# Caregiving in a Crisis: Mothers' Parenting Experiences and the Persistence of Class-Based Parenting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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*Mounting research has revealed how the labor of caregiving and parenting in the United States fell disproportionately to mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, with negative impacts on mothers' personal and professional well-being. Here, we advance this growing body of work by examining how mothers' pandemic-related parenting and caregiving experiences differed across socioeconomic status. We ask the degree to which mothers' class-based parenting approaches persisted or dissipated in the wake of the pandemic. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with 130 mothers caring for children under eighteen in 2020–2021, we find that these parenting patterns largely continued into the pandemic, with mothers' socioeconomic and employment status shaping how they experienced and navigated this disruption and particularly how they managed competing paid and unpaid labor demands.*

**Keywords:** motherhood, caregiving, parenting, socioeconomic status, COVID-19 pandemic

In February of 2021, just under a year after the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep through the United States, the *New York Times* published an article with the headline "America's Mothers Are in Crisis." The piece echoed mounting research documenting the pandemic's negative impacts on mothers (Heggeness 2020; Landivar et al. 2020; Qian and Fuller 2020), including

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how it had exacerbated long-standing gendered inequalities in household work, caregiving duties, and labor-market participation (Cohen and Hsu 2020; Lewis 2020; Weber and Fuhrmans 2020).

Indeed, although the pandemic shook the entire U.S. labor force, it was mothers who disproportionately suffered the negative personal and professional consequences of pandemic-induced disruptions, including increased caregiving demands in the face of daycare shutdowns and school closures (Alon et al. 2020; Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021). As mothers consistently assumed more unpaid domestic labor during the pandemic—in particular, parenting and childcare responsibilities—they also underwent some of the steepest declines in employment and wages, highest levels of burnout, and heightened amounts of stress and anxiety (Calarco et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2021; Collins et al. 2021). At the same time, the pandemic's harms to mothers were inequitably distributed, with low-income, Black, and Latina mothers—who were disproportionately represented in low-wage positions within the front-line service and hospitality industries—experiencing some of the steepest declines in employment and earnings as well as the slowest rates of recovery (Goldman et al. 2021; Lim and Zabek 2021; Moen, Pedtke, and Flood 2020; Thomas et al. 2021).

Over the past four years, robust quantitative and qualitative scholarship has documented the pandemic's varied negative impacts on mothers, including variation in their pandemic-related experiences and outcomes across society (Averett 2021; Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021; Racine et al. 2022; Radey, Langenderfer-Magruder, and Brown Speights 2021; Rinaldo and Whalen 2023; Zanhour and Sumpter 2020). Here we build on this mounting literature to advance a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of mothers' pandemic experiences, with a focus on how their parenting approaches in particular were patterned and shaped by their resources and broader contexts. Drawing on in-depth interview data with 130 mothers caring for children under eighteen collected through the American Voices Project (AVP) in 2020–2021, we ask two questions. First, how did mothers across socioeconomic status (SES) experience disruptions to their caregiving during the pandemic? Second, as mothers navigated those disruptions, to what degree did class-based parenting approaches (Hays 1998; Lareau 2003) persist or fall away?

## BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant disruptions to mothers' work and caregiving responsibilities. In this section, we discuss pandemic-related trends in mothers' employment and caregiving throughout the pandemic, as well as research on classed patterns of parenting before and during the pandemic.

### The Pandemic and Disruptions to Mothers' Employment and Parenting

In the United States, mothers bore the disproportionate burdens of job losses and reductions in paid work hours (Dang and Nguyen 2021; Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2022). In April 2020, maternal employment plunged by 15.7 percent, versus 9.6 percent for fathers (Landivar and DeWolf 2022), and even when mothers remained in the labor force, their average time in paid work decreased (Woodbridge, Um, and Duys 2021). From February 2020 to April 2020, the average number of hours worked per week fell by a factor of more than 1.5 for employed mothers with minor children, relative to little change among working fathers (Collins et al. 2020).

Gendered labor-market outcomes and trajectories during the pandemic stemmed in part from the fact that mothers took on most of the caregiving amid sudden school and daycare closures (Carlson and Petts 2021). Not only were mothers seen as the "natural" and "practical" caregiver over fathers (Calarco et al. 2021), but their jobs were also viewed as more flexible than fathers', leading to the expectation—and reality—that mothers would leave their jobs or reduce their work hours to accommodate more childcare needs during the workday (Rinaldo and Whalen 2023; Heggeness 2020). Even when mothers continued to work full time, they still provided the majority of pandemic childcare (Zamarro and Prados 2021). Although married couples with children became slightly more egalitarian in their caregiving early in the pandemic (Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2022), moth-

ers significantly increased their caregiving as the pandemic continued (Goldin 2022), spending fifteen more hours per week on caregiving and household tasks than fathers (Krentz et al. 2020).

Mothers' pandemic caregiving experiences were also patterned across socioeconomic status. Mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were especially likely to lose their jobs or have their shifts cut (Alon et al. 2020; Tüzemen 2021). Also, despite an initial cash income infusion through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act in Spring 2020, families with children near, at, or below the poverty line fared worst (Parolin et al. 2022). Latina and Black mothers also had the largest initial declines in employment rates, falling 21.2 percent and 15.2 percent respectively in April 2020 relative to February 2020 (DeWolf and Landivar 2022). Also, mothers of young school-age children (age six through twelve) experienced the steepest declines in employment rates and greatest reductions in work hours (Collins et al. 2020; Kocchar 2020). These paid and unpaid labor inequities were partially related to mothers' varied pre-pandemic employment and caregiving situations, including long-standing occupational segregation that has resulted in women's overrepresentation in service sectors and industries—all of which were more likely to close, reduce workers' hours, or lay workers off entirely (Alon et al. 2020; Ruppanner et al. 2021). Low-income, Black, and Latina mothers were also most likely to be employed in vulnerable industries (Gemelas and Davison 2022), and White and Asian women had greater access to remote work (U.S. Department of Labor 2022).

## Mothers' Experiences of Caregiving and Parenting During the Pandemic

These disruptions to mothers' employment, work hours, and work arrangements affected their caregiving experiences. On the one hand, the pandemic upended normal and reliable parenting routines, with the sudden closure and ongoing unreliability of in-person school and daycare options in 2020 and 2021 driving families to turn to more informal types of childcare, including nannies, tutors, older children, and extended family members while working (Zang, Yang, and Calarco 2022). Just under two-thirds of parents in one study reported relying on some form of informal childcare during the pandemic (Zang, Yang, and Calarco 2022).

For mothers with school-age children, unprecedented school closures and a move to virtual schooling also generated a new responsibility for mothers themselves to shoulder, namely, the monitoring and supporting their children's schooling (Clark et al. 2021; Garbe et al. 2020). For mothers working remotely, such workplace flexibility was a double-edged sword (MacEachen, Polzer, and Clarke 2008; Noonan and Glass 2012; Towers et al. 2006; Chung 2022) that resulted in more responsibility for managing children's schooling as well as more work-family conflict by blurring boundaries (Glavin and Schieman 2012). Given mothers' disproportionate responsibilities at home, working from home appeared to widen gender gaps in housework and childcare by providing mothers with even more time to engage in these tasks—particularly if they were the only parent working remotely (Alon et al. 2020; Chung et al. 2021). In fact, during the pandemic, mothers with less flexible work schedules appeared to share childcare more evenly with their partners than mothers with more flexibility (Martucci 2021).

