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Intimate Culture of Families in the Early Socialization of Literacy

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The intimate family culture for early literacy socialization was documented for a sociocultural heterogeneous sample of 66 children enrolled in pre-kindergarten through third grade at public elementary schools in a large U.S. city. Parents were interviewed about 3 types of indexes of their family's intimate culture: the child's engagement in various literacy-related activities at home, the parents' orientation towards the significance of literacy for early child development, and the family's routines of dinnertime, reading aloud, and doing homework for school. Basic reading competencies were assessed with the Woodcock–Johnson Psychoeducational Battery—Tests of Achievement, Revised (1989). Multiple regression analysis found that a significant proportion of variance in the children's literacy development was predicted by each of the quantitative indexes of intimate family culture, leaving little or no additional variance that was due to family income or ethnicity.

Theories of human development have increasingly sought to enrich their characterization of context beyond the notion of external stimulation, by conceptualizing it in terms of systems of social activity and cultural meaning (Serpell, 1993, 1999). According to Super and Harkness (1986, 1997), child development can be understood as adapted to the demands of a culturally structured "developmental niche." Super and Harkness have suggested that the structure of physical and social settings to which the child is exposed, and the pattern of customs of child care and socialization, are organized by an interpretive scheme represented in the form of implicit psychological theories held by caregivers such as parents. These "cultural models" (Holland & Quinn, 1987), or "ethnotheories" (Harkness & Super, 1992), include beliefs about the timetable of child development (Goodnow & Collins, 1990), parental goals for the child's development, and preferred strategies of intervention to cultivate the child's appropriation of various valued, cultural practices (Serpell et al., 1997). A child's engagement with the demands of the niche thus gives rise to a developmental process of participatory appropriation (Rogoff, 1993).

The cultural practice of literacy (Scribner & Cole, 1981) is composed of a set of recurrent activities (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), informed by a system of meanings (D'Andrade, 1984), and associated with a particular technology (Olson, 1994) that the child gradually comes to understand, to master, and to own. These activities, meanings, and technology are encountered by children early in the course of ontogenesis in contexts mediated by the family. Thus the family generates a filter between larger cultural formations and the developing child, which we refer to, following Lomnitz-Adler (1992) and Levinson (1996), as an *intimate culture* (Serpell, 1997, 2001).

Several dimensions of the family's intimate culture have been identified by researchers as potentially important influences on the child's literacy development. One approach has been to examine the range of opportunities afforded by family life for the child to participate in specific, literacy-related activities such as joint storybook reading with parents (Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Bus, van IJzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994), visits to the library (Anderson & Stokes, 1984), or language games that foster phonological awareness (Maclean, Bryant, & Bradley, 1987). Other researchers have emphasized more informal opportunities for language socialization, such as dinnertime conversation (Snow, Dickinson, & Tabors, 1991) and modes of discourse that map directly onto the register of language privileged by written texts (Bernstein, 1970; Goody & Watt, 1963; Olson, 1994; Snow, 1999; Wells, 1991).

As Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) pointed out, the tendency of social and behavioral scientists to rely on "social address" labels for comparative analysis of behavioral and cognitive phenomena threatens to obscure the influence on cognitive development of more directly relevant characteristics of individuals and social processes. The politicization of race and class in American society makes it essential

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to acknowledge those categories when deriving social policy implications from scientific research. However, in our search for understanding, we cannot afford to assume social significance for the categories per se. Ultimately what matters for a child's literacy development is not the class, race, or language group to which his or her parents belong, but the parents' particular socialization practices and the beliefs informing them.

Some of those beliefs may well bear a direct causal or interpretive connection with the social address from which a given parent originates. Ogbu (1994), for instance, has offered a compelling analysis of how the history of different American minority groups' relations with the state can inform the cultural frame of reference that students and their parents adopt to interpret the challenges of education. However, there are also considerable variations in belief and practice across members of a given sociocultural group, and many commonalities can also be detected across sociocultural groups. For any particular group of persons, a body of shared beliefs and practices involving a unique subset of uses and understandings of the larger society's technology, institutions, and so forth may be identified, which constitute its intimate culture. From this perspective, several levels of social grouping can be distinguished. We can identify regional variants of social class and ethnocultural group distinctions within a particular regional instantiation of a class. However, even within an ethnically and economically homogeneous social group in a particular region, there remain additional cultural parameters that differentiate among particular neighborhoods. Furthermore, within a neighborhood, the cultural context experienced by a particular child differs from one family to another.

Acknowledging the possibility of such a variety of cultural formations enables elaboration of the concept of cultural group membership beyond the notion of a social address. Rather than portraying what an individual derives from membership as externally defined, attention may be focused on the interpersonal processes through which members negotiate the understandings that they share. Nevertheless, the larger, less precise categories of African American, middle class, or American do have some explanatory power for the interpretation of culture. Any particular intimate culture typically includes traces of those larger, incorporating social formations.

A number of theorists (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 1983) have proposed that the context of child development is best conceived in terms of a complex of interdependent systems. Within such a systemic perspective, families feature as an intermediary node or layer. Thus, Sameroff and Fiese (1992) have proposed that a "family code" constitutes a set of factors "intermediate between the cultural influences [on child development] and individual interaction patterns. This code is not a set of stable enduring characteristics, but is an evolving regulatory system" (pp. 357–358). The family is a co-constructed representation of reality, that is, a framework within which individuals situate themselves and are situated by others in relationship to one another.

In this article we draw on both the concept of "developmental niche" (Super & Harkness, 1997) and the concept of "family code" (Sameroff & Fiese, 1992). Our specific objective was to provide an analysis that moves beyond the labeling of children by the social address of their family of origin to characterization of the intimate culture of children's homes, by documenting several dimensions of that culture: recurrent patterns of literacy-related joint activity by the child at home, parental orientation toward the significance of literacy in early child development, and investment by the family in relevant interactional routines.

In earlier reports, we have presented evidence that parents in our sample vary with respect to the relative emphasis placed on two complementary cultural themes about the nature of early literacy socialization: that literacy is a set of skills to be acquired and that literacy is a source of entertainment (Sonnenschein et al., 1997). A parental orientation that emphasizes the entertainment theme serves to cultivate a playful engagement with print (Serpell, 1997), fosters intrinsic reading motivation (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997), and is predictive of faster rates of literacy development by the child than a skills orientation (Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000).

