

# Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times

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**Title:** Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times

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One of the most maddening things about contemporary book publishing is the niche that a new book is supposed to occupy. This niche is not an abstraction: it corresponds to the actual place where a book will land in the bookstore. Consider, then, an analytical book about contemporary parents: is it a *parenting* book, which will then end up next to the how-to book on toilet training? Maybe. But if the book doesn't offer advice, some would say it doesn't belong there. Then does it belong on the "sociology" shelf, where no parent will find it? What's a book marketer to do?

This quandary extends, of course, to the tone of the hypothetical book itself. A reflective book on contemporary parenting, especially on the hot-button issue of anxious parenting, is often framed as a book about a social problem. Examples of what has come to be called "helicopter parenting" are now so common and so extreme that the issue cries out for journalistic treatment: why is this happening now, is it right or wrong, and (if wrong) what must be done about it? There are now legions of such books (full disclosure: including one of my own) that occupy an uneasy territory between parenting *advice* books and cultural analysis. As parenting books, these books are usually non-starters: no parent wants to buy and read a whole book about what they are doing wrong. And when it comes to helicopter parenting, wrong it is, at least in the consensus opinion of commentators on the subject.

But once in a while there comes a book that maintains its purity (or almost does; more on that later) by locating itself on one end of the spectrum and staying there. Margaret K. Nelson's *Parenting Out of Control: Anxious Parents in Uncertain Times* is just such a book. It is a *sociology* book; its methods, vocabulary, and overall style make it plain that this is a book of careful research and dispassionate analysis. It does not prescribe, but it does describe in exhaustive detail. The book takes as its topic the "helicopter parenting" phenomenon, but for its method it offers pure academic inquiry. Nelson's data consists of 93 in-depth interviews with parents across a broad spectrum of income levels, social classes, and geographic locations, which allows for a breadth of analysis lacking in most other books on the subject. Indeed, the emphasis on social class in this book is its greatest strength: Nelson elegantly demonstrates that parenting styles differ as a function of social class. While parental *anxiety* knows no class boundaries, her interviews make it clearer than ever that "helicopter parenting" is an upper-middle-class thing: other people have neither the time nor the money to hover in this peculiar new way.

The magisterial academic tone of the book also makes it a peculiar addition to the bookshelf on this topic. Nelson maintains a tone of value-neutrality that, as she points out, is lacking in others' work. *Should* parents hover? Is it a bad thing? Is it something about which one should be alarmed? Nelson never tips her even hand on any of these

questions. Indeed, even when discussing parenting behavior that is obviously maladaptive, the author refrains from judgment. A mental health professional might note Nelson's upper-middle-class subjects' exhaustion, their perfectionism, their obsessional thinking, and their paralysis in the face of competing objectives (wanting their children to be supervised but free; close but independent; protected but fearless; etc.) and write "how neurotic can you get?" in the margins of her notebook. But Nelson holds her fire.

Case in point: in a discussion of using cell phones to maintain connections with teenaged children, Nelson quotes extensively from one of her subjects about a daughter's putative ambivalence about attending a wild party. The mother finally prevails upon the daughter to "choose" to come home from the party because of the mother's own emotional neediness. The interview subject even gives *herself* a bad grade: "...at the last minute - I'm probably a bad mother - I said, 'I'm lonely - come home.' And she came home." But even though the subject condemns herself, Nelson does not condemn. This is, after all, description, not prescription.

Indeed, Nelson's dispassionate treatment can be frustrating for those seeking answers to the Big Questions. *Why* is this happening to elite parents? Nelson promises several "lenses" for looking at the data (this is the tipoff that it is written for an academic audience: the required trip to the metaphorical optical shop to get all the different "lenses" needed to understand the data in a multiplicity of ways). But the promised "analytical lens" which will explain why all this is happening *now* is disappointing, as Nelson rejects simpler causal hypotheses in favor of a more careful, "it's complicated." Her upper-middle-class informants suggest causal daisy chains of breathtaking complexity. Parents spend more time with their kids because they feel parenting takes so much time; therefore they have no time for friends; therefore their kids become their only friends; therefore they want to spend more time with their kids, because they have no other friends. Parenting takes an enormous amount of time; therefore people have less time for their spouses; marriages suffer as a result; therefore the only enduring relationships are with one's kids; therefore one invests more in them and less in the marriage, etc. These are the mutually reinforcing explanations Nelson favors, but the reader who longs for answers might find herself saying, okay, so, it's complicated. But why do these people feel parenting must be so time-intensive in the first place?

Nelson's "lens of theory" is also less than satisfying. She classifies elite parents' use of "control" based on warmth, trust, and negotiation, as distinct from "discipline," which is the preferred parenting style of non-elite parents; thus the awkward double-entendre title of the book, which refers not only to "out-of-control" parenting, but parenting "out of (a wish to) control." In reinforcing this distinction, she makes frequent reference to other sociologists who have documented the same phenomena, most notably Annette Laureau. But once again Nelson's reticence about causes, even hypothetical causes, makes the lens of theory turn out to be a lens of taxonomy: after making the distinction, a theory of why these two parenting styles might be so increasingly divergent is not forthcoming.

What's a book marketer to do? On the back cover of Nelson's book, the topic tag reads "PARENTING/SOCIOLOGY," a description that is only half true. *Parenting Out of Control* is an elegant example of contemporary academic sociology, exceedingly free of bias in its methods and modest in its claims. "Helicopter parenting" has brought forth enough Jeremiahs, one might suppose; now the topic has its Portia as well.