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# 'Making Up' the Middle-Class Child: Families, Activities and Class Dispositions

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**ABSTRACT**

In this article we draw on data collected from a recent qualitative project to highlight the enthusiasm of middle-class parents for enrolling their under fives in 'enrichment' activities (extra-curricular creative and sporting classes). We seek to identify the part activities play in parental strategies for class reproduction. We first consider the broader issue of children and consumption, drawing out the way in which consumption and leisure activities are highly classed, and focusing on notions of taste and distinction. Then, using examples from the data, we emphasize the sense of urgency and responsibility parents felt concerning their child's development and the classed and gendered involvement of parents. We conclude that enrichment activities are one response to the anxiety and sense of responsibility experienced by middle-class parents as they attempt to 'make up' a middle-class child in a social context where reproduction appears uncertain.

**KEY WORDS**

children / middle classes / parenting

*'Parenting mania' … This is not to say that everyone catches it. The profile of the target group is roughly as follows: highly susceptible are middle-class women who are well-educated city-dwellers, expecting their first child at a fairly advanced age.*
(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 117)



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## Introduction

This article draws on an ESRC-funded study (R000239232) of middle-class families choosing child care, which explores aspects of the habitus, dispositions and practices of families across and within different fractions of the middle classes as they organize and plan the care and education of their children. We argue in our book (Vincent and Ball, 2006) based on this project that if analyses of classed behaviour in relation to education and care are to go beyond a blunt middle class / working class dichotomy, we need to consider the behaviour and values of particular class fractions and nuanced similarities and differences between them.

We are focusing in particular here on an area of commonality among the middle classes: the enthusiasm for 'enrichment' activities, extra-curricular sports and creative classes in which respondent families enrolled their children (most, but not all, of the examples here pertain to the under fives). We consider the role which these activities play in parents' efforts to reproduce their children within the middle classes. We hope to capture something of the on-going processes of transmission, acquisition and conversion which are invested in middle-class childrearing – that is, their 'reproduction strategies'. This story of the 'making up' of the middle-class child involves a number of influences, including consumer culture, parental awareness of fluctuations in education and labour markets, and parents' perceptions of congestion and competition.

We first offer some details about the research project and the phenomenon of enrichment activities. Second, we consider the broader issue of children and consumption, drawing out the way in which consumption and leisure activities are highly classed. We develop this idea in the third section by focusing on notions of taste and distinction. Finally, we return to the study to consider the enrichment activities in more detail, emphasizing the classed and gendered involvement of parents, the sense of urgency and responsibility parents in our research felt around the development of their children, and the role activities play in relation to schooling. We conclude that enrichment activities are one response to the anxiety and sense of responsibility experienced by middle-class parents as they attempt to resist 'fears of falling' (Ehrenreich, 1989), and 'make up' a middle-class child in a social context where reproduction appears uncertain (also Lareau, 2003).

## The Study

Before giving some background information on the project, we wish to 'place' ourselves in relation to it (for more details see Vincent and Ball, 2006). We speak of middle-class parents in the third person, but Carol at least feels deeply implicated in the processes we are seeking to describe and analyse. She is a middle-class London mother, as were most of our respondents. A lot of their references, their concerns and their understandings are also hers. So we are concerned, certainly,

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to get some analytical distance from our respondents, but also not to 'other' them or to take up the morally superior position of omnipotent researchers (Skeggs, 1997; Standing, 1999).

The article uses material from interviews with 57 mothers and 14 fathers (from 59 different middle-class families) in two localities in London – Battersea and Stoke Newington. These areas were chosen because we felt that they would offer an interesting contrast in middle-class populations. Indeed, the Battersea sample had large numbers of financial sector professionals and managers, while in Stoke Newington there were more welfare/voluntary sector professionals (detailed descriptions of the two localities and respondent groups are provided in Vincent and Ball, 2006; Vincent et al., 2004).[1] We have written elsewhere about the issues on which the middle-class populations of the two areas differ (Ball and Vincent, 2007; Ball et al., 2004), but here, through our discussion of enrichment activities, we focus on an area of commonality. We employed a variety of methods to identify respondents, including placing adverts in child-friendly shops and cafes, and in local area parenting and National Childbirth Trust (NCT) newsletters. We also attended preschool activity sessions (e.g. music, library story-time), and 'snowballed' from our initial contacts. All families had at least one preschool child, ranging in ages from a few months to five years. We conducted repeat interviews with 20 mothers, nine of which included their partners. The respondent parents were a singular group, being largely white (except three), in heterosexual relationships (except one), and highly educated (52 mothers and 52 fathers had at least a first degree).

