>								
6	Female	Violin lesson	Street dance	Netball*	Judo*			Hockey
7	Female	Swimming	Running club* Tennis	Piano lesson	Drama* Stagecoach	Junior club	Triathlon club	
9	Female	Dance	Running club* Tennis	Swimming lesson	Art club*	Junior club	Dance	
35	Male	Hockey* Rugby	Football* Athletics	Tag rugby*	Judo* Fencing*		Athletics Tennis	Rugby
60	Male	Art club*	Football	Swimming lesson			Tennis	Football
<b>Upper-middle-class</b>								
3	Male	Guitar lesson*	Swimming lesson	Football*	Cricket*		Football	Rugby
5	Male	Guitar lesson*	Rugby	Football*			Rugby	Cricket
20	Female	Orchestra* Piano lesson*	Violin lesson* Swimming club	Newspaper club*	Animation club*	Chess club	Swimming club Chess club	Swimming club
26	Female		Swimming club*	Netball*	Cross country*		Tennis	
61	Male		Karate	Football*	Football		Swimming lesson Tennis	Football

\* School-based activity

It was also evident that there was an increasing supply of and variety in organised activities for primary school children:

I think there are more clubs available at primary level, I don't think there were any clubs available when I was at primary school. I think they probably do more activities, and I think their friends probably do more activities, sometimes it's about finding time for them just to play out actually! (Mother, family 41, MMC)

Given an increasing demand for and supply of organised activities for primary school children, it is perhaps unsurprising that the children in this study appeared to have higher rates of participation in organised activities than their parents' generation. When asked how their children's participation in organised activities compared to their own participation when they were a similar age, the following is typical response of the parents:

Oh, I did nothing in comparison, my kids do 22 activities a week ... I went to swimming lessons and then I went to girl guides, that was it ... my husband probably did swimming and that's it, if that, we did nothing structured. (Mother, family 17, LMC)

Most of the parents also noted that they did far more to initiate and facilitate their children's involvement in organised activities than their own parents had done for them:

Mum and dad were never very sporty ... I'd ask my dad to take us for a walk, "No, I'm knackered", it would never happen. They both babysat for us and we said, "Right, [son's] out at this time, the girls are out at that time, then take them to there, then do that, and take this". My dad started off by saying "We have looked after two kids ourselves you know", I went, "Yeah, but you didn't do all this", and they just didn't have two minutes. (Mother, family 26, UMC)

All-in-all, this data point to the central role of organised activities in middle-class families' lives, as well as how this appears to be relatively recent phenomenon linked to contemporary middle-class parenting culture, which is elaborated on further below.

### ***The Place of Organised Activities in Parenting Culture***

Many of the parents clearly felt that they needed to have their children involved in organised activities on a regular basis:

We do all these activities and sometimes it exhausts us and you think, "You don't have to do this", but then I think I need to do it more than I think I don't need to do it. (Mother, family 9, MMC)

This 'need' appeared to be generated within the parents' social networks, with parents feeling varying degrees of pressure to conform to 'norms' continually being established. Several of the parents, for example, talked about the competition between parents in relation to their children's organised activities:

Father: There are some people that we know who it seems to be important their kids are in a class of some description every night of the week.

Mother: They're doing a musical instrument, they're doing horse-riding, they're doing the piano and I think, you know, sometimes that can be one-upmanship by the parents ... and them being very competitive. (Family 10, UMC)

You think everybody else is doing it so you should do it too, "My kids are in swimming lessons and then they're doing this" ... some people do things every night, they've got Rainbows and Brownies and football and tennis and karate, and so I think there is a lot of peer pressure there, you think, "Well, someone else's kids are doing that so that might make them better

than mine”, I mean I don’t think that but maybe that’s where a lot of the mentality comes from, that everyone seems to want to be busy all the time. (Mother, family 26, UMC)

As mentioned above, conformity to organised activity norms varied considerably. Some of the parents pretty much gave over their lives to ‘ferrying’ their children around, while others were happy for their children to do some activities but strove for a ‘balance’:

