

Middle-class children: Squeaky wheels in training

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A study by Indiana University sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco found that working-class and middle-class parents often take very deliberate -- but different -- approaches to helping their children with their school experiences.

Working-class [parents](#), she found, coached their [children](#) on how to avoid problems, often through finding a solution on their own and by being polite and deferential to authority figures. Middle-class parents, on the other hand, were more likely to encourage their kids to ask questions or ask for help.

These self-advocacy skills taught by middle-class parents not only can help the children in school -- because these parents know that in educational settings [teachers](#) often expect and reward such behavior -- but they could help later in life in other institutional settings.

"Youth who do not learn to advocate for themselves might have more difficulty interacting with social service providers, financial service providers, [legal authorities](#) and other bureaucratic institutions," said Calarco, assistant professor in the Department of Sociology in IU's College of Arts and Sciences.

Calarco will discuss her research on Sunday during the [American Sociological Association](#)'s annual meeting in Denver.

Her study focuses on the interaction between parents, children and

teachers during the students' fourth- and fifth-grade years at a public elementary school. Her school observations took place at least twice a week, and then she interviewed the students and parents the summer following their fifth-grade year.

Conducted while Calarco was a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, the study is among the first to provide evidence that parents from different social classes teach their children different lessons about interacting with institutions. It also shows that parents help to perpetuate inequalities not only through what they do for their children, such as equipping them with different resources or opportunities, but also through what they teach children to do for themselves.

Calarco characterized both working-class and middle-class parents as "relentless" when it came to teaching their children important lessons. This sometimes even involved role-playing, when the middle-class parents wanted their children to solve their problem on their own -- but couldn't quite leave it to chance. She also found the students very receptive.

"Even very shy middle-class children learned to feel comfortable approaching teachers with questions, and recognized the benefits of doing so," she said. "Working-class children instead worried about making teachers mad or angry if they asked for help at the wrong time or in the wrong way, and also felt that others would judge them as incompetent or not smart if they asked for help. These differences, in turn, seem to stem not from differences in how teachers responded to students -- when working-class students did ask questions, teachers welcomed and readily addressed these requests -- but from differences in the skills, strategies and orientations that children learn from their parents at home."

Provided by Indiana University

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