As part of our in-depth, semi-structured interviews, we asked how the children spent their days, what they did, either at home with the mother or carer, or in another care setting. Parents whose children attended nursery often mentioned the 'extras', now routinely included by private day care providers (but often at extra cost), such as French, music, or (more unusually) yoga. We also specifically asked respondents whether their children were involved in any other such activities outside nursery. In nearly every case they were (and the exceptions were mostly those attending nursery full time and involved in 'extra' activities there).

Frank Furedi in his diatribe against parental anxiety and all its causes, writes of 'contemporary culture's preoccupation with the virtues of constant infant stimulation' (2001: 82). And indeed the widespread formal and commercial provision of enrichment activities which provide such 'infant stimulation' for the under fives is relatively recent. Tumble Tots, one of the best-known and widely established gym classes, started in 1979. However, there appears to have been a boom in enrichment activities over the last 10 to 15 years, and the availability and range of activities is still increasing. Commercial providers are local or franchised nationally and they advertise in local newsletters and magazines. The summer 2005 edition of *Families North* (a London newsletter) contains adverts for drama, dance, music, art (several different providers for all of these), singing, karate, yoga, gym, cooking, football, mixed sports, swimming, computing, French, basketball and pottery. The spring 2006 edition included life coaching and sewing (not together!). Children

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**Table 1** Number of families mentioning activities for their children

| | Music | Ballet/Dance | Gym | French | Drama | Sport |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Battersea | 23 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 7 |
| Stoke N. | 15 | 8 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 5 |

*Note:*
Some families had more than one child, and some children did more than one activity, so the totals here exceed the total number of families (59).

can start most of these activities from age 3 or 4 years onwards, although there is also a thriving market in classes in baby gym, movement, music and art for the under threes. These activities are replicated outside London, although possibly not in such density and variety.

> Research by WAA, the London and Birmingham advertising agency, reveals that the average family spends £1500 per child between the ages of six months and eight years on additional classes and activities (outside school hours). Most activities are given up within 5 weeks. [This sum] does not take into account the cost of specialist equipment … [A spokesman for the firm commented that] 'Parents rightly want to give their child a head start in life but unfortunately they often start them on activities when they are too young …'. (*Loving and Family Life Magazine*, Autumn 2004: 9)

It has to be noted that attending such activities provides a diversion for carers as well as children, and a potential opportunity to socialize with other adults. However, the emphasis and range of the activities the children in our sample are involved in goes beyond the simple need for their carer to get out of the house. What is striking, and difficult to convey except by reporting the numbers, is how much music, and dance, and French, and structured physical activity is part of the normal weekly routine for the young children in our research.

We aim to analyse the meaning and purpose of these activities for these middle-class families. We start with some general comments about children and consumer culture.

## Children and Consumption

Martens, outlining the antecedents of the current relationship between children and the market, notes that:

> As modernity progressed, childhood became increasingly construed as 'sacred', as distanced from the economic with children being valued increasingly in emotional and sentimental ways (Cook, 2000: 113). This construction of childhood was far removed from the profanity of the market, creating difficulties for entrepreneurs who recognised in children new opportunities to expand markets. (2005: 348)

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Cook (2000) argues further that those marketing goods to children had two options in response to this sacred child/profane market dichotomy. One was to market toys and goods to parents as beneficial to children's development, and the other was to communicate directly to children, treating them as autonomous participants in the market place (and thereby removing some of the protection accorded to the 'sacred' child). These are broadly age-related initiatives, with the former being the stronger strategy in relation to young children (Martens, 2005: 351). As Kenway and Bullen note, advertisers 'exhort parents – mothers – to buy products promising to ensure the child's maximum development' (2001: 42). Examples here include Baby Einstein, Mozart for babies, Early Leaning Centre shops etc. Such products are marketed through promises of 'fun with a purpose' (Block, 1997, cited in Kenway and Bullen 2001: 82; see also Williams, 2006). 'Advice' directed towards new parents is often closely linked to advertising (Kenway and Bullen, 2001: 40), the linkages making it seem as though appropriate child development is only achievable with the right advice, goods and services.