Managing children's schooling from home presented new and significant challenges for mothers. Although some reported enjoying bonding with their children while assisting them with school, mothers also felt overwhelmed and underprepared to supervise their children's learning (San Jose, Concepcion, and San Jose 2021). Additionally, mothers who found themselves unexpectedly homeschooling their children were less able to work themselves (Petts et al. 2021). Parents described difficulties with balancing responsibilities, childrens' motivation, content accessibility, and learning outcomes (Garbe et al. 2020). Remote-working mothers and single mothers reported feeling additional strain in managing paid and unpaid labor demands and increased feelings of guilt and stress (Smith 2022; Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2021; Zanhour and Sumpter 2022). Low-income mothers continued to rely on informal support networks during the pandemic; however, when they faced financial con-

straints, their family and friends did as well, limiting the support their networks could provide (Radey et al. 2022). They were thus forced to make childcare arrangements they felt increased their children's risk of COVID-19 infections, which contributed to feelings of frustration and fear (Radey et al. 2021).

## Intensive Mothering, Natural Growth, and Concerted Cultivation in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although mothers with the greatest access to financial, social, and institutional resources were arguably best poised to adapt to the challenging circumstances of the pandemic, they also reported ongoing stress related to trying to meet the normative ideal of intensive mothering (Cummins and Brannon 2022). This ideology remains the prevailing standard in the United States for "good" motherhood; it specifies that mothers must be children's primary caregivers, regard their children as priceless, and use child-centered, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive childrearing methods (Hays 1998; Damaske 2013). Mothers' embrace of these standards has tended to occur among middle- and upper-middle-class families and has been associated with the hands-on concerted cultivation approach to childrearing through which mothers ensure their children are involved in a multitude of age-appropriate extracurricular activities to teach them important life skills (Lareau 2003). This cultivation can also be ensured by employed mothers through extensive mothering, whereby mothers outsource some of their child's development while reframing good mothering as maintaining their role as the orchestrator of their childrens' lives, which allows them to remain in the paid labor market and maintain their standing as a "good mother" (Christopher 2012).

Yet because intensive and extensive mothering standards are largely informed by neoliberal, Western, White, middle-class values, their availability to and resonance with mothers across society varies. Although some research suggests that mothers of all socioeconomic positions would prefer to raise their children intensively or extensively (Ishizuka 2019), other work has found that mothers' real-life parenting practices can diverge from intensive expectations due to a host of structural and economic circumstances or different community standards (Lankes 2022; Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram 2012). Scholars have identified defensive and inventive mothering as ideologies more often used by lower-income mothers, allowing them to use resourceful and inventive strategies to provide for their children's basic needs and deflect stigma amidst ongoing financial scarcity and insecurity (Elliott and Bowen 2018; Randles 2021). Such ideologies also tend to be associated with the accomplishment of natural growth approach to childrearing, whereby mothers give their children more self-directed time and close extended family connections, allowing children's development to unfold in more freeform and unstructured ways (Lareau 2003).

Growing research suggests that the pandemic challenged and complicated how mothers worked to achieve good motherhood and childrearing. Mothers who practiced intensive mothering during the pandemic were especially likely to report increased feelings of stress, anxiety, and guilt, and frustrations with themselves and their children (Calarco et al. 2020). Intensive mothering applied to new domains during this time, including managing children's remote schooling; this became a source of conflict as mothers created elaborate schedules and held their children accountable for staying on top of their schoolwork and homework (Calarco et al. 2020). In comparison, mothers who did not feel pressured to intensively mother their children, or did not have work and family conflict due to losing their jobs or experiencing childcare disruptions, actually reported additional time with their children as a source of joy (Calarco et al. 2020).

Research suggests that one central way mothers dealt with the new realities of caregiving during the pandemic was to adapt aspects of their parenting, be it through finding a new routine, or carving out more time with their children when everyone was stuck at home (Cummins and Brannon 2022). Additionally, mothers adapted by choosing to "give in" to screen-time requests from their children, and accepted the fact that their children's usage of screens would be elevated to deal with the

stress of the pandemic and the social distancing restrictions in place (Findley et al. 2022). Technology, in addition to limited physically distanced in-person interactions, also allowed mothers and their children to stay connected to family and friends outside the home (Miller et al. 2022). Indeed, amid pandemic-induced challenges, it is also important that mothers' experiences of the pandemic were not exclusively negative. Mothers have reported that the pandemic allowed them the opportunity to spend more time with their families (Haskett et al. 2022) and deepen connections with their children and people in their support networks (San Jose, Concepcion, and San Jose 2021; Radey et al. 2022).

### The Present Study

Taken together, the literature points to considerable nuance and variation in mothers' pandemic caregiving experiences across socioeconomic statuses. Here we extend this literature by asking the degree to which mothers' well-established class-based parenting patterns persisted or fell away in the wake of the pandemic. Indeed, research points to two plausible answers. First, work on parenting adaptations suggests that the pandemic likely disrupted these patterns by making intensive parenting too difficult for higher-SES mothers or easier for lower-SES mothers to engage in concerted cultivation because they had more time with their children at home. However, research highlighting the durability of the intensive mothering ideology into the pandemic suggests the opposite—that these patterns largely persisted through the pandemic because higher-SES mothers remained better equipped to practice concerted cultivation than their lower-SES counterparts. Although the latter possibility suggests a resilience of classed parenting approaches, even in times of crisis, the former suggests that such patterns can be more easily disrupted by contextual forces.

## DATA AND METHODS

This study uses data from the American Voices Project, a large-scale, mixed-methods study of everyday life in the United States. A joint initiative of the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, and the American Institutes for Research, the AVP aimed to deliver a comprehensive portrait of life in rural, suburban, and urban communities. It is a stratified address-based sample, with households randomly drawn from selected census block groups and high-poverty sites oversampled (for more detail, see the introduction). In this article, we use the in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2020 and May 2021 with all 130 mothers caring for children ages seventeen or under in their home.

The sample is racially, geographically, and socioeconomically diverse (see table 1). Among the mothers in our sample, 44.6 percent are non-Hispanic White, 21.5 percent are non-Hispanic Black, 26.2 percent are Hispanic of any race, and the remaining are non-Hispanic Asian, two or more races, or missing on race-ethnicity.[1] Mothers vary in their geographic location, with 16.9 percent residing in the Northeast, 13.1 percent in the Midwest, 23.1 percent in the West, and 46.9 percent in the South. Two-thirds are married (46.2 percent) or cohabiting (20 percent).[2]

1. Respondents gave a wide range of responses when asked with which races and ethnicities they identify; we describe individuals as Black if they stated Black or African American, White if they stated White or Caucasian, and Hispanic if they stated Hispanic or Latina.