Sameroff and Fiese's (1992) conception of a family code distinguishes three facets: rituals, routines, and stories. The distinction between routines and rituals is a matter of degree: a family routine is a recurrent pattern of activity in which some or all members of the family participate with designated roles, which may qualify for designation as a "ritual" to the extent that it is meta-cognitively acknowledged in family discourse as a recognized and valued unit of shared experience and to the extent that it is endowed with affective meaning for the family. Sameroff and Fiese (1992) argued that "family rituals are most easily accessible for report" (p. 357) because "they are the most self-aware aspects of the family code" (p. 362). Fiese and her colleagues (Fiese & Kline, 1993; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993) have examined the reliability with which different members of a family describe the characteristics of recurrent, routine activities that make up their family's rituals and have standardized their assessment in terms of eight dimensions, which are illustrated in the Appendix for the setting of "Dinnertime." Ratings were obtained from adolescent children, mothers, and fathers on each of these dimensions of ritualization across a total of seven settings: dinnertime, weekends, vacations, annual celebrations, special celebrations, religious holidays, and cultural traditions. High levels of internal consistency were found across both settings and dimensions. Moreover, in general, family members agreed about the relative level of ritualization of their family.

Fiese and her colleagues have described family rituals as "powerful organizers of behavior within the family system," which "appear to exert influence on family life by pairing meaning and affect with patterned interaction" (Fiese et al., 1993, p. 634). By defining a reliable pattern of recurrent joint activity, the rituals may "serve protective functions for individuals when in stressful family conditions such as parental alcoholism," and "may protect couples from marital dissatisfaction during the early stages of parenthood" (Fiese et al., 1993, p. 634). Furthermore, rituals may be considered a reflection of family identity. Fiese and col-

leagues have therefore focused on the degree of ritualization as a general characteristic of a family's life. Whereas the perspective on family rituals and routines advanced in this previous research has focused on their potential as protective resources for the mental health of children, the present research addresses a set of complementary questions regarding the influence of various characteristics of family life on the socialization of cognitive development, with particular attention to a child's appropriation of literacy.

In this report, we present new data concerning parents' ratings of the family's routines with respect to dinnertime, reading aloud, and homework assigned by the school and show how parents' level of investment in these routines complements and correlates with the other indices we have used to document the family's intimate culture, namely, parental orientation (entertainment versus skills) and frequency of the child's participation in literacy-related, recurrent, home activities. We then examine how these various dimensions of family life relate to the development of children's literacy competencies.

METHOD

The Early Childhood Project

This article presents data from a longitudinal study of children and their families recruited in two waves through the public elementary schools of a large U.S. city to participate in the project over a period of 3 to 5 years, beginning in either pre-kindergarten or first grade and ending in third grade. A full account of the methods has been reported elsewhere (Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein, & Scher, 1994). The neighborhood schools chosen for participation represented several different types of demographic profile with respect to family income and ethnicity (Akkari, Serpell, Baker, & Sonnenschein, 1998). Family income was determined by whether the focal child was entitled to a reduced price (or free) lunch. The following types of data were sought for each child: a 1-week diary of the child's daily life at home and an ecological inventory completed by one of the child's parents on each of four successive occasions; a series of ethnotheory interviews with the parent about her ideas concerning the nature of child development, socialization, and education, combined with several semistructured observations of the child at home; and a set of individual competency tests conducted at school at the end of each academic year.

Participants

Data for the present report were derived from a subset of the grand total, comprising the 74 families who completed diaries and the second ethnotheory interview, 66 of whom also completed the fourth and fifth rounds of interviews in which the rating scales of family routines were administered. Children recruited in the two waves were all part of a single cohort, enrolled in Grade 2 in 1995–1996, with a mean age of 7.5 years ($SD = 0.32$) at the time that the third ecological inventory was administered. The diaries and the second round of ethnotheory interviews were conducted for Wave 1 participants when the children were in pre-kindergarten, whereas those for Wave 2 were conducted when the children were in Grade 1. Of these 66 families, 23 were classified as low-income African American; 19 as low-income European American; 9 as middle-income African American, and 15 as middle-income European American. Of the focal children in this subsample, 32 were boys and 34 were girls, fairly evenly distributed across the four social addresses defined by income and ethnicity. The rate of attrition of our sample over the 5 years of the project was quite modest and did not appear to reflect any significant reluctance to continue participation by certain types of families. In most instances, withdrawal of families who had begun to participate was explicitly attributed to logistical considerations such as relocation outside the city or severe illness of the primary caregiver. Specifically, across the two waves of recruitment, a total of 80 families completed the initial step of maintaining a diary and granting the first extended parental interview, and 61 (or 76%) of these completed the final interview as well as consenting for their child to perform the last round of competency tests, 3 to 5 years after initial recruitment.

Procedure

Frequency of Engagement by the Child in Reading and Writing Activities Together With an Older Person

In the Ecological Inventory, we asked the parent about each of several categories of activity in which the child engaged, how frequently they engaged in the activity and in whose company. The broad categories of recurrent activity that we inventoried were games and play activities; mealtime activities; TV, video, or music activities; recurrent outings; and reading, writing, or drawing activities. In the segment entitled "Reading, Writing and Drawing Activities," the parent was asked to rate, on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all* (0) to "*very often, almost every day*" (3), how frequently the focal child currently engaged in each of the following activities: reading preschool books, reading picture books, reading storybooks, reading chapter books, reading nonfiction books, reading magazines, reading newspapers, reading comic books, reading word puzzle activity books, reading other books, drawing or coloring, writing journals or diaries, writing letters, writing poems or stories, playing word games involving writing, and other types of writing.

In the version of the inventory administered when the focal child was in second grade (Ecological Inventory No. 3), each of these activities was rated by the parent for the frequency with which the child engaged in the activity alone and then for the frequency of engagement with another person, either another child or an adult or adolescent. For the present analysis, only the ratings for joint activity with an adult or adolescent were considered, on the supposition that engagement in a literacy-related activity with an older person was generally more likely to be conducive at this age to the focal child's appropriating valid literacy skills, knowledge, and orientation. A composite index was constructed by summing the ratings across each of the 16 items (missing data were substituted by an average of ratings for the same child across the other items).