There seems to be an awful lot of pressure on parents to make sure their children are doing lots of things and it’s very expensive and, you know, if you can afford it then it’s great but if you can’t afford it it’s a nightmare. I’ve always said the happy medium of we’ll do a couple of things but I play rugby, I go running, I don’t want to give up all my life to ferrying them two round to every which way. It gives them an unfair idea of what the worlds like, “We are the centre of the universe, you work, we spend”, there’s got to be a balance. (Mother, family 50, MMC)

There was also a number parents who were opposed to and felt constrained by organised activity norms. The mother of three children from family 5 talked animatedly on this point:

When something is cancelled I’m, sadly, over the moon, and we don’t do a lot ... there’s a lot of kids out there, private or state schools, they don’t get in ’til nine or 10 and they’re knackered and I don’t agree with that at all ... I just do the minimum really, I’m not really socially influenced, if people were to say, ‘What do your kids do?’ I’ll go, “Well, we’re busy” ... but I know a lot of mums do stuff to keep up ... I think it’s horrendous, I think it’s a rat race ... I think some kids now are being thrashed, absolutely thrashed, and I don’t really know if they’re enjoying it ... My best friend just rang me from down south and said, “I said I wouldn’t do it but every night we’ve got two clubs”, and I said, “You’re mad, just stop it” ... if you then combine that with a mum who’s working and a dad who’s knackered and there’s not enough

money and there's not enough time, I don't know, personally I think it's all gone too far, and I'm anti that. (Mother, family 5, UMC)

A particularly interesting finding was that as well as through peer pressure, the perceived 'need' for organised activities among the parents appeared to be reinforced and perpetuated to a degree by their children. As highlighted in the following excerpt, there was an expectation among the children (stemming primarily from the children talking to other children, particularly siblings and friends) that their parents would arrange for them to do organised activities:

We didn't really do anything organised at all ... I think the expectation was you occupied yourself ... the expectation of the kids is that we occupy them in some way (*laughs*) by taking them to these places ... they seem much more reluctant to just go round a friend's or whatever (Mother, family 52, MMC)

Furthermore, the children's schools seemed to play a central role in generating the pressure the parents felt to have their children involved in organised activities via the extra-curricular programmes they offered. The parents reported that information was regularly sent home from their children's schools regarding extra-curricular activities on offer, some which were free and run by teachers but a growing number were provided by external companies who charged a fee. Though the parents liked the number and variety of activities that extra-curricular programmes afforded, many reported that they felt pressure related to the additional charges:

What I don't like is this creeping-in of asking for money that's become part of state education now ... I think it often puts pressure on people of lower incomes, the ones who perhaps fall above the benefits but are on lower incomes ... I don't like the use of the school bag for advertising extra-curricular activities that you have to pay for. It drives me mad, I think it's really bad, because every child sees every letter and goes, "Oh yes, I want to do that, I want

to do fencing, I want to do this, I want to do that” ... I don’t want it pushed. (Mother, family 33, LMC)

These findings, when considered alongside those noted earlier in relation to the growing supply of leisure-time organised activities, suggest that an organised activity ‘market’ has emerged. This organised activity market is likely to have emerged in response to middle-class parents feeling a ‘need’ for organised activities, but is now also likely to be promoting and praying upon it.

### ***Explaining the Growing Significance of Organised Activities***

The emergence of organised activities within middle-class children’s lives can be explained in terms of the parents’ increasing abilities and inclinations to promote them as a consequence of several developments in society. With regard to ‘ability’, many of the parents’ narratives indicated that finances (“We didn’t have the money to do it when we were younger” - Mother, family 9, MMC) and logistics (“At one time we didn’t have transport so they just couldn’t get you round to these places” - Father, family 45, LMC) had limited their own parents’ ability to promote their participation in organised activities. All of the middle-class families involved in the present study had two cars and a greater or lesser amount of ‘disposable’ income.