2. There were a few notable key sociodemographic differences between lower- and higher-SES groups. First, the higher-SES group had a higher proportion of non-Hispanic White mothers than the lower-SES group: roughly two-thirds of higher-SES mothers were non-Hispanic White, with the remaining third split largely split between non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic of any race, and non-Hispanic Asian. In contrast, the lower-SES group was roughly split evenly between non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic of any race; additionally, a few mothers in the lower-SES group were multiracial or non-Hispanic Asian. Second, among lower-SES mothers, more White mothers were married than Hispanic or Black mothers, and more White and Hispanic mothers stayed at home than Black mothers. However, when it came to income, lower-SES Black mothers had higher incomes than lower-SES Hispanic or White mothers.

**Table 1.** Sample Sociodemographic Characteristics, *N* = 130

| | Percent | | Percent | | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SES** | | **Age** | | **Employment status** | |
| Lower | 67.7 | 18–34 | 41.5 | Full-time | 36.2 |
| Higher | 32.3 | 35–44 | 40.8 | Part-time | 13.8 |
| | | 45 or older | >16 | Unemployed or out of workforce | 50.0 |
| **Race-ethnicity** | | | | | |
| Non-Hispanic White | >43.8 | **Region** | | **Household income last month**[c] | |
| Non-Hispanic Black | 21.5 | South | 46.9 | $0–2,000 | 45.4 |
| Hispanic of any race | 26.2 | West | 23.1 | $2,001–4,000 | 17.7 |
| Other[a] | ** | Northeast | 16.9 | $4,001–6,000 | >10 |
| | | Midwest | 13.1 | >$6,000 | 16.2 |
| **Marital status** | | | | | |
| Married | 46.2 | **Born in United States** | | **Employed mothers' work format** | |
| Cohabitating | 20.0 | Yes | 86.2 | In person | 60.3 |
| Single, never married | 17.7 | No | 13.8 | Remote or hybrid | 39.7 |
| Other[b] | >13 | | | | |
| | | **Education** | | **Age of children**[d] | |
| **Number of children** | | Less than high school | 12.3 | 0–5 | 33.5 |
| 1 | 30.8 | High school or GED | 29.2 | 6–11 | 33.5 |
| 2 | 28.5 | Some college | 25.4 | 12–17 | 32.9 |
| 3 | 25.4 | Bachelor's degree or higher | >30 | | |
| 4 or more | 15.4 | | | **Receipt of federal benefits** | |
| | | | | Yes | 73.1 |
| | | | | No | 26.9 |

*Source*: Authors' tabulation.

*Note*: SES = socioeconomic status. Not all values for each category add to one hundred due to missing data. All counts less than eleven not specified to protect confidentiality (**).

[a] Includes non-Hispanic Asian, Other, and two or more races.

[b] Includes, divorced, separated, or widowed.

[c] For households that failed to report all component income variables, the value for "income last month" was imputed. Multiple imputation was used, with fifty implicates. The regressors were a quadratic in respondent age, race, household size, education, homeownership status, employment status, urban status, and region of residence. The household was assigned to the most common bracket among the fifty implicates.

[d] Many mothers have multiple children; *N* of children = 194. Of the 194 children in the sample, ages are roughly equally distributed among age groups.

We rely on mothers' education to proxy families' socioeconomic status. Although education and income are often considered together to do so, we chose to only use maternal education for two reasons, one theoretical and one practical. First, maternal education is highly theoretically relevant for class-based parenting approaches and child outcomes (McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Jacobsen 2014; Harding, Morris, and Hughes 2015; Prickett and Augustine 2016). Second, because our sample had 10 percent missingness on income (and some of the reported incomes introduced validity concerns for this measure), education served as a more reliable indicator of SES than income in this data set. Mothers with a bachelor's degree or higher were designated as higher SES (32.6 percent of the sample), and those with some college or less were designated as lower SES (67.1 percent). Full-time employed mothers make up 36.2 percent of the sample, part-time employed mothers make up 13.8 percent, and unemployed. Mothers or those who were out of the workforce make up 50 percent. Among

mothers in the labor force, 60.3 percent work in person and 39.7 percent work remotely or on a hybrid basis.

Following institutional ethics approval, individuals were recruited in a letter mailed to their address and follow-up phone calls. The interviewers, all of whom received training in best-practices of in-depth interviewing and other qualitative methods, were a mix of advanced degree-holders, graduate students, college graduates, and undergraduate students. All interviews from March 2020 onward were conducted over the phone, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and deidentified. All respondent names in this article are pseudonyms. When foreign-language interpreters were required, interviewers administered a shortened protocol. Respondents' economic and demographic data were recorded by hand and digitally entered after the interview. Depending on the wave of data collection, respondents were paid between $60 and $140 for participating.

Following informed consent, the interview began with a prompt, "Tell me the story of your life," and continued with questions about individuals' daily patterns, routines, neighborhoods, and lived experiences. Data for this article emerged primarily in the protocol sections focusing on family, daily routines, and stress, worry, and emotional well-being. Certain questions in the protocol were particularly generative for our analysis. In response to the question "What has life been like since the coronavirus/COVID-19 became an issue in the United States?", mothers discussed pandemic-related changes and disruptions in their lives, including specific challenges at home and work. When asked about recent changes in their daily routines and their children's routines, mothers described their detailed, day-to-day experiences which informed our understanding of classed differences in mothers' lives during the pandemic. Mothers were also asked, "Tell me about each of your children's experiences in school," which elicited responses about the virtues and difficulties of virtual and in-person schooling. Three questions that focused on mothers' mental health revealed how mothers were coping with pandemic-induced stressors.

## Data Analysis

We began our analysis by conducting a full review of the relevant 130 interview transcripts, paying particular attention to the protocol sections that delved into mothers' life histories, family and supports, daily routines, and stress, worry, and emotional well-being, as well as the specific COVID-19 questions on recent changes. Our first read involved open coding the interviews to identify insights related to our central research questions on mothers' experiences caregiving during the pandemic. Given our expectation that different stages of the pandemic were qualitatively different for mothers, we classified transcripts into five pandemic seasons based on when the interview was conducted: spring 2020, summer 2020, fall 2020, winter 2020–2021, and spring 2021. Our team divided the interviews among ourselves to code them chronologically, from spring 2020 through spring 2021, enabling an analysis of trends and patterns in mothers' experiences as the pandemic evolved over time.

We then coded the interview data using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. We approached data analysis abductively, through a process in which we moved iteratively back and forth between data and theory (Charmaz 2006; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Conducting an an abductive analysis meant that we were sensitized by previous research and theories about how and why mothers' pandemic experiences might be stratified across social groups; at the same time, we remained open to surprising or unexpected findings to emerge organically (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Given its appropriateness and efficiency for large-*N* studies and team-based qualitative work, we used a flexible coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2018; Gerson and Damaske 2021), beginning with an initial exploration of the data through indexing transcripts with broad codes related to motherhood and pandemic parenting and working to generate more specific conceptual categories, such as work and family conflict, pandemic schooling, and classed approaches to childrearing. We used the coding capabilities in NVivo to tag relevant sections of the interviews with high-level themes we developed based on our research question, such as classed parenting. This was

followed by more detailed coding where we applied more fine-grained, analytic codes—such as concerted cultivation and natural growth—to subsections of the text and used the index as a data reduction tool. We then divided transcripts into groups according to characteristics we found to be substantively important to caregiving and parenting approaches: respondents' socioeconomic and employment statuses. We read transcripts in these thematic categories for patterns within and across multiple groups. Through this process, we determined that one key dimension of variation in mothers' parenting pandemic experiences was employment status; based on this, we coded mothers as employed full time, employed part time, stay-at-home, or unemployed. For our analysis, we chose to group mothers who worked part time with stay-at-home mothers, given that their characteristics (including greatly reduced work hours) and parenting pandemic experiences were more similar to that group than to mothers who worked full time. As a final step in the analysis, we grouped respondents together into four categories and reviewed data on parenting experiences from respondents in each of the following categories to confirm our findings: higher-SES mothers working full time, higher-SES mothers working part time or staying at home, lower-SES mothers working full time, and lower-SES mothers working part time or staying at home.