Entertainment Versus Skills in the Parent's Orientation to Literacy Socialization

Early Emphasis

Diaries. The first step that we took to establish an entry into each participating child's developmental niche was to request the primary caregiver or parent (in most cases, this was the focal child's mother) to keep a diary of the everyday life of the child for one week (either writing entries in a notebook or dictating them into a cassette recorder). These diaries gave us a sample of the actual vocabulary used by the parents for representing child development and socialization practices. We used this sample to

initiate an exploratory conversation with the parent about the meaning of recurrent activities in which the child co-participated with the parent and/or other agents of socialization and enculturation. The content of each diary was coded for the proportion of print-related activities reported that reflected each of three broad cultural themes that inform the kinds of print-related experiences that parents make available to their children: literacy as a source of entertainment, literacy as a set of skills that should be deliberately cultivated, and literacy as an ingredient of everyday life. The following activities were coded as informed by the entertainment theme: joint book reading, independent or self-initiated reading, play involving print, incidental exposure to print while being entertained, and visits to libraries and bookstores. Coded as informed by the skills theme were the following: homework and other school-related activities and practice of literacy skills. A second rater coded a 20% random sample of the diaries within each social address grouping; the interrater reliability of the coding was .87. Further details of the coding scheme are reported by Baker et al. (1994).

Ethnotheory interviews. In Ethnotheory Interview No. 2, the parent was first asked a series of questions pertaining to her or his hierarchy of developmental goals for the focal child, then her or his opinions regarding the antecedents of individual differences on various dimensions of psychological functioning and the modifiability of each dimension. Next, the following question was posed: "It seems that some parents have differing ideas about the most effective way of helping a young child to learn these things, and teachers do not always agree with one another about this. What do you believe is the most effective way to help your child to learn about some of these things? (a) learning about what's right and wrong; (b) learning about the physical world; (c) learning to speak and understand language, to communicate effectively with others; (d) learning to read and write; (e) learning about numbers."

In the present article we consider only parental responses to Part d of this question, that is, learning to read and write. An analysis of responses to other parts of the question and other questions posed in the interview has been presented elsewhere (Serpell et al., 1997). Each parent's response to Part d received two codes, one for the degree to which it was informed by the theme of literacy as a source of entertainment and one for the degree to which it reflected the theme of literacy as a set of skills to be cultivated. Interrater reliability was computed by having two raters independently code responses to about 20% ($N = 10$) of the Wave 1 families. Interrater agreement was .84 (Sonnenschein et al., 1996). Responses from Wave 2 families were coded by two new raters who were trained with the original Wave 1 data until each reached .90 interrater agreement with the original rater.

Composite indices of parental orientation. A composite of the diary codings and coded responses to Question 13 (d) above was computed as described in detail by Sonnenschein et al. (1996). The two composite indices derived from those data were labeled "entertainment orientation" and "skills orientation."

Theme Endorsement

In order to further validate and refine our interpretation of this dimension of variation in the family's intimate culture, we revisited this topic in the sixth round of parent interviews (conducted at the same home visit as Ecological Inventory No. 3, when the focal child was in second grade), by asking the parent to think back to when her child was in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten and to consider: "When children learn to read, which things do you think are important for a child to become a good reader?" They were then asked to rate each of the following items on a 5-point scale ranging from *not important* (1) to *very important* (5):

Entertainment theme: show children that reading books is fun; encourage children to pick out books about things they have interest in; encourage children to read and look at books in their spare time; encourage children to pick out books about fictional characters they like.

Skills theme: encourage children to recognize letters; encourage children to recite the alphabet; encourage children to practice reading words from lists or cards; encourage children to learn letter–sound correspondences.

Everyday life theme: show children how reading is useful in going to the store; show children that reading can be used for getting places; show children that reading is necessary for understanding bills and letters; show children that reading is useful for preparing packaged foods.

At the time of presentation for rating, these items were arranged in a sequence that alternated across the three categories. The sum of a parent's ratings of the four items pertaining to each theme was computed as a theme endorsement score. Two of these were used in the present analysis, labeled respectively "entertainment theme endorsement" (Cronbach's alpha = .68) and "skills theme endorsement" (Cronbach's alpha = .76). The everyday life theme has been shown in our earlier research to be less predictive of literacy development outcomes (Sonnenschein et al., 1996) and was therefore not examined further in the present study.

Family Routines

Rating Scales

We took advantage of an early round of interviews with part of our sample to inquire about what recurrent activities might lend themselves to such an analysis. Five families agreed that one such activity was reading storybooks at bedtime. Other routine social activities that several families said were characteristic of their family life included getting ready to go to school ($n = 9$), going shopping/to the store ($n = 6$), and saying prayers/grace ($n = 5$). Our selection of reading aloud and doing homework for examination in terms of ritualization was guided not only by frequency of citation in this pilot inquiry but also by our theoretical analysis of opportunities for advancing the appropriation of literacy by children already enrolled in the first and second grades, and by our estimation of what might lend itself to an inoffensive inquiry addressed to a wide range of families.

Several researchers have suggested that in middle-class, literate families another such routine occasion may be dinnertime conversation (Heath, 1983; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984; Snow et al., 1991). As a benchmark for comparison with Fiese and Kline's (1993) samples, we therefore replicated her Dinnertime scale, as well as devising two new scales in parallel format for the activities of "reading aloud" and "doing homework" (because homework is routinely assigned by Baltimore City's public elementary schools). The three scales are presented in the Appendix.

The Dinnertime scale was administered as part of the fourth parental interview, when the focal children of Wave 1 were in kindergarten and those of Wave 2 were at the beginning of first grade, whereas the other two scales were administered in the fifth interview, when all the children were at the end of first grade.

Interpretations of Homework as a Family Activity

As an extension of our investigation of the recurrent activity of doing homework assigned by the school, we first invited parents in an open-ended question to tell us more about the meaning attached by their family to homework, and then to rate each of the following interpretations on a 5-point scale, ranging from *not at all true* (1)

to *very true* (5). "Some parents have told us that they see their child's homework as an opportunity for the following things. To what extent is this true for you?"

