



- Also in this section**
- 25 Down with helicopter parents
 - 26 The death penalty in California
 - 26 A new threat to Obamacare
 - 27 Collins v Bellows in Maine
 - 28 Lexington: Daydreaming of Elizabeth Warren

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Parenting in America

Choose your parents wisely

BETHESDA, MARYLAND AND CABIN CREEK, WEST VIRGINIA

There is a large class divide in how Americans raise their children. Rich parents can afford to ease up a bit; poor parents need help

SHANA, a bright and chirpy 12-year-old, goes to ballet classes four nights a week, plus Hebrew school on Wednesday night and Sunday morning. Her mother Susan, a high-flying civil servant, played her Baby Einstein videos as an infant, read to her constantly, sent her to excellent schools and was scrupulous about handwashing.

Susan is, in short, a very conscientious mother. But she worries that she is not. She says she thinks about parenting “all the time”. But, asked how many hours she spends with Shana, she says: “Probably not enough”. Then she looks tearful, and describes the guilt she feels whenever she is not nurturing her daughter.

Susan lives in Bethesda, an azalea-garlanded suburb of Washington, DC packed with lawyers, diplomats and other brainy types. The median household income, at \$142,000, is nearly three times the American average. Some 84% of residents over the age of 25 are college graduates, compared with a national norm of 32%. Couples who both have advanced degrees are like well-tended lawns—ubiquitous.

Bethesda moms and dads take parenting seriously. Angie Zeidenberg, the director of a local nursery, estimates that 95% of the parents she deals with read parenting books. Nearly all visit parenting websites or attend parenting classes, she says.

Bethesda children are constantly stimulated. Natalia, a local four-year-old, watches her three older siblings study and wants

to join in. “She pretends to have homework,” says her mother, Veronica; she sits next to them and practises her letters.

Veronica is an accountant; her husband is an engineer. Their children “all know that school doesn’t end at 18,” says Veronica. “They assume they’ll go to college and do a master’s.” Asked how often she checks her various children’s progress on Edline, the local schools’ website that shows grades in real time, she admits: “More than I should, probably.”

In “Coming Apart”, Charles Murray, a social scientist, ranked American zip codes by income and educational attainment. Bethesda is in the top 1%. Kids raised in such “superzips” tend to learn a lot while

young and earn a lot as adults. Those raised in not-so-super zips are not so lucky.

Consider the children of Cabin Creek, West Virginia. The scenery they see from their front porches is more spectacular than anything Bethesda has to offer: the Appalachian Mountains rather than the tree-lined back streets of suburbia. But the local economy is in poor shape, as the coal industry declines. The median household income is \$26,000, half the national average. Only 6% of adults have college degrees. On Mr Murray’s scale, Cabin Creek is in the bottom 10%.

Melissa, a local parent, says that her son often comes home from school and announces that he has no homework. She does not believe him, but she cannot stop him from heading straight out across the creek to play with his friends in the woods.

She has other things to worry about. The father of her first three children died. The father of her baby is not around. Her baby suffers from a rare nutritional disorder. And Melissa has to get by on \$420 a month in government benefits. Small wonder that she struggles to enforce homework. And small wonder the gap between haves and have-nots in America is so hard to close.

Parenting has changed dramatically in the past half-century. When labour-saving products such as washing machines, dishwashers and ready meals started to spread, people naturally assumed that parents would soon have much more free time.

Not so. Although the average American couple spent eight hours a week less on household chores in 2011 compared with 1965, according to the Pew Research Centre, more than all of this extra time was gobbled up by child care (see chart 1). Women now devote an extra four hours a week to looking after their offspring; men devote an extra four and a half. This is largely a