This message is also conveyed by the increasing number of glossy parenting magazines. *Junior*, for example, is designed in the style of fashion and lifestyle publications directed towards women. It features articles on entertainment, education, health, fashion and travel for the under eights. In the *Junior* world (as opposed to the traditional women's 'glossies') children replace men as objects of desire and also replace women themselves as the recipients of a developed and detailed consumerism. Recently, a number of free magazines have appeared in London – glossier versions of the *Families* newsletters, slimmer versions of *Junior*. *Loving Family and Life*, *Angels and Urchins*, *Flapjack* and *Adore* also offer advice on childrearing and features on children's fashion and entertainment. Supported by advertising, these magazines both respond to and stimulate parents' sense of responsibility for the child. Concomitant anxiety and the lure of the market often lead to frantic parental activity and consumption on behalf of their children. There is a degree of self-awareness about this (of which this article could be said to be part), which may not, however, change behaviour.[2]

On another aspect of consumption, Williams (2006) in her ethnographic research in toy stores in America, comments that the exclusive toy store in her project, 'Diamond Toys', was more adult-dominated than the contrasting case study – 'Toy Warehouse', a retail park 'box store' – and was a place where the adults 'bought what *they* wanted' (Williams, 2006: 164, original emphasis). Williams references Seiter's (1993) argument that 'parents and grandparents communicate their values to their child through the toys they buy for them' (Williams, 2006: 164), and that educational toys and 'nostalgia toys' (from an apparently more 'innocent' era) were therefore favoured purchases.

The child here is understood as a project – soft, malleable and able to be developed and improved, with the 'good' parent presenting a myriad of opportunities and support for the child to have a range of learning experiences. At this point, it is important to note that these attitudes are class-specific, their

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strongest manifestation particularly associated with the professional middle class (see also Lareau, 2002, 2003). Therefore, in general, the consumption behaviour of parents and children needs to be understood as that of 'materially positioned individuals belonging to differentiated social groupings and communities' (Martens, 2005: 350); 'household consumer cultures' (p. 351) of which enrichment activities are a part, are of course highly differentiated.

## Taste and Distinction

Acts of consumption and 'taste' are used to maintain, strengthen or sometimes challenge social boundaries. Music, a popular enrichment activity, is an interesting example here. Bourdieu specifically discusses the role of music as a classificatory practice. Indeed he suggests that 'nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music'. He goes on to say that this classification and affirmation of class comes about 'by virtue of the rarity of the conditions of acquiring the corresponding dispositions'. Further, he argues that 'for an adequate interpretation of the differences found between the classes or within the same class as regards their relation to various legitimate arts, painting, music, theatre, literature etc., one would have to analyse fully the social uses, legitimate or illegitimate to which each of these arts, genres, works or institutions considered lends itself' (1986: 18). We draw some inferences below about some social uses. For Bourdieu, music – classical music that is – has a special place in distinguishing the 'bourgeois world' from that of the 'populace', or as he also suggests 'inheritors' from 'newcomers'.[3] Of particular importance for him in making such distinctions, even among those who share an enjoyment of classical music, is not simply what kind of classical music is enjoyed but the 'conditions of reception' involving either 'belated knowledge through records' or 'early knowledge through playing the piano' (Bourdieu, 1986: 19). The latter 'early, domestic, practical acquaintance' (1986: 76) – childhood music lessons – is a particular mode of acquisition of cultural capital.

However, the assertion made by Bourdieu that high-status individuals dislike items of popular culture, seeing them as crude and vulgar, is challenged, at least in the US context, by Bryson (1996) and Peterson and Kern (1996). Petersen and Kern (1996) describe the growing phenomenon of the 'cultural omnivore' who 'can access, know, participate and feel confident about using a wide variety of cultures (from low to high)' (Skeggs, 2004: 143). This does not, however, indicate an absence of distinction and boundaries. Bryson argues that 'cultural breadth' (1996: 895), patterns of broad taste displayed by the cultural omnivore, is not indiscriminate and still excludes particular low-status genres and cultural styles. Cosmopolitan cultural tastes thereby act as a marker of distinction, a 'new criterion of cultural exclusion' (Bryson, 1996: 897).