## FINDINGS

We begin by laying out the unique parenting context that mothers across socioeconomic status experienced due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, including worries about children's well-being and concerns about children and family members catching COVID-19. We then illuminate how the pandemic disrupted lower- and higher-SES mothers' caregiving and employment arrangements. Next, we show how mothers adapted their parenting approaches after these disruptions, and how these adaptations were shaped by both mothers' socioeconomic positions and their pre-pandemic parenting approaches. In doing so, we reveal how, despite the changed environment of parenting in the pandemic, mothers retained certain classed parenting practices—that is, natural growth and concerted cultivation—based on inequality of resources and environmental characteristics that persisted into the pandemic. Throughout, we demonstrate how the challenges mothers across SES encountered and the work-family trade-offs they were forced to make varied by mothers' employment status.

### The Unprecedented Context of Parenting Across Socioeconomic Status During a Pandemic

Mothers across the sample shared worries about children's well-being in the midst of social isolation and changing school modalities, as well as concerns about children and family members catching COVID-19. Consistent with prior work (Carlson et al. 2022; Gildner et al. 2021; Duh-Leong et al. 2022), mothers described being forced to make ongoing parenting decisions that demanded weighing the risks for their children. For all mothers, assessing these particular risks was emotional labor unique to pandemic times. Emily, a White higher-SES mother who worked as a government administrator, described her parenting as "making risk assessments all day long." She worried: "You know, is this safe? Is this a healthy choice for my child, for my husband, for our friends that we're close to?" Mothers also described feeling in a bind when considering the choice between their children's safety and in-person education. They were concerned about learning loss when children were enrolled in remote or hybrid schooling, but had to think about this in relation to continued health risks. Anna, a White higher-SES mother and special education teacher, lamented, "In trying to protect their safety from this virus, I worry that they will be forever affected and further harmed by the loss of education."

Mothers across backgrounds and geographic locations experienced difficulties figuring out how to keep their children busy amid institutional closures and stay-at-home directives. A central pandemic-related change mothers described was the inability to use public spaces and in-person educational activities that, before the pandemic, had been important to their children's development. Mothers expressed frustration that institutions such as li-

braries and zoos and extracurricular activities such as sports, musical ensembles, and clubs were no longer available for entertaining and occupying their children. This was particularly true during the first six months of the pandemic, and though schools returned to some in-person operational status in many states where mothers were interviewed by September of 2020, mothers across the country noted that other facilities and programs were slower to open. Mothers across the socioeconomic spectrum sought alternative options for their children, which ranged from educational to those designed primarily "to fill the time." Amy, a White, higher-SES stay-at-home mother of one shared, "COVID's definitely hampered a lot of our plans and ability to go out. Prior to COVID, we had a regular stream of play dates." Now, she explained, "I try to keep our activities different but basically, I'm entertaining her during the day while my husband's working." Efforts to keep children safe by limiting their time outside the home also demanded difficult trade-offs, most notably the loss of family gatherings with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, which had before the pandemic served as key forms of childcare, socializing, and joy (Miller et al. 2022).

Yet alongside these agonizing trade-offs, mothers also reported aspects of the pandemic as having some benefits, such as offering them more time with their families and children (San Jose, Concepcion, and San Jose 2021). Carly, a lower-SES Black mother of two, referred to the pandemic as a "blessing in disguise." One White lower-SES stay-at-home mother, Becca, described this silver lining: "We went into this year with the hope and the desire to spend more time together and to get to know each other better and just learn, as a family, who we are. This year has been awesome because we've been able to do that."

Other mothers shared how the pandemic allowed them time to stop and think as well as connect with family members. Angie, a higher-SES White mother of two, said the pandemic brought "life into perspective," and gave her more time for "reflection and pause"; meanwhile, Andrea, a higher-SES Black mother of three, noted that the pandemic provided an opportunity to "regroup and reconnect" with family. Overall, even though the pandemic introduced new challenges and concerns for mothers across the spectrum, the interruptions it generated also afforded mothers the chance to reassess certain aspects of their parenting.

## Pandemic Disruptions for Lower-SES Mothers

However, alongside these shared experiences was important variation across SES in how the pandemic disrupted mothers' lives. Relative to higher-SES mothers, for whom pandemic-induced financial concerns were discussed less often if at all, lower-SES mothers expressed more concerns about financial stressors (Kalil, Mayer, and Shah 2020). Unless they were on a fixed income from disability payments, they largely regarded lost wages or reduced shifts for partners or family members as contributing to household expenses. Mothers experienced such financial stressors as disruptive to their parenting, particularly because scarce financial resources made providing for children more challenging. Maria, a newly unemployed Hispanic mother, shared the economic impact of her layoff, noting that "I lost my job. Basically, the financial situation is not good. I'm having financial struggles and me and my kids constantly are getting sick." Lupita, a Hispanic mother of two, explained: "It's been tough, since we're at home without getting any income and . . . the little money we have, we're using it for food." Mothers reported difficulties getting bills paid, expressed frustrations over food stamps not covering the amount of food they needed, and described stress over waiting for unemployment payments that had not yet arrived.

Yet despite the financial challenges they described, lower-SES mothers varied in their characterizations of the pandemic's disruptiveness to their caregiving. Surprisingly, most did not describe or characterize the pandemic as uniquely disruptive from a parenting perspective. Instead, even though mothers reported the pandemic as challenging, they did not characterize it as the greatest challenge they had encountered in caring for their children. This was clearest among full-time employed, lower-SES mothers. Most (88 percent) of these mothers in our sample worked in-person jobs during the pandemic. Those whose jobs required them

to work in person described making adaptations that resembled the kinds of adaptations they had been making even before the pandemic. For instance, mothers took on night shifts to be available during the day for children, alternated with spouses to always have someone home with the children, or dropped their children off with family and friends during the day while they worked. That is, even when mothers' caregiving and work were in direct and clear conflict, they did not experience it as particularly unusual. For instance, Michelle, a Black mother who worked as a restaurant manager, decided after her shifts were cut early in the pandemic to just take time off and get unemployment benefits rather than work ten hours a week. She explained: "If I can't work during the time while they're in school, I prefer to work overnight. Most of my jobs have been overnight so that way I can have my days to do appointments, if I need to go because, you know, sometimes the school would call and you know, they're sick and I need to do that." Such adaptive strategies were familiar to these mothers from long before the pandemic began.