In relation to ‘inclination’, the data revealed several developments in society that appear to have increased the attractiveness of organised activities to parents. The first development was the increasing prevalence of maternal employment. Several of the mothers, for example, spoke about organised activities as avenues for childcare and cultivation:

I think a lot of it is to do with working parents ... you don’t have any energy left and it’s sort of easier to have all these organised activities and it kind of ticks a box doesn’t it, and so you don’t feel guilty about, “Oh, are they being stimulated?”. (Mother, family 33, LMC)

The second development was the growing competitiveness of the labour market. The narratives revealed that many of the parents took a holistic approach to investing in their children to ensure they 'succeeded', 'thrived' and 'achieved' in the difficult world they would face in the future:

The job market for him I think it's going to be much more competitive and much more difficult for him to progress if he hasn't got a decent education and a decent kind of, you know, like school record, plus all the other extra-curricular things. So I think that what I'm trying to do is prepare him for in eight, nine, 11 years time that he's kind of got a fighting chance of succeeding. (Mother, family 11, MMC)

The third development was the heightened concern over children's health and safety. In relation to health, many of the parents reported being concerned regarding how active their children were, which was linked to their children's preferences for sedentary leisure activities and the contemporary sedentary lifestyle generally:

Because you're battling with the TV and the computer and the fact that they don't go out ... I'm conscious of how much physical activity they're getting. When I grew up in the seventies we'd be climbing trees ... so when they do a physical activity like their dance, or their theatre club or their swimming ... I'm thinking, "Yeah, she's getting exercise", so it's all about, you know, us trying to get them doing stuff! (*Laughs*). (Mother, family 62, MMC)

In terms of safety, many of the parents were concerned about 'dangers' outside of the home from roads and 'strangers'. When their children were in organised activities, however, the parents knew where they were and that they were being supervised:

It's to do with the fact that roads are busier ... when I was a kid we could just go off and cycle ... you couldn't just let your kids do that now so kids don't have the freedom, so parents probably feel that the kids need to be organised instead of just saying, you know, "Go out and



come back at tea time”, and I think parents just think it’s safer and the people doing it are all CRB checked and I think there is that fear where you can’t just let your kids go off and do their own thing now. (Mother, family 54, LMC)

A related development was the emergence of an ‘accountability’ culture. There was of evidence within the parents’ narratives that having children in organised activities rather than playing in the streets was viewed as more responsible:

This idea that you arrange things, I think [it’s] partly because it’s just society and the way society has grown, the fact that society has become more protective of its kids, if you look at everything, for example ... in school there’s targets, there’s far more paperwork, and I think that moves down into rearing your child as well. (Mother, family 59, UMC)

The final development was the increase in parental involvement in the school selection process. As a consequence of the middle-class parents’ propensity to choose their children’s primary and secondary schools, a number of their children went to schools outside of their catchment areas and for some this meant that they did not have any friends that lived locally. Thus, the parents of these children noted that part of the reason they wanted them to be involved in organised activities was social interaction with other children:

I think maybe one of the reasons why there is so many activities for children now is because you have your selection of schools, whereas when we were kids you just all went to the local school so you knew that everybody at school lived near to you. (Mother, family 7, MMC)

Altogether, there was considerable evidence that several inter-related developments have created a context in which middle-class parents can, and feel that they need to, initiate and facilitate their children’s participation in organised activities.

### ***Consequences of Children’s Participation in Organised Activities***

When questioned specifically about why they promoted their children's participation in organised activities, it was found that the parents were overwhelmingly positive and talked about short-term benefits such as enjoyment, health promotion and social interaction, as well as those more long-term such as the accrual of various 'capitals' and the successful transition into the labour market. Interestingly, however, throughout the interviews it was negative implications of children's participation in organised activities that came out most strongly. The narratives revealed that the children's participation in organised activities cost their parents a considerable amount of time ("I'm sort of looking forward to a time where it's not as onerous on my time ... where there's a bit of me left" - Mother, family 28, UMC), money ("Everybody is worried about how much you spend for these extra-curricular activities" - Mother, family 31, UMC) and energy:

The helping, the fixtures, the kits, the gear, the gum shields, the food, the snacks, the waiting, the rain, the car rides, fitting it in with your life and the other two children's lives, that's the hardest thing by 10 miles. (Mother, family 5, UMC)