1. For monitoring the child's development (keeping an eye on how she or he is growing up/learning)
2. For hearing about the child's experience at school (for her or him to tell me about the work they do, about the way the teacher talks to her or him, about how she gets along with other kids at school, etc.)
3. For communicating with the teacher (writing notes on the homework, reading notes from the teacher, getting ideas for things to talk with the teacher about when I meet her or him, e.g., at parents' evening, etc.)
4. For correcting ideas I don't agree with that may be being promoted at the school (e.g., stereotypes about gender, race, nationality, poverty, drugs, etc.).

Literacy Competencies

The Early Childhood Project developed a number of new measures for assessing children's emergent literacy, grounded in particular aspects of the individual child's experience and based on information provided by the parents in the course of interviews (Serpell, Baker & Sonnenschein, 2002).

In the present report, we focus on a more standardized measure of reading achievement that was administered individually to our participants at their schools by members of the research team. At the end of the first and second grades, two reading subtests from the Woodcock–Johnson Psychoeducational Battery—Tests of Achievement, Revised (WJ-R; 1989) were administered: Word Identification and Word Attack. The Word Identification subtest calls for the child to identify words that appear in large type in a test booklet. The published version of the test begins with identification of isolated letters. This portion of the test was not administered to children in the Early Childhood Project because their letter identification was tested separately. The Word Attack subtest measures the child's skill in applying phonic and structural analysis skills. The child is asked to read aloud pseudowords. Following the test developer's instructions, a Basic Reading Skills composite score combining scores on these two subtests was constructed for use as a measure of word recognition. At the end of Grade 3, four reading subtests from the WJ-R were administered. As in Grade 1, a Basic Reading Skills composite score was constructed from the Word Identification and Word Attack subtests. In addition, following the test developer's instructions, a Reading Comprehension composite score was constructed from the Passage Comprehension and Reading Vocabulary subtests. The Passage Comprehension subtest calls for the child to read short passages and supply missing words in a cloze procedure. The child must state the word that would be appropriate in the context of the passage. The first few items have accompanying pictures. The Reading Vocabulary subtest calls for the child to read words and supply appropriate meanings. In Part A: Synonyms, the child states a word similar in meaning to the word presented, and in Part B: Antonyms, the child states a word that is opposite in meaning to the presented word. Reliability data provided by the publisher (Woodcock–Johnson Psychoeducational Battery—Tests of Achievement, Revised, 1989) for these tests are as follows: Basic Reading Skill composite, for age 6 = .98 (N = 245), for age 9 = .96 (N = 263); Reading Comprehension composite for age 9 = .95 (N = 262).

Scores were available on this set of subtests for only 54 of the children because some had left the project in the intervening years. One indication of external validity for these assessments of literacy development is that they correlated strongly with scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in fourth grade obtained from the Baltimore City Public Schools (with values of r ranging from .77 to .91, $p < .01$).

RESULTS

Elaboration of the Construct of Family Routines

Factor Analysis of Item Scores on the New Family Routine Scales

We began our analysis of the ratings of family routines by replicating the analytical procedures followed by Fiese and her colleagues. Fiese (1992) pooled ratings across seven settings, conducted principal-components factor analysis with varimax rotation, and identified two major factors, accounting respectively for 44% and 28% of the variance, confirming the pattern of an earlier investigation. Fiese labeled the first factor Meaning, with heavy loadings from the dimensions of symbolic significance attributed to the activity, affect invested in the activity, deliberateness with which the activity is planned, importance attached to attendance by all members of the family, and regularity of occurrence. Fiese's second factor was labeled Routine, with heavy loadings from routinization (as contrasted with flexible timing) of the activity and specificity of role assignment in performance of the activity.

We conducted separate factor analyses with varimax rotation of the ratings by parents in the Early Childhood Project on each of three scales: the Dinnertime scale, replicated from Fiese and Kline's (1993) work, and our two new scales, entitled Reading Aloud and Doing Homework. Table 1 summarizes the results of these factor analyses. It is apparent that the factor structure of Fiese's studies across seven settings was more similar to that which we found with

Table 1
Results of Factor Analyses of Item Responses to Family Routine Scales

Source	Items with heaviest distinctive factor loadings	
	First factor	Second factor
Fiese (1992) across seven settings and Fiese et al. (1993)	1, 5, 6, 8	2, 3
Baltimore Early Childhood Project[a]		
Dinnertime	1, 4, 7	2, 8
Reading Aloud	1, 5, 7	2
Homework	2, 5, 7	1, 3, 8

Note. Factor analysis involved principal-components analysis with varimax rotation. Item focus was as follows: (1) regularity of occurrence of the activity; (2) specificity of role assignment for performance of the activity; (3) routinization (vs. flexible timing) of the activity; (4) expectations about attendance for activity; (5) affect invested in the activity; (6) symbolic significance attributed to the activity; (7) continuity of the routine over the course of child development; and (8) deliberateness with which the activity is planned.
[a] Loadings higher than .63.

our scales for Dinnertime and Reading Aloud than to that which we found for Doing Homework.

Investment Scores

In our analysis of how ratings on these family routine scales are related to other variables, we emulated the scoring system adopted by B. H. Fiese (personal communication, May 13, 2002), by creating a subscale derived from each of the first principal-component factors that emerged from our factor analysis of ratings in the present sample. Fiese's system assigns a Ritual Meaning scale score by summing the ratings made on Items 1, 5, 6, and 8, and a Ritual Routine score comprising the sum of ratings on Items 2 and 3. In an analogous manner, we considered the sum of items with a loading of .63 or greater on the first factor identified in our data by principal-component analysis as a possible representation of some type of investment by the family in each activity. These are referred to in this article as investment in dinnertime as a regular, inclusive tradition" (DT 147); "reading aloud as a regular, valued tradition" (RA157), and "homework as a role-specific, valued tradition" (HW257). (See Table 1 for explanations of what the factors include.) Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these three scales were .68 for Dinnertime, .61 for Reading Aloud, and .58 for Homework. Because of the greater variability across activity settings in which items loaded strongly on the second factor to emerge from our factor analyses, we elected not to project these second factors onto another scoring dimension, as this would render comparisons between routines in different activity settings difficult to interpret.