In particular, lower-SES mothers who continued to rely on family members or friends to watch their children described that little changed during the pandemic for them. These mothers did not have the option to leave their jobs in order to care for children because, as Jimena, a Hispanic mother of three, explained, "I have to work . . . I have to go out every day and see what we can do to save our household and our family." Jimena, like other mothers, relied on her family to provide crucial caregiving support. In her case, it was her elder son who offered this care; other mothers reported turning to grandparents, aunts, and neighbors. These mothers drew on their informal support networks to take on caregiving during irregular work hours, multiple jobs, or long shifts. Janae, a Black mother who worked as a certified nursing assistant, explained that her grandmother was her childcare: "I literally just get up, get ready for work, drop my sisters and my son off to my grandmother's house to be watched while I'm at work, get off work, maybe stop at a store or something, and pick them up." Similarly, Alicia, a Hispanic mother of three and cashier, related, "childcare is hard here. . . . but I leave [my children] with my friend or my niece because they don't have school."

For lower-SES mothers who reported the pandemic as disruptive to their caregiving, it was less often because their jobs or work hours changed and more because the informal (and less expensive) childcare safety net they had relied on—that is, family, friends, and neighbors—came undone (Radey et al. 2022). Multiple mothers identified that the central challenge was that they were used to family members caring for their children, and the pandemic disrupted that. Daniella, a Hispanic mother of three who had left her job during the pandemic, explained that she "didn't work last year because we didn't have anyone to look after [the kids] due to the pandemic." Contrasting the pandemic to pre-pandemic times, she elucidated, "We would be able to go out to work with more ease, because we didn't have to think, 'who am I going to leave the kids with?' since we used to be able to resort to any friend or relative to look after them. But not anymore, since they don't want to get infected, we don't want them to get sick." Although most lower-SES mothers were familiar with challenges finding care for their children, the pandemic had a negative impact on their flexible strategies for securing that care.

## Lower-SES Mothers and the Persistence of Natural Growth Parenting

Lower-SES mothers discussed a parenting style largely adaptive to the daily struggles engendered by the pandemic. Lower-SES mothers reported parenting broadly in line with a natural growth approach and adapted it to meet the unique constraints of the pandemic. Natural growth parenting allowed for more unstructured leisure time for children and fewer activities monitored or directed by adults. Lower-SES mothers described relatively independent children and few daily parental interventions, largely emblematic of a natural growth approach. For example, Coreen, a lower-SES Black stay-at-home mother, explained how her children basically kept their own daily schedules: "Their daily routine is like every day, certain time when they want to play the game and have certain time when they want to watch TV, have certain times when they want to eat again. . . .

[and] they're always on their phones." Similarly, Olivia, a Hispanic mother of three, illustrates that one natural growth-aligned parenting approach was to allow children to spend time on screens or playing outside if the living arrangement allowed: "They will just go and play outside. I let my son play his video game but to an extent. . . . He takes care of his pets. And the girls, my oldest, she always liked to stay in her room." However, not all lower-SES mothers kept to this free-range approach all the time, and some recounted efforts to find educational activities for their children while at home. For instance, Jazmin, a lower-SES White mother, described offering educational direction through mutual activities in the home: "I like to keep educational things around the house. . . . Do you guys want to draw? Do you want to do a puzzle? Do you want to, you know, do you want to play hangman, we'll play chess, we'll do different things like that."

A benefit of the natural growth parenting approach was that it was largely available during the pandemic as well as compatible with daycare shutdowns and remote schooling. Indeed, lower-SES mothers of school-age children generally noted that they left their children to manage schooling on their own, even trusting them to handle their school logins and assignments. They discussed relying on educational institutions to manage the bulk of the responsibility to teach children with minimal parental supervision or intervention. This was true among both employed and stay-at-home lower-SES mothers who reported counting on their children's teachers to manage children during online lessons and largely expecting their children to handle school, work, and virtual schooling themselves. Jill, a Hispanic employed mother of three, described her thoughts on monitoring education economically: "I even tell the teachers, well, if I was getting paid, like to make sure that my child is in school, then I don't have to work. But I'm not getting paid. I need to go to work when I need to go to work with my clear mind, like not worrying about [school]."

Significantly, lower-SES mothers who maintained their jobs from the beginning of the pandemic often did not have the availability and flexibility to supervise children's virtual schooling or activities because they worked outside the home. In these cases, there were few alternatives to natural growth; mothers simply could not be at home to constantly monitor children's schooling. Thus, lower-SES mothers relied on their informal network to be present for this schooling; mothers described children being supervised at a relative's or babysitter's home, by older siblings, or by the school-age children themselves. Full-time employed, lower-SES mothers also reported focusing more of their energy on arranging the patchwork of care necessary for them to keep their jobs—few of which had remote options—rather than on monitoring children's schooling. Jimena, a Hispanic mother of three, described the mental energy she devoted to ensuring someone could be with her daughter when she worked during the day: "My daughter is nine and I can't stay with her because if I don't go out and work, I can't pay household expenses, so I do pay for someone to care for her, not every day because since my son doesn't work right now he helps me with that."

Lower-SES mothers often described pursuing their pre-pandemic model of parenting as more challenging under the unique conditions: accomplishing natural growth is difficult in an environment where children do not have the freedom to be in shared public environments. Mothers related that being at home with their children all day could feel claustrophobic and boring, and even lead to negative interactions among family members. Mothers like Aliya, a Black mother of three, equated being stuck at home to being stuck in prison, noting the need to escape every so often: "And then when we absolutely can't take it anymore, we will go for a little ride in the car." Eliana, a Hispanic mother of one, reported that all of the extra time at home "does stress me out sometimes, thinking about, wow, I have a whole day and I have no idea what I'm going to do to entertain the small, needy human." During the summer in particular, when not even virtual school structured at least part of the day, mothers shared that their days lacked a routine. This was especially true for mothers who, because of their geographic locations, financial constraints, or both, lived in smaller apartments with little access to outdoor space. This relative

lack of daily structure became oppressive for some lower-SES stay-at-home mothers amid the need to socially distance and keep children safe.

Indeed, although some aspects of a natural growth approach to schooling and enrichment were largely achievable during the pandemic, many lower-SES mothers also expressed concerns about the absence of informal socialization in the neighborhood and community that had been important before the pandemic. They lamented the loss of family gatherings with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins due to concerns about spreading COVID-19 during the pandemic. Lower-SES mothers were particularly worried about the transmission of COVID-19 to vulnerable relatives because so many of them personally knew someone who had died from the disease. Thus they found themselves without consistent and rich interaction with extended family. Daniella, a Hispanic stay-at-home lower-SES mother of three, described her children's loss of consistent interaction with extended family: "They don't interact with their cousins or friends now, we don't either. . . . The worst thing that happened to us this year was not being able to see my parents. My kids are the kind who love spending the holidays with their grandparents and due to this, they weren't able to."

Overall, almost all lower-SES mothers discussed concerns about their children feeling isolated, cooped up, and bored.

## Pandemic Disruptions for Higher-SES Mothers

Unlike lower-SES mothers, higher-SES mothers rarely mentioned financial stressors as chief among their pandemic-related concerns or disruptive to their caregiving. Even after her husband's layoff, mothers like Kayleigh, a White mother of five, described the pandemic as an inconvenience rather than financially devastating. Similarly, Nicole, a White mother of two, explained about her family: "We're really lucky. It hasn't affected us financially at all. I wasn't working and my husband, although he worried it would affect his work, but it really didn't. . . . I think he actually earned more money last year than the previous year."