An example of class divisions and boundaries in childrearing can be found in the concerns some of our middle-class parent respondents had about the

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tastes and practices of working-class childminders. They were very aware of differences in the childminder's environment and their own homes, and of differences in approaches to TV, food and activities (see Vincent and Ball, 2006). The distinctions brought to bear deploy loose-fitting but practical signifiers which help to 'place' people in the social world and construct a 'structure of affinity and aversions' (Bourdieu, 1987: 7). Thus, the distinctions between one child's 'hand-crafted' wooden toys and another's plastic *Toys R Us* versions denote separate circuits and lifestyles, supported by different amounts of financial capital, but also invested with different social and cultural capitals. The toys themselves may not vary that much in what the children can do with them, but their appearance, their packaging and what they signify are worlds apart. As Bourdieu argues:

> Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects classified by the classification distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar. (1986: 6)

The dispositions and distinctions involved in the frantic activity to make up a middle-class child have a particular relevance in terms of Bourdieu's understanding of the functioning of the education system and the relationships between cultural capital and academic capital. It is not sufficient to attend to the education system alone:

> Academic capital is in fact the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (the efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital directly inherited from the family). (Bourdieu, 1986: 23)

In other words, in order to fully come to grips with the distribution of academic capital we must look at the work done inside the family in the transmission of cultural capital and in particular 'in its earliest conditions of acquisition … through the more or less visible marks they leave' (Bourdieu, 2004: 18). This is, Bourdieu argues, 'the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment' (2004: 17). Here, however, the inherited capital is supplemented by that bought in as activities. These activities contribute to the cultural capital held by and embodied in the family itself and are part of an accrual of class resources (Skeggs, 2004).

## Body (Gym) and Soul (Music)

The emphasis upon enrichment activities was shared across the two research localities, although a higher number of activities is mentioned in Battersea than in Stoke Newington. This may be a reflection of the greater financial capital available in Battersea, or may indicate a different relationship to educational futures. The enrichment activities discussed here are not necessarily closely connected to the advancement of formal learning (although we speculate on their more diffuse benefits below). Instead they are about the acquisition of cultural

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skills and knowledge, the establishment of the foundations of a cultural breadth – the beginnings of a 'renaissance child'.

As noted earlier, involvement in 'enrichment activities' is class specific: an indicator of 'good' parenting – or more accurately mothering – and recognized as such by other professional middle-class parents. Lareau's recent study into class-related differences in the 'cultural logics of childrearing' (2002: 772), illustrates the way in which social class influences the 'rhythms of family life'. She identifies the 'cultural logic of middle-class parents' as emphasizing 'concerted cultivation' of their children. 'They enrol their children in numerous age-specific, organised activities that dominate family life and create enormous labour, particularly for mothers. The parents view these activities as transmitting life skills to children' (Lareau, 2002: 748). Lareau argues that the childrearing strategies of the working-class and poor parents in her study emphasize, by contrast, the 'accomplishment of natural growth'. 'These parents believe that as long as they provide love, food and safety, their children will grow and thrive. They do not focus on developing their children's special talents' (Lareau, 2002: 748–9).

Williams applies Lareau's argument to toy shopping, arguing that 'worthy' purchases are 'part of the child-rearing strategy of concerted cultivation favoured by middle class adults' (Williams, 2006: 183). Thus, Williams observes that 'middle class parents were often appalled by the kitschy toys that their children coveted and tried to interest them in other things' (p. 149). However, in line with the emphasis within concerted cultivation on fostering autonomy, Williams finds 'children retained their authority as the ultimate decision-maker in these instances' (p. 149).

Lareau's distinction between 'concerted cultivation' and 'natural growth' is supported by our findings both from our (now completed) research on middle-class parents (Vincent and Ball, 2006) and our current project exploring working-class parents' use and choice of childcare. The working-class families are far less likely to involve their children in enrichment activities. One clear reason for this is of course financial, as many of these activities are expensive (see below). But we suggest that the working-class parents are much less likely to see their children as a project for development. Instead, the children just *are*, with characteristics, skills and talent being understood as more fixed and static (Reay and Ball [1997] discuss working-class fatalism with regard to education). By contrast, a black middle-class couple in Lareau's study, Mr and Ms Williams 'couldn't imagine themselves *not* investing large amounts of time and energy in their [9 year old] son's life' (2002: 757). This investment is clearly one way of augmenting middle-class privilege, something at which middle-class families appear adept (Griffith and Smith, 2005). Research conducted by Diane Reay and colleagues on middle-class families who send their children to inner-urban comprehensives analyses the ways in which this apparently 'risky' educational choice becomes another way of 'resourcing the middle class self' (Reay et al., 2007: 1054). One benefit for middle-class children is their gain of valuable 'multicultural capital', derived from their knowledge of ethnic 'others' and their acquisition of aspects of 'other' cultures. Such capital allows white middle-class

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children to be cultural omnivores; 'streetwise, globally knowledgeable, tolerant, inclusive' (Reay et al., 2007: 1052–3).