Interpretations of the Meaning of Homework as a Family Activity

Responses by parents to our open-ended question on this topic revealed that most of them had a definite opinion about the significance of the activity, and evaluation of it was in almost all cases positive. The focus of these responses was about evenly divided between benefits for the child and opportunities for the parent to either monitor the child's development or academic progress (the focus of our follow-up prompt to Item a) or to learn about what the child had been doing and learning at school (prompt to Item b). Nine of the 14 parents who cited their opportunity to learn about what the child has been doing at school were in the low-income, African American group. Benefits mentioned for the child included opportunities for substantive learning of new knowledge (more often cited by parents in the low-income group) and opportunities for review or practice of skills learned at school. Some of the parents citing the latter as a benefit (especially in the low-income group) went on to emphasize enhancement of the child's self-confidence: "it gives them confidence that they've absorbed what they've learned"; "she gets to express what she's learned, how smart she is."

Another interesting focus expressed by several parents (all in the middle-income group) was on metacognitive and/or self-regulatory skills and attitudes: "skills for professional life: taking on an assignment and seeing it through"; "good study skills to be successful"; "responsibility: it teaches the child this is like a job, preparation for the future"; "self-discipline—doing things you don't really want to do but have to—responsibility." Several parents stated that doing homework together afforded a valued opportunity for family bonding: "time to spend with the child—quality time"; "brings the family closer together—trying to teach them closeness"; "it's the first thing they do when they get home—togetherness time"; "quality time: all involved together"; "that way he's learning, and we're working together."

The mean ratings (and standard deviations) by the 61 parents who responded to the follow-up questions on this subject are presented in Table 2. The vast majority of parents in our sample rated (a) (monitoring the child's development) as a significant aspect of the meaning they attribute to the activity of doing homework, and a clear majority also rated it as an opportunity for (b) hearing about the child's experience at school and for (c) communicating with the teacher, whereas opinions were more evenly divided about whether it is (d) an opportunity for correcting ideas they don't agree with that may be being promoted at the school.

Analyses of variance with family income and ethnicity as independent variables yielded no significant effects for any of these ratings as dependent variables. None of the four ratings was significantly correlated with scores on the Homework investment scale.

Intercorrelations Among the Various Indices of Intimate Family Culture

Zero-order correlations among the various indices of intimate culture appear in Table 3. Relations among scores on the three routine investment subscales were quite low. Among the four composite indices of parental orientation, only the negative correlation between endorsement of the skills theme and early emphasis of the entertainment orientation reached statistical significance. Given their imperfect correlation, we decided to treat these as separate indices in the multivariate analyses reported below.

Demographic Correlates of Variations in Intimate Family Culture and Literacy Competencies

Table 4 presents means and standard deviations of the scores on each of the two indices of parental orientation toward literacy socialization, the three family routine in-

Table 2
Ratings of Alternative Interpretations of the Meaning of Doing Homework Assigned by the School as a Family Activity

Meaning of homework	*M*	*SD*
For monitoring the child's development	4.72	0.69
For hearing about the child's experience at school	4.41	1.07
For communicating with the teacher	4.16	1.20
For correcting ideas I don't agree with	3.26	1.63

Note. $N = 61$.

Table 3
Correlations Among Various Composite Indices of the Family Intimate Culture

Index of family intimate culture	Reading Aloud	Doing Homework	Entertainment: Early emphasis	Entertainment: Endorsement	Skills: Early emphasis	Skills: Endorsement	Joint literacy activity
Dinnertime	.11	.22	.02	.01	.05	.19	.23
Reading aloud		.27*	.13	.24	−.12	.05	.27*
Homework			.12	−.01	.10	.19	.10
Entertainment							
Early emphasis				.21	−.34**	−.30*	.10
Endorsement					.03	.17	.07
Skills							
Early emphasis						.20	−.13
Endorsement							.05

Note. Dinnertime, reading aloud, and homework represent investment in these rituals as a family routine. Entertainment and skills refer to orientation toward literacy socialization. Joint literacy activity refers to the frequency of the child's engagement in joint literacy activity.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .02$.

vestment scores, the index of reported frequency of engagement by the child in joint literacy activities, and the literacy competency measures, as a function of family income and ethnicity. The means presented in Table 4 show several contrasts among the sociocultural group categories that were tested for significance by coding family income and ethnic heritage as binary point variables.

Frequency of Engagement by the Child in Joint Literacy Activities

The reported frequency of engagement by the child in joint literacy activities was significantly correlated with family income ($r = .41$, $p < .01$, $n = 59$), but not with ethnicity.

Entertainment Versus Skills Orientation by the Parents

Confirming our earlier reports on this sample, middle-income parents were more likely than lower income parents to express an entertainment orientation toward literacy socialization (early emphasis, $r = .35$, $p < .01$, $n = 74$; endorsement, $r = .23$, $p < .10$, $n = 58$, and less likely to express a skills orientation (early emphasis, $r = -.43$, $p < .01$, $n = 74$; endorsement, $r = -.37$, $p < .01$, $n = 58$).

Table 4
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on Indices of Family Intimate Culture and Child Literacy Competency, as a Function of Family Income and Ethnic Identity

	Low income				Middle income			
	African American		European American		African American		European American	
Index of family intimate culture	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Orientation toward literacy socialization								
Entertainment theme								
Early emphasis	1.50	0.90	2.00	1.07	2.40	0.55	2.60	1.20
Endorsement	17.90	2.10	17.76	2.30	18.50	1.51	18.92	1.25
Skills theme								
Early emphasis	2.36	0.95	2.00	1.02	0.80	0.79	1.45	1.00
Endorsement	18.85	2.05	18.70	1.44	19.37	0.91	15.31	3.17
Investment in family routines								
Dinnertime	8.91	2.71	8.52	2.69	8.60	3.47	10.93	1.43
Reading Aloud	6.91	2.35	8.32	2.58	9.67	1.80	7.87	2.50
Doing Homework	10.30	1.82	9.68	2.43	10.89	1.36	9.13	2.70
Engagement of child in joint literacy activity (reported frequency)	12.98	6.74	12.63	5.89	20.26	4.12	16.69	5.48
Grade 1								
Basic reading skills	13.04	11.41	10.87	6.55	18.27	11.37	25.53	14.79
Grade 2								
Basic reading skills	25.75	17.01	18.72	11.87	27.27	13.21	40.00	14.22
Grade 3								
Basic reading skills	29.74	15.27	26.87	12.91	37.20	12.48	47.43	13.45
Reading comprehension	23.91	10.40	23.20	12.70	34.00	10.86	45.21	16.91

African American parents were also significantly more likely to endorse the skills orientation than European American parents ($r = .35$, $p < .01$, $n = 58$). Interpretation of these zero-order correlations will become clearer in the light of the results of the multiple regression analyses reported below.

