

► good thing. For most people, teaching a kid to ride a bike is more rewarding than washing dishes. A different Pew survey finds that 62% of parents find child care “very meaningful”, a figure that falls to 43% for housework and only 36% for paid work.

However, there are two worries about modern parenting. One concerns “helicopter parents” (largely at the top of the social scale), who hover over their children’s lives, worrying themselves sick, depriving their offspring of independence and doing far more for them than is actually beneficial. This gets a lot of attention, probably because media folk belong to the helicoptering classes (see box on next page). The other worry concerns parents at the bottom, who struggle to prepare their children for a world in which the unskilled are marginalised. This is far more important.

In a study in 1995, Betty Hart and Todd Risley of the University of Kansas found that children in professional families heard on average 2,100 words an hour. Working-class kids heard 1,200; those whose families lived on welfare heard only 600. By the age of three, a doctor’s or lawyer’s child has probably heard 30m more words than a poor child has.

Well-off parents talk to their school-age children for three more hours each week than low-income parents, according to Meredith Phillips of the University of California, Los Angeles. They put their toddlers and babies in stimulating places such as parks and churches for four-and-a-half more hours. And highly educated mothers are better at giving their children the right kind of stimulation for their age, according to Ariel Kalil of the University of Chicago. To simplify, they play with their toddlers more and organise their teenagers.

### The Adventures of Supermom

“I talk to him constantly,” says Lacey, another Bethesda mother, of her two-year-old son. “As we go through the day, I talk about what we’re doing. I try to make the regular tasks interesting and fun, like going to the grocery store.” Her older son, who is five, devours maths apps and asks his mother questions about arithmetic. At the weekend the family might go to the American History Museum or the Washington Zoo or a park.

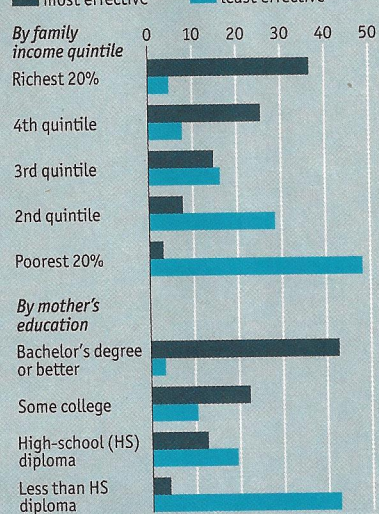
Cabin Creek parents love their children just as much as Bethesda parents do, but they read to them less. It doesn’t help that they are much more likely to be raising their children alone, like Melissa. Only 9% of American women with college degrees who gave birth in the past year are unmarried; for those who failed to finish high school the figure is 61%. Two parents have more time between them than one.

And even two-parent families in Cabin Creek tend to be more stretched than those in Bethesda. Sarah, another Cabin Creek mom, has a sick mother and a husband

### The parenting gap

Percentage of parents who are among the:

■ most effective ■ least effective



Source: Richard V. Reeves and Kimberly Howard, “The Parenting Gap”, September 2013

who was injured in a coal mine. Her three boys, two of whom make it a point of pride to be on the naughty kids list at school, exhaust her. She helps them with their homework and reads to them fairly regularly, but often just lets them watch television. “Dora the Explorer” is somewhat educational, she says: “It’s got Spanish in it.”

Children with at least one parent with a graduate degree score roughly 400 points higher (out of 2,400) on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (a test used for college entrance) than children whose parents did not finish high school. This is a huge gap. It is hard to say how much it owes to nurture and how much to nature. Both usually push in the same direction. Brainy parents pass on their genes, including the ones that predispose their children to be intelligent. They also create an environment at home that helps that intelligence to blossom, and they buy houses near good schools.

Nonetheless, there is evidence that parenting matters. After reading enough scholarly papers to make a life-sized papier-mâché elephant, Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution, a think-tank, concludes that it accounts for about a third of the gap in development between rich and poor children. He argues that the “parenting gap” is more important than any other.

The two aspects of parenting that seem to matter most are intellectual stimulation (eg, talking, reading, answering “why?” questions) and emotional support (eg, bonding with infants so that they grow up confident and secure). Mr Reeves and his Brookings colleague Kimberly Howard take a composite measure of these things called the HOME scale (Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment) and relate it to how well children do in later life, using data from a big federal survey of

those born in the 1980s and 1990s.

The results are striking. Some 43% of mothers who dropped out of high school were ranked among the bottom 25% of parents, as were 44% of single mothers. The gap between high- and middle-income parents was small, but the gap between the middle and the bottom was large: 48% of parents in the lowest income quintile were also among the weakest parents, compared with 16% of the parents in the middle and 5% in the richest (see chart 2).

Likewise, the difference between high-school dropouts and the rest was far greater than the gap between high-school and college graduates. Mr Reeves and Ms Howard estimate that if moms in the bottom fifth were averagely effective parents, 9% more of their kids would graduate from high school, 6% fewer would become teen parents and 3% fewer would be convicted of a crime by the age of 19.

From a public-policy perspective, nature is a given. Individuals can influence the genes their children inherit, by choosing the right partner, but the state is concerned only with how children are nurtured. America lavishes public money on school-age children (more than \$12,000 per pupil each year, or nearly one and a half times the rich-country average) but virtually ignores the very young, despite strong evidence that the earliest years matter most. Only 67% of American three- to five-year-olds and 42% of under-threes are enrolled in formal child care or preschool. In France it is 100% and 48%.

Government meddling in parenting is politically touchy. As Mr Reeves writes: “Conservatives are comfortable with the notion that parents and families matter, but too often simply blame the parents for whatever goes wrong. They resist the notion that government has a role in promoting good parenting.” As for liberals, they have “exactly the opposite problem. They have no qualms about deploying expensive public policies, but are wary of any suggestion that parents—especially poor and/or black parents—are in some way responsible for the constrained life chances of their children.”

Nothing the government can do will give the children of Cabin Creek the same life chances as the children of Bethesda. But weak parents can learn to be stronger, and outsiders can sometimes help them. In West Virginia, for example, an organisation called Zero to Three (as in, 0-3 years old) sends “parent educators” to families. They find them via the local maternity clinic, visit their homes and identify the parents most in need of help by looking for simple clues. For example, are there fewer than ten books visible? Does the family go out less than once a week?

The parent educators don’t just nag parents to read to their offspring more and hit them less. They also teach them how to in- ►