Such investment is gender-specific as well as class-specific. 'Intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) for middle-class mothers involves the necessity of broadening the children's worldview and developing their talents (Lareau, 2002: 757) through 'exposure' (p. 755) to as many valued experiences as possible. 'Intensive mothering', or what Manicom (1984) calls 'total mothering', requires a heavy investment of the mother's time, energy, money and emotional commitment to enhancing the child's intellectual, physical, social and emotional development: 'the maximum free time being harnessed to maximum cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 2004: 19). Bourdieu posits that women are 'the predominant markers of taste. It is women's role to convert economic capital into symbolic capital through the display of tastes' (Skeggs, 2004: 142; see also Byrne, 2006; Vincent and Ball, 2006). In the families in our research it was certainly the mothers who bore the responsibility for researching, arranging and monitoring the care and education of the children, and their attendance at activities. Griffith and Smith (2005) also argue that it is middle-class women's work that complements the educational work of the school, or, as we argue below in relation to these preschool children, develops their 'learning readiness'. This process may consist of activities bought in the market place and/or, as this quote from a father shows, activities arranged at home. Daniel argues that it is the responsibility of parents to provide a 'creative environment' for their children, although his frequent work-related absences from the home mean that the actual work is done by his partner, Connie.

> I think that most education occurs at home …The [childcare] help is convenience help; we're not looking for, you know, fantastic quality, creative … Because Connie is incredibly creative with them, you know, she provides this incredibly creative environment. And, you know, there's just all those things going on, and they're all playing musical instruments and, you know, they're constantly painting and crafts and … You know, and that's the role of the home … I think it's our, as parents, it's our responsibility. (Connie and Daniel, Stoke Newington [SN])

The 'making up' of the child in terms of particular 'talents' or 'abilities' is then 'the product of an investment of time and cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 2004: 17) and also money. The buying-in of expertise through activities (or tutoring, or parenting classes) is one of the more obvious ways in which cultural capital is linked to economic capital. Children's activities in our study ranged in cost from 50 pence to £15 an hour.

> You used to enjoy music, didn't you? …And [son] did a French course in the summer. … I took him if I was at home, [carer] took him if I wasn't. And it has worked very well. It is expensive, that's, that's the drawback, it is very expensive … (Margaret, Battersea [B])

> Oh God, yeah, well, I suppose so. I mean, [carer] did used to take her to Tin Pan Annie, which is a, sort of, a music class around here. But, no, I mean, you know, apart from anything else, I mean, if you're paying somebody as a full-time nanny,

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> why would you, why would you want to have them going to all these other things which cost an arm and a leg? (Kathryn, B) (but see Kathryn's next quote)

> It's £4 a session for half an hour. It's not exactly cheap. (Valerie, B)

The role of the aesthetic in this as a vehicle of accumulation of culture for exchange – 'making culture into a property of the middle class itself' (Skeggs, 2004: 135) – is important, but at the same time there is enjoyment to be had for the children. The two things are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, aestheticization involves 'a particular relation to culture as a resource, which is used to generate the self' (Skeggs, 2004: 137) – a form of extension and accumulation of value to the self. The two aspects may indeed be inseparable, as part of what is being acquired is the ability to enjoy. To know what is good and what is good for you; an investment of oneself in activities of legitimate taste, and the development of oneself as investment. 'The generation of an aesthetic self relies on the accrual of cultural capital in the right composition, of the right volume, with the right knowledge in the right way' (Skeggs, 2004: 136) – no wonder so much anxiety ensues!