In contrast, the collision of work and family in the home rose to the top of these mothers' list of concerns; relative to lower-SES mothers, a greater share of higher-SES mothers described the pandemic as uniquely disruptive to their caregiving. In particular, they reported that school shutdowns and daycare closures—which resulted in their children being home all day—made it impossible for them to both get their work done and give the right kind of care to their children. Higher-SES mothers felt that they were burning the candle at both ends and falling short as both employees and caregivers. Particularly those who worked remotely, and therefore were responsible for supervising children's schooling while working, reported that the pandemic was overwhelming and challenging. As Jennifer, a Black mother of two and a professor, explained, "I think a good word would be just overwhelmed, overall, very overwhelmed. There's just a lot going on, and you're just not able to get really anything done." Jennifer related feeling as if she wasn't "getting enough work done. You know that you need to do more, but you just physically can't do any more than what you're doing." Similarly, Andrea, a Black mother of three and an accountant, added how much more difficult her life at home became when she started working remotely and her children were doing remote school from home: "That became a little bit more difficult because, again, you're trying to homeschool now and then you're trying to work while you're at home because you're not off and then you're still trying to cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner and manage the home and then clean the home."

Andrea, echoing other higher-SES employed mothers, described the pandemic as a "stressful, stressful time" especially when it came to helping her children complete the school work packets their teachers sent home. Indeed, words such as *stress* and *stressful* repeatedly emerged among higher-SES mothers—even higher-SES stay-at-home mothers—as they described the new demands of having their children at home all day. When asked to explain why exactly she was feeling stressed, Elena, a Hispanic mother of three who left the workforce a few years before the pandemic, explained that it had to do with having her children home all day and being home herself: "My

kids being home all day, dealing with our new life, juggling taking my son to therapy, going to doctor's visits and stuff like that, making sure she's on Zoom at specific times, handling the massive load of homework. It's just a lot and then trying to deal with my own personal issues trying to, oh, I need to lose weight, I need to eat healthy, that kind of stuff."

Similarly, mothers said that having their children and spouses home all day significantly increased their housework and stress loads because others expected caregiving and household tasks from them during work hours. Martina, a Hispanic mother of three and managerial assistant, explained that "I think I'd be happy if work was to reopen again. Working from home I just have to be very selfish with my time on the clock. And that is a point of stress because my family sees I'm there and they expect me to be available to them for whatever it is."

Higher-SES employed and unemployed mothers' pre-pandemic experiences shaped their views and experiences of pandemic parenting. Compared with lower-SES mothers who reported being accustomed to continually making adaptations to navigate work and caregiving, higher-SES mothers were accustomed to having stronger boundaries between their work and caregiving and more consistent childcare, such as an arrangement where they worked while their children were at school or daycare. Most of these mothers did not describe making changes such as leaving children with family or taking on night shifts; instead, because of pandemic closures, they discussed navigating—many for the first time—trying to manage their jobs and caring for their children simultaneously and often under the same roof.

Overall, it was higher-SES stay-at-home mothers who seemed best structurally poised to navigate the challenges brought on by virtual schooling and childcare closures. This is not to say that higher-SES stay-at-home mothers didn't experience challenges: indeed, they echoed mothers across the socioeconomic spectrum in sharing their frustration with not having as many places to visit or activities to engage in with their children—as well as the ways that having family at home increased their workload. However, these mothers were less likely than their employed counterparts to describe these pandemic-related changes as stress-inducing and more likely to describe life as relatively normal and their daily routines as similar to the way they were before. When asked about recent changes in her daily routine due to the pandemic, Nicole, a White stay-at-home mother of two, said, "Oh, I don't know. It's pretty normal. They get up, they have breakfast, they do what they need to do in the morning. Now I'm driving them to school, but normally they would take the bus if we weren't in a pandemic. Then I pick them up and we hang out after school and they do their homework and I make dinner and a couple of nights a week, my son has soccer practice." In this case, the lack of transportation caused by the pandemic was not an issue for Nicole—she simply structured her day so she could do school drop-offs and pick-ups herself.

Overall, most higher-SES stay-at-home mothers reported that having children at home meant being able to spend more time with them than had been possible before the pandemic. Because tthey did not have to navigate the conflicting demands of paid work and care, they were better able to see the silver lining in the moments of togetherness with immediate family or spend an additional hour preparing for the week of virtual schooling with their children without a sense of guilt that they should be back on their own computer catching up on work.

## Higher-SES Mothers and the Persistence of Concerted Cultivation Parenting

Higher-SES mothers discussed their childrearing in ways that were largely consistent with a concerted cultivation approach to parenting—and with how they had sought to parent their children before the pandemic. Yet concerted cultivation was less available and in many ways misaligned with the realities of pandemic parenting for working mothers. The blurring of lines between work and caregiving made it difficult for mothers to achieve concerted cultivation while carrying out their jobs the way they wanted; this led them to experience caregiving and work as being in the most direct and clear conflict. As Kathryn, a White mother of two, noted, she and her children were "often at the dining room table together. So, I will be doing

work and then when they need help, I just kind of stop whatever project I'm working on and go help them." Mothers who worked from home were particularly prone to interruptions to their work in order to help troubleshoot virtual schooling.

Yet these barriers did not lead mothers to abandon a concerted cultivation approach and adopt another approach more in line with natural growth and the challenges of the pandemic. Instead, higher-SES mothers described seeking to cultivate their children during the day while they were working. One way higher-SES mothers practiced concerted cultivation was enriching children's learning experiences. Mothers maintained concern about all aspects of their children's growth, whether social, emotional, or academic. As Julia, a Black mother of three, explained, "I spent a lot of time thinking about [my] kids, developmentally . . . we do things that match when they can understand developmentally." Other mothers echoed Julia in spending time providing academic enrichment opportunities to children. Veronica, a White mother of two, explained that she always spent time with her son, "reading books, and reading a magazine, National Geographic for kids, that sort of helps him . . . improve his reading skills." In fact, she reported how this additional investment led to a boost in his school performance: "His grades being in lockdown improved, because we were the ones who were like paying attention now to actually what he studies and also making sure he understands all the topics, whether it's math, or it's some other science, social science, social studies, so I think it was definitely more beneficial for him."

As Veronica noted, her child's academic performance actually improved during the pandemic thanks to the additional attention he received at home. Indeed, higher-SES mothers were often able to leverage the additional access to their children during the school day and provide further academic enrichment activities.

Pandemic closures meant that the majority of mothers were left with only outdoor or virtual activities for their children. Higher-SES mothers reported working within these constraints to find suitable outside extracurricular activities, such as swimming or park playdates for kids and their friends. Veronica noted that her older son had, in addition to soccer, "at least three different activities. He does Taekwondo once a week, . . . he does karate, then he does basketball." Rachel, a White mother of one, noted that she bought thousands of dollars of ski equipment for her family so they could exercise outside because there was little else to do outdoors in the winter, and the ski mountains were open.