Family Investment in Routines

Among the three investment subscales, the relation with family income only approached significance in the case of the Homework investment scale ($r = .22$, $p < .10$, $n = 68$). However, maternal education, which is highly correlated in our data with family income ($r = .61$, $p < .01$, $n = 66$) was significantly correlated with the Homework investment scale ($r = .31$, $p < .02$, $n = 57$).

Literacy Competencies

Scores on the competency measures across the three years of Woodcock–Johnson testing were highly intercorrelated, for basic reading skill scores: .87, .81, .92, and between the reading comprehension score (only available for Grade 3) and basic reading skill scores over the three years (.75, .83, .89). As would be expected from other research, all of these scores were highly correlated with family income (.40, .35, .46, .55). All of these correlations were significant at the .01 level.

Multiple Regression–Correlation Analysis

Intimate Culture Versus Social Address as Predictors of Literacy Outcomes

We conducted multiple regression correlation analysis separately for Grade 3 basic reading skills and Grade 3 reading comprehension. Table 5 summarizes the outcomes of these analyses.

In the case of Grade 3 reading comprehension, three indices of intimate family culture predicted a significant amount of variance: endorsement of the entertainment orientation ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .21$), (with a negative beta weight) endorsement of the skills orientation ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .19$), and early emphasis on the entertainment orientation ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .05$). Thereafter, when the social address variables of family income and ethnicity were entered into the equation, family income only accounted for a small and marginally significant amount of variance ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .03$).

In the case of Grade 3 basic reading skills, three indices of intimate family culture predicted a significant amount of variance: endorsement of the entertainment orientation ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .21$), (with a negative beta weight) endorsement of the skills orientation ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .15$), and investment in doing homework as a family routine ($R^2_{\text{change}} = .06$). Thereafter, when the social address variables of family income and ethnicity were entered into the equation, neither of them accounted for a significant amount of variance.

It is noteworthy that when these analyses were repeated with the same set of variables but without constraining the order in which the independent variables were entered, using the stepwise version of the SPSS regression program, the outcome for the reading comprehension dependent variable was different, and involved entering family income in Step 1 to account for .24 of the variance, followed in successive steps by endorsement of entertainment orientation ($R^2 = .11$), endorsement of skills orientation ($R^2 = .09$), and early emphasis on entertainment orientation ($R^2 = .03$). We consider the analysis reported in Table 5 to be more appropriate, as the sequence of entry of the blocks is guided by

Table 5
Prediction of the Child's Literacy Competencies by Indices of Family Intimate Culture and Social Address Variables: Basic Reading Skills

Independent variable	Step	R^2_{change}	*B*	β	*SE*	*t*	*df*
Block 1: Indices of family intimate culture							
Endorsement of literacy socialization themes							
Entertainment	Step 1	.21**	4.15	.52	1.02	4.06	48
Skills	Step 2	.15**	−2.51	−.39	0.89	−2.83	47
Early emphasis							
Entertainment							
Skills							
Investment in family routines							
Dinnertime							
Reading Aloud							
Doing Homework	Step 3	.06*	1.49	.22	0.79	1.88	46
Engagement in joint literacy activity (reported frequency)							
Block 2: Social address variables							
Family income							
Ethnic heritage							
Total R^2		.45					

Note. Independent variables were entered in a forced sequence of two blocks, but freely, stepwise within each block; entry criterion $p = .20$, $N = 50$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 6
Prediction of the Child's Literacy Competencies by Indices of Family Intimate Culture and Social Address Variables: Reading Comprehension

Independent variable	Step	R^2_{change}	*B*	β	*SE*	*t*	*df*
Block 1: Indices of family intimate culture							
Literacy socialization themes							
Endorsement							
Entertainment	Step 1	.21**	3.35	.43	0.94	3.56	48
Skills	Step 2	.19**	−1.89	−.30	0.77	−2.46	47
Early emphasis							
Entertainment	Step 3	.05	2.89	.20	1.73	1.63	46
Skills							
Investment in family routines							
Dinnertime							
Reading Aloud							
Doing Homework							
Engagement in joint literacy activity (reported frequency)							
Block 2: Social address variables							
Family income	Step 4	.03†	6.65	.22	3.86	1.72	
Ethnic heritage							
Total R^2		.48					

Note. Independent variables were entered in a forced sequence of two blocks, but freely, stepwise within each block; entry criterion $p = .20$, $N = 50$.
† $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$.

our theoretical argument that intimate family culture constitutes a proximal variable and offers a more precise psychological explanation of the child's opportunities for literacy development than status variables such as family income. Allowing all the variables to enter freely (stepwise) did not alter the outcomes of the second analysis reported in Table 6 (with basic reading skills as the dependent variable), nor of the analysis reported in Table 7, described below.