> God, yeah, they do masses. He has flute lessons, piano lessons, football, he also does cubs, they both do swimming. (Kathryn, B)

> I'm just, I try, I took her to ballet and it was about the same time that I started her at playgroup and I just thought she's too young, she sat rather frightened on my lap, so I'll leave that for a while.[4] I sort of want to start her on violin, but I'm still debating because it's a big undertaking to do it, I'd have to also learn it apparently. (Denise, SN)

This approach – 'concerted cultivation' – is part of a process of experimentation of making and finding the child, ensuring that talents and abilities are located and made the most of. The parents work within a logic which draws on the idea of 'the pursuit of self-making' (Jordan et al., 1994: 5–6) which lies at the heart of liberal individualism – the idea, as Bauman (1993: 4) puts it, of individuals with 'identities not-yet-given', which in their construction over time involves the making of choices. This is a particular kind of individualism, and a particular kind of freedom, embedded in the specialness and particularity of the young child, and the idea that the child should be able to realize their inherent capabilities or potential and become a self-developing subject, a person of categoric value.

> I would like to think that I'm not channelling her too much in one particular direction. I'm giving her options, or presenting options to her, so she can choose her way, how she wants to be, and what are her interests and what are her strengths. So she's given a variety of ... maybe ... today I bought her a little tennis racquet, because we went to this drop-in thing at the tennis here, and she shows an interest in tennis, she likes kicking a ball. We go to a music class. She likes swimming. I like to give her a taste of different things to see if it's something she's interested in. (Sally, B)

Nonetheless, a few parents indicated an awareness that the 'making' and the opportunities involved in such activities were also part of a process of transmission and reproduction – a re-making.

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> I think [what's important is] letting them grow into what they're going to be and not trying to impose too much, but still setting a framework of what's acceptable. Also, sharing with them the things that we like and enjoy. I mean, I think we're in great danger of creating historians, because that's what we really like. So, I mean, I really enjoy that part of it, you know, and I think and I suppose music is important to me so I have rather foisted that on them, but they seem quite happy about that, don't they? (Lynn and Allen, B)

As Suzanah's extract (quoted later) indicates, there are other kinds of learning invested in 'activities', forms of social learning, behaviour and responsibility embedded within the fun. All of this is serious stuff, but again we note it is not – indeed cannot be – presented as too serious; the children's wishes and enjoyment are key.

> Yes, we have an eldest child who has got an enormous amount of energy … and has wanted to get into everything. And I should think he's tried everything. And last year he was doing tennis, swimming, he was in the school play … So, that's, sort of, singing, drama. Art he did, they've all done French club but I haven't managed to keep them going because I think it's their choice after school. They don't have to do anything, but if they want to they can. They both started piano and didn't want to continue … And now [one son] wants to learn the saxophone, but we'll have to see about that. My middle one adores cubs … He didn't join any clubs for a long while. (Linda, B)

There is no simple separation of soul-work and body-work here: No obvious hierarchy as Bourdieu suggests. Indeed there are multiple determinations of the body involved here in the production of what we have called a 'renaissance child' – a child with intellectual, creative and sporting skills and experience. As the quotations illustrate, some children do a large number of different sorts of activities with different kinds of developmental and investment purposes.

Rather than being marked by an apparent ease, as Bourdieu seems to suggest, the process of inculcation is hectic, even frantic. As one respondent mother said: 'I'm finding just trying to keep up with [son's] incredibly complex social life hard enough' (Isabel, B). Mothers do not, however, always have to organize all these activities themselves. Private nurseries, as we noted above, offer an ever-increasing range of extras to attract parents. French, for example, is ubiquitous. (Note the apparent cynicism of mothers.)

> [The nursery] buy[s] in things like ballet and French and God knows how much French they learn [laughing]. It's like kind of to please the parents, that's what the parents expect. (Juliet, B)

> She does [learn French at nursery], yeah, I always used to think that I used to disapprove of that actually, 'cos I taught French and German and I just thought it was all very precious and silly to start doing it at, you know, and I thought it kind of appealed to middle-class parents who want their children to be high achievers and in fact they should just be playing and not learning French, but sod it, they offer French there and she loves it and she comes home with little stickers saying she knows what the name of a lemon is … obviously there is a lot of benefit in learning languages early rather than just being exposed to other languages, there are all sorts of benefits … (Jackie, SN)

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> There's a lot of extra-curricular activity [at nursery], they go swimming once a week …and when they're a little bit older a lady comes in once a week to do music and movement with them. They can have French lessons, I mean French at the age of two and a half is a ridiculous concept, but I think it's the concept of other stimulation and exposure to other things, and also I guess, there's a little bit of being disciplined there, you know, they have to sit around the table and spout French words for half an hour or something and soon enough they're at school and they've got to get used to it … (Ruth, B)