Mothers also reported that virtual activities appealed to them because they could be attended without leaving the house and children were often able to log on their own. Mothers described children logging on remotely to attend Boy Scout meetings, Bible study, church, virtual therapy, and physical therapy. Mothers sought out educational videos online about cooking and cake decorating to develop their children's interests and talents. Mothers also talked about the in-person pods they set up with their children's friends for playdates and group activities to allow them to see their friends while mitigating the risks that COVID-19 infection posed. For example, one mother, Sejal, an Indian-American mother of two, noted that her children logged onto Zoom to take Indian dance classes, while Claire, an Asian mother of two who worked remotely, explained that her kids "do take piano and violin, but again, they're self-sufficient where they know when they have to be logged in and get on those Zoom meetings." That her children could manage and attend these virtual sessions independently allowed Claire to keep working while periodically checking in on the children as needed.

Relative to their lower-SES counterparts, higher-SES mothers generally described the open time provided to their children by the pandemic as an opportunity and sought to fill it with enrichment activities. They reported organizing more scheduled and busy days for their children, both on weekdays and weekends. For instance, while Kathryn, a White mother of two, explained that after school and work, "we have the rest of the day to do whatever we want or nothing, because there's really not much to do," she then listed the daily and weekly virtual meetings and activities her chil-

dren participated in, including gymnastics, clubs, and playdates. Similarly, Tonya, a Black mother of three, shared that when it came to her children, she worked to "always keep them occupied. Because I feel I want to make sure they are on point for the academic and stuff, and I want them to have fun, not just be home and not have a plan each day."

There were, however, exceptions to this broader pattern. Some higher-SES mothers—especially those who were working—described experiencing challenges around keeping children occupied and engaged in adaptive parenting (Cummins and Brannon 2022), which generally involved less hands-on interaction and more screen time (Findley et al. 2022). As adaptive parenting aligned more with a natural growth approach (highlighting the congruency between natural growth and pandemic parenting), following it could drive feelings of guilt for mothers whose class status favored an approach of concerted cultivation. For example, a White higher-SES mother, Nicole, reduced screen-time restrictions for her children during the pandemic. Yet she felt badly when she compared herself with other mothers who seemed to be excelling at concerted cultivation without the use of screens: "I was seeing Facebook posts of like all these well-organized crafts that these families were doing at the table and I couldn't get my kids off their iPads."

### Higher-SES Stay-at-Home Mothers and the Easier Enactment of Concerted Cultivation

Overall, in our sample, stay-at-home higher-SES mothers experienced the pandemic as the least challenging and disruptive to their parenting. Because they did not face caregiving-work conflict or financial stressors, they were best poised to navigate the increased caregiving demands of the pandemic and also achieve classed parenting ideals around concerted cultivation. Kristina, a White mother of one with another on the way, explained how the pandemic did little to change the enrichment activities she could offer her daughter: "And so, me and my daughter, we went places a lot. We would go to the zoo. We had memberships anywhere you could have a membership just so we could have something to do. So, we went to the zoo a lot. And we had memberships to the science museums and the planetariums and all those things."

Thus, although stay-at-home higher-SES mothers reported the same psychological struggles as their lower-SES counterparts with having children around so much—and faced limited options with which to occupy their children outside the home—they also described finding creative ways to introduce structure into their children's lives during the pandemic. As Kristina detailed, "we started to do a lot of virtual things. My daughter does ballet class. And so, they did a virtual class, so her and I used to do it together. We started virtual yoga. . . . we're just going to do this for a little while."

Higher-SES stay-at-home mothers described schedules and routines that were slightly altered due to the pandemic but largely similar to pre-pandemic schedules. Also notably, these mothers reported that any necessary schedule shifts were manageable. Higher-SES stay-at-home mothers did not experience the same weekday time crunch that working mothers faced. For instance, Kayleigh, a White stay-at-home mother of five, stated that she had time to run errands (such as going to the grocery store) when her youngest child was in preschool. She also organized activities for her youngest daughter throughout the day until her older children were done with school: "when she's home, is when we do play and go for walks and pickup, sit at the library and walk around the little pond there, but then all the kids get home and then it's the same as usual. So it's, 'Okay, get dinner on the table. Let's go.'"

Similarly, Amy, a White mother of one, said that things were pretty much the same before and during the pandemic, except that her husband worked from home so he got to spend time with her and her daughter during lunch breaks. She described it as helpful to have him pitch in, especially since she was now pregnant with their second child and felt more tired.

Overall, stay-at-home higher-SES mothers were best equipped with the time and financial resources to support their children's remote schooling, facilitate activities at home, and find opportunities for children to engage in extracurricular activities online. Although some mothers in this group reported frustrations

about having everyone home all day with nothing to do, they faced few additional stressors, and had comparatively more bandwidth and resources to ensure that children had a range of pandemic-adapted activities to pursue.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with 130 mothers caring for children under eighteen in 2020 and 2021, we found that mothers' socioeconomic and employment status shaped how they experienced and navigated competing paid and unpaid labor demands and performed classed forms of parenting. Mothers from all backgrounds experienced pandemic-related disruptions and stressors. They also tried to do the best for their children given their circumstances (Lareau 2003). Mothers experienced novel pandemic-related disruptions around balancing carework and paid work, but the nature of those disruptions varied; whereas lower-SES mothers reported challenges due to decreased informal family supports, higher-SES mothers reported stress and anxiety related to trying to perform their jobs while at home alongside caregiving. Classed parenting during the pandemic similarly manifested—and persisted—along expected lines, with lower-SES mothers reporting more of a natural growth approach and higher-SES mothers reporting more pandemic-adapted concerted cultivation parenting (Lareau 2003). Because a natural growth approach was more compatible with the constraints and challenges of pandemic parenting, higher-SES mothers seeking to engage in concerted cultivation—particularly those who were also employed—reported a great deal of stress, worry, and frustration while facing pandemic-related constraints.

Overall, our study advances a growing literature showing how mothers' pandemic-related experiences with parenting and caregiving were far from uniform. Instead, they were heterogenous and fundamentally shaped by the broader contexts. Across 130 mothers in our sample, only one demographic—the higher-SES stay-at-home mothers—was structurally poised to navigate pandemic-induced childcare and school shutdowns. All mothers faced disruptions in their daily routines at the beginning of the pandemic, but higher-SES stay-at-home mothers reported being most easily able to adapt to the new reality of lockdowns and reduced educational and recreational offerings. This was due largely to their ability to focus on their children (without competing paid work demands) and their access to financial and educational resources. This is not to say that these mothers did not also experience challenges; indeed, they reported difficulties providing structure for their families and an increased workload at home. However, these mothers' lack of competing demands on their time and resources meant that they were in the best position to successfully pivot their lives around the pandemic's challenges. Higher-SES stay-at-home mothers' experiences reveal that when crisis hits, there is no fallback societal or institutional care infrastructure; instead, mothers operate as that infrastructure, and their work exists as a private, unpaid, and undervalued undertaking.

A central, novel contribution of this study is that it reveals the durability of classed parenting approaches, even in times of crisis (Hays 1998; Lareau 2003). Higher-SES mothers, while striving to engage in concerted cultivation, struggled in unprecedented ways to do so because of pandemic-related restrictions. The intensity of this struggle, however, was bifurcated by employment status. For mothers engaging in full-time, paid employment, concerted cultivation added an additional layer of complication to the already Sisyphean task of balancing work and caregiving. For stay-at-home mothers, continuing a path of concerted cultivation often required a great deal of thought and creativity, but became integrated into pandemic life more seamlessly. As they were before the pandemic, families' financial and social resources were essential to mothers' abilities to concertedly cultivate their children; mothers who could afford to do so paid for virtual enriching experiences and continued to closely monitor their children's development, but employment status mediated how easy this was to do. At the same time, most higher-SES mothers reported feeling a degree of stress related to the need to intensively parent in an environment where children's activities—and even mothers' time—were much more limited than before.