There was also evidence that the children's participation could be damaging to their parents marital relationships. Several sets of the parents noted that they spent little time with each other because they were constantly transporting their children to and from organised activities or that there had been disagreements over their children's participation in them. One mother, for example, said the following:

I have leaned on my husband a little bit more lately with the clubs and he's not liked it, he's like, "This is mad". I think if he had his way, if I wasn't around, you know, if I died tomorrow or we got divorced and he had custody of the kids, I don't think they'd do any clubs. (Mother, family 22, UMC)

The mother from family 5 talked quite extensively about the issues she had faced in her marital relationship through prioritising her children's educational and cultural development:

I followed my parents, we follow our children, so we're trying to redress that balance. My mum always said to me when I had babies, "Make time for each other, your marriage will be there at the end and the kids won't", and that has more importance to me now because our marriage has been kind of quite hard lately ... that's a really big lesson to learn because if you don't put the time into your marriage, even if you're putting the kids first, they don't want to come from a broken home. (Mother, family 5, UMC)

In relation to the children, it was apparent that organised activity participation was tiring. Many of the parents spoke about their children returning from organised activities 'absolutely exhausted'. In addition, several of the parents perceived that spending so much time in organised adult-supervised environments could be to the detriment of children learning important time-management and independence skills:

I would spend most of my time just playing around with neighbours' children and brothers and sisters, out in the streets or within your house, there wasn't any structured play, it was just free play, you choose what you wanted to do. But I think that's good in a way because I find that my children always need to be told what they can do next ... they keep coming to me and saying, "What shall I do next, what shall I do next?" and I find it (*laughs*) difficult because they've got a room full of toys, they've got all kinds of gadgets around them, they've got friends who can come home any time, and still he does not know what to do with his time. (Mother, family 31, UMC)

In terms of the family as a whole, there was evidence that the children's organised activity participation could limit family leisure, with such activities cluttering evenings and weekends when parents and children might otherwise have spent time together:

It's been quite noticeable in the village, quite a few parents with children our age where the boys have been doing rugby, because rugby happens on Sunday, they don't go to church

anymore ... I wonder whether actually we ought to be looking back and saying, "Should we really be keeping Sunday free?" I suppose if nothing else it helps the family. (Father, family 10, UMC)

Indeed, overall, family life for the middle-class families involved in the present study appeared to be more child-centred and structured than in previous generations, with the parents doing considerably more 'work' in relation to their children's organised activities as well as their educational development.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

It is well-established that middle-class parents in today's society have a tendency to treat their children as 'development projects' (Irwin and Elley, 2011); that is, they invest considerably in their children's educational development and bodily dispositions from a young age (Evans and Davies, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2007). Much of the research on the topic area to date has focused on the educational aspect of this culture – often conceptualised as 'concerted cultivation' – with a small but growing focus on the physical aspect and parents' promotion of their children's participation in organised activities, particularly sport (Stefansen et al., 2016; Trussell and Shaw, 2012; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016; Wheeler and Green, 2014). This article has aimed to further the latter literature by elaborating on how and why organised activities have come to be a central feature of middle-class family life.

In terms of the 'how', the data presented in this article point towards an increasing supply of and demand for organised activities, with children doing a greater number and variety of organised activities and their parents doing more initiating and facilitating of participation. It certainly seems, as others have observed, that organised activities have come to play a central role in middle-class families' lives and now feature in middle-class parents' perceptions of 'good' parenting (Lareau, 2003; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). The trend towards concerted cultivation in Britain has occurred alongside

a growth of middle-class parents with more disposable income but who face greater uncertainty regarding the social reproduction of their offspring. This has heightened middle-class parents' predisposition to not only be involved with and invest in their children's leisure biographies but to do so in a more deliberate, rigorous and rational manner with an increasing focus on their children's future in addition to their present circumstances. This study also finds evidence of the 'messy' but 'recognisable' combination of parenting resources, aspirations, strategies and practices that Lareau (2003) speaks of. The middle-class parents evidently 'aspired' to prepare their children for adult life in terms of active and fruitful uses of leisure, and used their resources (such as disposable income, cars and parenting networks) to facilitate their parenting 'strategies' and 'practices' in relation to their children's organised activities.