Again, we wish to emphasize that the role played by such activities is 'fun with a purpose' (Block, 1997, cited in Kenway and Bullen, 2001: 82). None of our respondents expressed opinions in favour of formal learning at an early age (under three), and indeed several spoke out against 'pushing' children at too young an age. However, enrolling under fives in activities ensured that children developed physical, social and intellectual skills which would leave them in a state of learning readiness for future success at school. The providers' scripts focus on this. One London drama school for example claims its classes 'develop essential life skills', and are especially designed 'to help young children develop all-round skills in a fun and imaginative way'; skills like 'the "4 Cs" – Communication, Concentration, Co-ordination and Confidence – leading to benefits such as a strong memory, a rich vocabulary, high self-esteem' (www.perform.org.uk).

These activities can be understood as evidence of the planning ahead, the concern with the future that defines the approach of the middle classes to education (Ball, 2003). As well as being fun for toddlers, enrichment activities have a second practical purpose for the future, aside from ensuring that the child is in a state of 'learning readiness'. This is to formulate the beginnings of a CV for the child. A proven track record in music, drama, art or sport can increase a child's attractiveness in a competitive school market. For example, a selective state school in London which is commonly over-subscribed asks Year 6 children to take a series of tests. Without passing these academic tests the child will not be offered a place (and many, if not most, will have received private tuition). However, if they do score well, children can then gain valuable extra marks for their participation in extra-curricular activities. The highest scoring children are those offered a place.

Something of the parental sense of necessity, anxiety and expectation in all of this is evident in Jessica's comments below – the word 'should' was commonly used by mothers in discussing the commencement of particular activities. Embedded here is a model of the cultural development of the child and which activities come when. For girls in particular, through ballet and other dance classes particular forms of 'style', 'grace' and 'habit' are invested in the child, embodied in the child, making the child's body readable in a particular way and subject to visible classification. 'The meticulous disciplining of the body enables the conversion of morality into style, aestheticizing virtue' (Skeggs, 2004: 155). And as Suzannah's extract suggests, the child is also subject to learning manners and comportment. Important social learning is evident here and the development of early forms of social capital may also be involved.

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> She's going to do ballet soon. They do extra lessons at the nursery if you want them so she does an hour a week of drama and an hour a week of music. … And then I think we should think about a musical instrument. Oh God – the violin! (Jessica, SN)

> [Oldest daughter] does French at [nursery] – It's just a bit of fun – They sit in a little semi-circle and the French teacher ... she goes round, asks them things so it's teaching her to take turns and stuff like that. How much French [she learns] I'm not sure, but it's not really the aim. [Youngest daughter] does Tumble Tots and Tick Tock [music group], because what I've tried to do is something for their imagination and something physical ... [Oldest daughter] does ballet which is sweet …It's not full on ... I just think it teaches her to take turns and just learn to get on with the other kids. And I always make sure she puts her ballet costume in her bag herself and just little things like that, just get herself organized. (Suzannah, SN)

> Yeah, I do, I mean the ballet thing, it's actually partly because [daughter] like myself, turns her feet in and we have to encourage her to turn her feet out and I think she's going to be a big girl like myself and I think she's going to need to know how to coordinate herself, and I think she enjoys dancing, and there's not an awful lot of option at this age for dancing, so ballet seems to be it really, I guess every girl wants to get dressed up in pink (laughs), I don't know, but we do that on Saturdays up the road … and she steps into the class, she doesn't know anyone there and she gets on with it, and I like to do that because I think she really does have a really good, a very kind of well mixed social circle, and I like the fact that she'll get out and meet new people doing other things. That is the only thing we additionally pay for. (Lauren, B)

There is learning about femininity, self-control, social graces, skills of interaction and, as noted already, grace and movement. Transmission is written onto and into the bodily hexis; Bourdieu asserts that: 'Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*, helps shape the class body' (1986: 190). Perhaps this is why gym classes are the other most commonly bought in activity alongside music, especially in a context of 'moral panics' around child health (asthma, anorexia, obesity, allergies etc.).