Table 7
Prediction of Changes in the Child's Basic Literacy Skills by Indices of Family Intimate Culture and Social Address Variables: Grade 3 Basic Reading Skills

Independent variable	Step	R^2_{change}	*B*	β	*SE*	*t*	*df*
Block 1: Baseline							
Grade 2 basic reading skills		.84	0.86	.85	0.06	15.73	
Block 2: Indices of family intimate culture							
Endorsement of literacy socialization themes							
Entertainment							
Skills							
Early emphasis							
Entertainment							
Skills							
Investment in family routines							
Dinnertime	Step 3	.01*	0.68	.12	0.29	2.40	47
Reading Aloud	Step 2	.01*	0.66	.11	0.31	2.14	46
Homework							
Engagement in joint literacy activity (reported frequency)	Step 1	.03**	0.24	.10	0.12	1.95	45
Block 3: Social address variables							
Family income							
Ethnic heritage							
Total R^2		.90					

Note. Independent variables were entered in a forced sequence of three blocks, but freely, stepwise within each block; entry criterion $p = .20$, $N = 50$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Intimate Culture Versus Social Address as Predictors of Literacy Development

Table 7 presents the outcome of an analysis that replicated the analysis of Grade 3 basic reading skills reported above, with one addition: Grade 2 reading skill scores were entered first as a covariate, followed in sequence by a block of intimate culture variables and then a block of social address variables. In this case the baseline variable of Grade 2 basic reading skills accounted for most of variance (R^2 = .84). Thereafter, three of the intimate family culture variables predicted small but significant additional amounts of variance: reported frequency of joint literacy activity by the child (R^2_{change} = .03); investment in reading aloud as a family routine (R^2_{change} = .01); and investment in dinner time as a family routine (R^2_{change} = .01). Finally, when the social address variables of family income and ethnicity were entered into the equation, neither of them accounted for a significant amount of variance. These latter effects can be interpreted as representing the power of each independent variable to predict growth in reading skills from Grade 2 to Grade 3.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of data collected from an ethnically and economically diverse sample of Baltimore families presented above advances us toward our goal of moving beyond social address descriptions of the developmental niche in several ways. Multiple regression analysis of various predictors of literacy developmental outcomes showed that when indices of particular aspects of the family's intimate culture were entered first, only a small proportion of the variance remained to be accounted for by family income, a popular index of social class, and no significant additional variance was accounted for by ethnic heritage.

Moreover, the various indices of potentially relevant dimensions of family culture that we designed attests to their relevance and coherence. For instance, the degree to which a family was rated by a parent as invested in reading aloud as a regular, valued tradition was significantly correlated with the frequency with which the parent reported that the focal child engages in joint literacy-related activities at home. Furthermore, confirming our earlier findings, we found that in the primary caregiver's account of the child's developmental niche, an emphasis on the significance of literacy as a source of entertainment was negatively correlated with an emphasis on literacy as a set of skills to be acquired.

We did not enter this domain with strong hypotheses about the exact impact on literacy development of particular dimensions of family culture or about their distribution across social groups. Nevertheless the relationships that we found lend themselves to some *ex post facto* interpretation. The finding that middle-income parents attributed on average more meaning to dinnertime as a family ritual than lower-income parents is consistent with other reports in the literature that dinnertime conversation constitutes a valued practice of middle-class, American culture (Heath, 1983; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984; Snow, Dickinson, & Tabors, 1991).

The finding that the factor structure of ratings for the Doing Homework scale differed to a greater degree than that of the ratings on the Reading Aloud scale from the factor structure found by Fiese and Kline (1993) for the Dinnertime scale may reflect the fact that doing homework is less likely than the other two activities to be perceived by the family as part of its own repertoire of meaningful rituals, as it is defined as a task set by an external agency, the school.

The finding of an association between maternal education and level of investment in doing homework as a family routine may be a reflection of the greater incorporation of mainstream cultural values within family life by families with more advanced levels of parental education. Ogbu (1994) argued that the experience of involuntary incorporation into U.S. society generates a cultural frame of reference that is oppositional toward various mainstream values prominent in the ethos of public schools. In light of this, we hypothesized that lower income and African American parents might be more likely than other groups of parents in our sample to endorse an interpretation of homework as an opportunity for correcting ideas they do not agree with that may be promoted at the school. However, we did not find any evidence to support this hypothesis. It may be that such oppositional attitudes are less prevalent among parents of young elementary school children than among high school students (Fordham, 1996) or that such attitudes are not expressed in the context of monitoring children's homework, or that they are indeed seldom explicitly acknowledged in discourse with educated visitors such as our interviewers.

Not all of our indices of family culture were as strongly predictive of literacy developmental outcomes as we had expected, but each of them accounted for a significant amount of the variance in at least one of the analyses. Further research will be needed to explore more specific relationships between the particular focus of family routine activities and child development outcomes. Moreover, additional variance in literacy socialization and development may be found to be due to routines and traditions in other activities that we did not explore in this study, for example, getting ready to go to school, going shopping, and saying prayers.

Our data are consistent with Super and Harkness's (1997) theoretical contention that the recurrent activities in a child's developmental niche are largely organized and driven by parents' implicit theoretical perspective on child development and socialization. Some aspects of that perspective are informed by broad themes propagated by the media and/or passed on from one generation to the next within ethnocultural groups. In addition to the structure derived from such broad, sociohistorical influences, each family co-constructs its own unique, intimate culture, blending the specifics of its constituent personalities, its particular ecological niche, and its own history of shared events.[1]

Viewed against this background, social addresses can be

[1] As noted by Sameroff and Fiese (1992), such family histories are sometimes rehearsed or celebrated through storytelling. Our attempt, within the Baltimore Early Childhood Project, to tap into this dimension of intimate culture as a complement to the other indices described in this article will be presented elsewhere.

construed as offering a simplistic typology of intimate cultures based on superficial features, some of which may be grounded in fact, such as religious taboos, whereas others may be based on misinterpretations and/or deliberate distortions motivated by hostile attitudes. Whatever their origins, such ethnocultural group stereotypes necessarily overgeneralize and are therefore likely to be weaker predictors of parental behavior and of child developmental outcomes than a finer grained analysis of the patterns of activity, meanings, and technology that characterize particular families. In the everyday discourse of contemporary American society, the concept of culture is often deployed as a way of referring to widely recognized contrasts between large, self-identifying social groups. In our usage, however, its primary significance is to characterize a dimension of behavior and experience that is shared among co-participants in joint activity and that endures over time. Thus families are equally legitimate repositories of a distinctive culture as are larger social groups.

When we examine our indices of intimate family culture, despite their relatively untested status as measures, we find that they account for most of the variance in children's literacy competencies attributable to the social address of family income. Thus, from the perspective of literacy development, psychosocial features of a family's intimate culture are more informative than economic indices of the family's material resources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLICATION AND PUBLIC POLICY

Human service professionals who work with families may find the concept of an intimate family culture useful as a way of conceptualizing the perspective from which parents approach their interactions with outside institutions such as schools. Traditionally, teachers have often construed their role as representatives of the school to be grounded in knowledgeable expertise and as an authoritative stance on cultural values. From this perspective, the challenge of negotiating a satisfactory relationship between school and home centers on how to promote congruence of the student's family life with the agenda of schooling. Arguably, however, this approach is too asymmetrical, and teachers need to seek ways of understanding in greater depth the practices of families and the priorities that inform them. Furthermore, if schools are to perform a more productive, less alienating function in society, parents and teachers need to identify shared assumptions and build on them (Serpell, 1997).