An important finding of this study is that not all parents appear to hold organised activities as an aspect of 'good' parenting to the same extent. There are parents who are clearly fully committed to and engaged in the cultivation of their offspring via organised activities, but there are also those who, while they perceive such activities as important, promote them primarily because it is normative within their social network. There are also a number of parents who actually would not promote their children's participation in organised activities to the same extent (if at all) if their social network did not dictate that they should and put pressure on them to do so. An interesting point to note in this regard is how children and the commercial sector, as well as parents' social networks, now appear to be reinforcing and perpetuating organised activities and adding to the pressure parents feel to invest in them. There is evidence that children have grown to expect their leisure time to consist of organised activities, which is driving parents to continue to provide such activities. It has also been found that the commercial sector, which has now seeped into primary education, also seems to be responding to and perhaps even exploiting parents' feelings of vulnerability surrounding the social reproduction of their children by offering an increasing array of activities designed to develop youngsters' minds and bodies in various ways. A trend, in fact, that other researchers have observed to play out before

children even begin their primary education through so-called 'enrichment activities' (Vincent and Ball, 2007; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016) and 'private enterprise physical education' (Evans and Davies, 2010).

With regard to why organised activities have become such a central feature of middle-class family life, it is clear that this has occurred in a context in which several developments have combined to add momentum to middle-class parents' ability and inclination to engage in the concerted cultivation of their children in order to prepare them for twenty-first century adult life. The first development is related to economics – more mothers returning to work after having children has had the dual effect of: (1) extra-curricular activities becoming increasingly attractive to parents who are time-poor but keen to invest in their children; and (2) middle-class parents having a greater amount of disposable income to spend on the cultivation of their children. The second development is the growing competitiveness of the labour market, which has resulted in earlier, more intensive and prolonged cultivation of children in a wider variety of areas, cultural capital being just one. The third development is the emergence of an accountability culture surrounding parenthood, which appears to have heightened parents' concerns with regard to the health and safety of their children. In this scenario, organised activities in which children are usually active and supervised are viewed as a responsible parental choice. The final development is related to education – with parents more actively involved and investing in this area there has been an increasing incidence of children not necessarily going to their local school or having local friendship groups, so organised activities are increasingly viewed as an important avenue for social interaction.

There are some important implications for children, parents and the family as a whole related to these findings. On a positive note, these organised activity repertoires are likely to set middle-class children up for diverse and lasting leisure biographies. The data from this study showed that middle-class children, particularly those in 'mid' and 'upper' fractions, are already 'cultural omnivores' before the end of primary schooling; that is, they participate in a wide range of different types of activities, some

quite commonplace and others more esoteric (Peterson and Kern, 1996). There is strong evidence that childhood is the 'critical life stage for laying secure foundations for long-term careers in sport' (Roberts, 2016, p. 23), and this probably extends to many other leisure activities as well. In addition, recent research suggests that 'family culture' is crucial for disposing individuals to participate in sport and active leisure (Birchwood et al., 2008; Haycock and Smith, 2014; Wheeler, 2011). Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the promotion of organised activities is boosting national participation rates in various forms of leisure – there is certainly evidence for this in relation to sport (Wheeler and Green, 2014). In this regard, a suggestion for future research is to explore the transition of organised activities through to secondary school and beyond.

In terms of problems associated with organised activities, it seems that both middle-class children and their parents can suffer as a consequence of over-scheduling. There is evidence that parents' reserves of time, money and energy are often considerably depleted and marriages can be put at 'risk' due to the demands of supporting their children's participation. It is also apparent that some children might have limited opportunities for free-play and to manage their own time, which are important for healthy development (Ginsburg, 2007). In light of this, it is worth questioning whether any benefits children accrue through participation in organised activities could be negated because of these problems. Specifically, important questions raised on the basis of this article are: (1) whether middle-class parents are putting social (re)production above their children's (and their own) wellbeing; (2) what the physical, mental and social health outcomes associated with participation in organised activities actually are; and (3) the extent to which organised activities can be regarded as 'leisure' if they are obligatory and potentially detrimental to children's wellbeing. These are all potential directions for future research.

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