Eventually, of course, the conditions of acquisition are obscured and the skills involved are simply seen as 'legitimate competence', viewed as natural and essential qualities of the individual child. Cultural capital is accumulated not only by prolonging the child's education as Bourdieu suggests, but starting it early 'without delay, without wasted time' (2004: 19) as we hope to have demonstrated here.

## Conclusion

The nature of our data only allows us to speculate on the extent to which the music, art, and drama classes involve the early acquisition of the legitimate disposition 'by frequent contact with a particular class of works' (Bourdieu, 1986: 26). In other words, the extent to which these activities expose the child to 'great works' and to what makes them great; and whether in the process the child

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begins to acquire a sense of discernment between the worthy and the popular. That is the 'disposition to recognize legitimate works … and perceive them as worthy of admiration in themselves' (Bourdieu, 1986: 26). The nature of these enrichment activities and classes would suggest though that 'unintended learning [is] made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholarly inculcation of legitimate culture' (Bourdieu, 1986: 28). This is 'the work of the bourgeois family' (p. 28) and their agents. Through activities and visits (to galleries, museums etc.), confrontations with conventions and institutions, the child is surely inducted into the 'caste' of 'those who understand'. However, we should be attentive to the range and variety of activities involved here and the production of a new generation of middle-class cultural omnivores. It may be that doing activities, any activity, which involves the 'stretching' and 'development' of the child is, for many families, more important than the substantive content. We cannot tell from our data how our parents will react if, when their children are slightly older, they opt for 'street dance' rather than ballet, guitar rather than violin. What is equally important however is to recognize that there are particular 'conditions of acquiring' involved here – the class, the teacher, the equipment – conditions that are available only to those who can afford them. Although not exclusively middle class, these are well-bounded settings which market themselves in part in terms of safety and expertise. They are part of a social 'cocooning' of the child, and often set limits on social mixing. Even as they get older the children are escorted or driven from one activity to the next.[5] These activities replace an unsupervised public life of the child (see also Lareau, 2002).

Additionally, we need to note that parenting is increasingly assailed by disparate discourses and imperatives. In particular, the state and the market are offering up versions of 'good' and 'necessary' parenting which insert themselves into the private choices and decisions of middle-class families (there is more history of such insertions for the working classes of course). The responsibility of 'doing the right thing' for the child appears to require additional expertise to be bought in to augment the work of the middle-class family. However, the parental responsibility remains key; after all, in the flow of moral panics around child health, education, and wellbeing it appears that almost everything – including 'too many' activities – is bad for children. At the same time, the possibilities of the social reproduction of the middle-class family are no longer perceived as certain as they perhaps once were. The anticipation of an objective future is fraught with anxieties and risks. Here then calculation, improvisation and invention are to the fore. The work of transmission of cultural capital really is work; 'a labour of inculcation and assimilation' as Bourdieu (2004: 18) puts it. Effort is expended to ensure adequacy and advantage, to ensure the best for that child. It is an effort of endless responsibility, fuelled by the market, provoked by the state and driven by social competition in a context of social and technological risk. Our data may not offer definitive answers on the role of enrichment activities as an induction to 'legitimate' culture, and a preparation for academic achievement. However, they certainly indicate the need to frame our understanding of class opportunities and class differences in educational

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achievement more widely, looking inside the family and at 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996).

## Notes

1 The research design was influenced in this respect by the work of Tim Butler on the spatial distribution of the middle classes in London (Butler with Robson, 2003).
2 'These days, we can offer our children a seemingly endless array of activities and opportunities. It is *natural* [our emphasis] that we should want our children to seize every chance to enrich their lives and learn new skills … So why do we do it? Ironically, we do it because we so desperately and sincerely want to be good parents. We want to offer our children as many opportunities as possible and to set them on the surest path to success' (Devlin, 2004).
3 In our study we classified Battersea and Stoke Newington inhabitants using ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods) 'types'. ACORN data give an indication of consumption and lifestyle patterns of people living in a particular postcode. Interestingly the less well-established middle class in Stoke Newington did not share the marked interest in classical music that was characteristic of the Battersea classifications.
4 There is still space for the child to choose among the variety of activities on offer.
5 Cocooning is the act of insulating or hiding oneself from the normal social environment, or what Faith Popcorn defines as 'the need to protect oneself from the harsh, unpredictable realities of the outside world' (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4422/is_n5_v6/ai_7177496; Vincent and Ball, 2006).

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