We believe that the different themes we have articulated about the significance of literacy in child development (entertainment, skills, and everyday life) constitute a valuable resource for enhancing cooperative communication between teachers and parents (Serpell et al., 1996; Sonnenschein et al., 2000). More specifically, it also seems noteworthy that the degree of investment by the family in homework assigned by the school as a role-specific, valued tradition accounted for a much smaller amount of the variance in our sample's basic reading skills in third grade than did parental endorsement of an entertainment orientation, whereas parental endorsement of a skill orientation was negatively related to the child's level of reading skills. Parents and teachers in our study appeared to agree that homework affords a valuable opportunity for parents to learn about their child's progress at school, but our evidence suggests that conscientious use of that opportunity may be surpassed in importance by other dimensions of the family's intimate culture. Rather than assigning predetermined roles to their students' families as monitors or helpers with the school's agenda, teachers may benefit from seeking to capitalize on their inherent strengths by attending to parental values and ideas as well as family routines and traditions.

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Appendix

New Family Routine Scales

Dinnertime Routine Scale

Think about a typical dinnertime in your family

For our family: really true	For our family: sort of true			For our family: sort of true	For our family: really true
___ 4	___ 3	1. Some families regularly eat dinner together.	BUT Other families rarely eat dinner together.	___ 2	___ 1
___ 4	___ 3	2. In some families everyone has a specific role and job to do at dinner time.	BUT In other families people do different jobs at different times depending on needs.	___ 2	___ 1
___ 1	___ 2	3. In some families dinner time is flexible. People eat whenever they can.	BUT In other families everything about dinner is scheduled; dinner is at the same time every day.	___ 3	___ 4
___ 4	___ 3	4. In some families, every one is expected to be home for dinner.	BUT In other families you never know who will be home for dinner.	___ 2	___ 1
___ 4	___ 3	5. In some families people feel strongly about eating dinner together.	BUT In other families it is not that important if people eat together.	___ 2	___ 1
___ 1	___ 2	6. In some families dinner time is just for getting food.	BUT In other families dinner time is more than just a meal; it has special meaning.	___ 3	___ 4
___ 4	___ 3	7. In some families dinner time has always been and always will be a regular family event.	BUT In other families dinner time has changed over the years as children grow up and schedules change.	___ 2	___ 1
___ 1	___ 2	8. In some families there is little planning around dinner time.	BUT In other families dinner time is planned in advance.	___ 3	___ 4

Note. The Dinnertime Routine scale is part of the Family Ritual Questionnaire, from "Development of the Family Ritual Questionnaire: Initial reliability and validation studies," by B. H. Fiese and C. A. Kline, 1993, *Journal of Family Psychology, 6,* pp. 290–299. Copyright 1993 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission of the authors. The respondent checked one response for each of the eight items on the scale. Each choice per item was assigned a value from 1 (*low*) to 4 (*high*). The higher the score, the more routinized the activity for the respondent.

Reading Aloud

For our family					For our family	
really true	sort of true				sort of true	really true
___ 4	___ 3	1. Some families regularly read aloud together.	BUT	Other families rarely read aloud together.	___ 2	___ 1
___ 4	___ 3	2. In some families, the same parent or older child always reads aloud to the youngest child.	BUT	In other families, different people read aloud to the child at different times depending on who is available.	___ 2	___ 1
___ 1	___ 2	3. In some families, the timing of reading aloud is flexible. People read aloud whenever they get the (a) chance.	BUT	In other families, reading aloud is very definitely scheduled; it happens at the same time every day.	___ 3	___ 4
___	___	5. In some families, people feel strongly about reading aloud together.	BUT	In other families, it is not that important whether people read aloud or not.	___	___
___	___	6. In some families, reading aloud is just so others can hear.	BUT	In other families, reading aloud is more than just information; it has special meaning.	___	___
___	___	7. In some families, reading aloud has always been and will always be a regular family event.	BUT	In other families, the time at which people read aloud has changed over the years as children grow up and schedules change.	___	___
___	___	8. In some families, there is little planning around reading aloud.	BUT	In other families, reading aloud is planned in advance.	___	___

Note. Adapted from "Development of the Family Ritual Questionnaire: Initial reliability and validation studies," by B. H. Fiese and C. A. Kline, 1993, *Journal of Family Psychology, 6,* pp. 290–299. Copyright 1993 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission of the authors. Sample scores are listed for the first three items; see Dinner Time Routine for an explanation.

Doing Homework Assigned by the School

Think about the way homework is typically done in your family

For our family: really true	For our family: sort of true				For our family: sort of true	For our family: really true
__	__	1. Some families regularly do homework together.	BUT	Other families rarely do homework together.	__	__
__	__	2. In some families, the same parent or older child always helps the youngest child with her/his homework.	BUT	In other families, different people help the child with homework depending on who is available.	__	__
__	__	3. In some families, the timing of homework is flexible. Children get homework done whenever they can.	BUT	In other families, homework is strictly scheduled; it is done at the same time every school day.	__	__
__	__	4. In some families, parents feel strongly that they should check the children's homework.	BUT	In other families, it is not that important whether parents check the homework or not.	__	__
__	__	5. In some families, parents feel strongly that they should help with the children's homework.	BUT	In other families, it is not that important whether parents help with homework or not.	__	__
__	__	6. In some families, homework time is just for getting the task assigned by the school teacher done.	BUT	In other families, doing homework is more than just a task assigned by teacher; it has special meaning.	__	__
__	__	7. In some families, homework has been a regular event ever since the oldest child started going to school and will remain that way until the youngest finishes school.	BUT	In other families, homework time has changed over the years as children grow up and schedules change.	__	__
__	__	8. In some families, there is little planning around homework (time).	BUT	In other families, homework (time) is planned in advance.	__	__

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