Even though lower-SES mothers lost resources important to their natural growth parenting approach because of the pandemic, including some public spaces and close connections to extended family, the natural growth approach was more in line with the structure of daily life during lockdowns and school closures. Whether or not they were engaged in paid employment, lower-SES mothers often relied on choices made and schedules set by children, or on their children's educational institution. They worried about their children's lack of socialization and their health, but less about how their inability to curate developmentally appropriate experiences in a pandemic world would disadvantage their children. Indeed, even a handful of higher-SES mothers turned to forms of natural growth as a survival strategy during the pandemic. As Erin Findley and her colleagues (2022) find, higher-SES mothers who adopted some natural growth strategies—about things like increased screen time or time playing outside instead of participating in enrichment activities—were more relaxed, and could therefore better enjoy the extra time with their children. Although experimental research has shown that parents across the socioeconomic spectrum may aspire to a more intensive parenting model (Ishizuka 2019), our analysis suggests that lower-SES mothers' experiences with alternative forms of parenting—including inventive mothering—may have allowed them to more easily engage in natural growth parenting, which was more compatible with pandemic constraints.

This study has several important strengths. First, the breadth and diversity of the AVP sample allowed us to directly examine variation in mothers' experiences across SES and employment using a large, national sample. The inclusion of stay-at-home mothers in our sample is a unique and critical study feature; to our knowledge, no research to date has investigated these mothers' experiences. Yet doing so helps reveal the lived reality of a large number of mothers during the pandemic who forwent paid employment to care for their children. As many families discovered, without a functioning system of formal care and education for children, stay-at-home mothers became the first line of defense (Chung et al. 2021; Collins et al. 2021).

The study has some notable limitations. First, because the AVP was not designed specifically to examine pandemic-related parenting experiences, the number of interview protocol questions and probes on these topics was fewer than would have been in a study focused on these experiences. This likely limited the depth of discussion among interview respondents—and the depth of our analysis—of their pandemic parenting experiences. Second, despite being relatively large and inclusive, the sample is likely slightly biased toward mothers who had more time or greater resources to balance work and caregiving responsibilities, because these were probably the most likely to answer the phone or reply to the AVP recruitment letter. Thus we may have missed hearing about the most problematic cases of caregiving and work clashing, and the voices of the mothers who could not spare the time to participate in the study. That interviews were conducted over the phone rather than in person limited researchers' abilities to observe for themselves and develop paradata from mothers' home environments; our analysis may therefore have missed important paradata, such as the cleanliness of the home or the interactions respondents actually had with their children in the presence of researchers. Our ability to conduct a temporal or longitudinal analysis of mothers' caregiving trajectories is also limited by the sampling strategy and data collection procedures, which focused on conducting cross-sectional interviews with mothers throughout the first year and a half of the pandemic. Future research should longitudinally assess how changes in employment, school closures, and social norms over the full course of the pandemic affected parenting styles and experiences, including across geographic locations. We also focused our analysis on the experiences of mothers; future scholarship should examine the critical roles of other caregivers, including grandparents and fathers. In addition, although our data—and other research (Greenway and Eaton-Thomas 2020; Rakap et al. 2023; Dobosz, Gierczyk, and Hornby 2023)—suggested that parents of children with disabilities faced unique pandemic caregiving chal-

lenges, our subsample of parents who were caring for children with disabilities was too small to adequately examine these experiences and how they differed from parents who were not engaging in the same caregiving; this is an important topic for future research. Finally, because we chose to focus only on socioeconomic and employment statuses—as these were two characteristics uniformly discussed throughout interviews—our analysis did not intersectionality examine other key sociodemographic characteristics that likely shaped caregiving experiences, including race-ethnicity, nationality, or immigrant status.

Our findings contribute to building a more robust understanding of how the incongruent combination of work and caregiving contribute to the persistence of gender inequality. Other research on the pandemic has shown how this inequality persists given that mothers have been disproportionately responsible for childrearing and household management responsibilities (Collins et al. 2021; Chung et al. 2021; Cummins and Brannon 2022). The pandemic further exposed the disconnect between the expectations of work and parenting, especially because both existed within close proximity to each other for many mothers, and qualitative research has exposed how mentally, emotionally, and physically taxing such conflicting responsibilities were (Chung et al. 2021). This study builds on prior work and shows that classed expectations of good parenting for higher-SES mothers were incongruous with the realities of combining paid work and caregiving at home, in a context of few institutional resources. Indeed, the group of mothers who seemed to be best equipped to address the demands of pandemic caregiving were those who had private financial resources and no competing time commitments from paid work.

We show that the daily impossibility of integrating work and caregiving was, for lower-SES employed mothers, not a sole product of the pandemic. Instead, this incompatibility in many ways preceded the pandemic. However, lower-SES mothers in our sample expressed more worry about the financial precarity the pandemic had brought to their families—not to mention the health consequences of the COVID-19 illness—than about how they would balance their lives as a paid worker and unpaid caregiver. Whereas some higher-SES mothers experienced conflict between carework and paid work for the first time, this conflict was already well known to lower-SES mothers, and most often registered behind other sources of pandemic-related stress.

Overall, our findings suggest that policies to promote work-life balance and well-being among mothers cannot be one-size-fits-all; instead, they must be tailored to mothers' work arrangements and caregiving setups. Higher-SES mothers—many of whom may continue hybrid and remote work moving forward—may benefit most from workplace flexibility, which allows them to work hours that work for their families, and in a location most beneficial to their scheduling needs. Yet lower-SES mothers—more of whose jobs will remain in person—may benefit most from workplace stability. As Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett (2021) show, low-income workers are most disadvantaged by inconsistent and last-minute scheduling practices, and these practices are detrimental to the ability to arrange quality, stable care for their children. Policies aimed at requiring employers to be consistent and predictable in their scheduling practices may best support lower-SES working mothers. In addition, investing in social institutions that bolster the development of children of lower-SES mothers will ensure that childrens' well-being is prioritized, regardless of whether mothers are able to provide those resources themselves, or whether they are engaged in paid employment. In times of crisis, organizations and communities that provide support to lower-SES mothers and their children should have a plan in place that will allow them to continue to extend public resources critical to children's well-being.

One of the most consequential experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a renewed discussion about the importance of carework and its centrality to the persistence of intersecting gendered inequalities. We found that the disruptions and stressors mothers experienced in both their paid- and care- work during the pandemic—and the adaptations they were forced to make—were shaped by their unique social locations. We also found that mothers

across all of these social locations shared a common gendered parenting burden of ensuring their children's and families' well-being. Ultimately, in exposing just how vital mothers' labor is to families' and children's well-being and societal flourishing, the pandemic has centered the urgency of reframing carework as a public responsibility rather than a private undertaking; these findings echo this urgency and speak to the need for policies that ensure all mothers have the resources and supports to care for and raise their children.

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