Educational Differences in Parental Care Involvement and Child Developmental Stages: A Couple-level Study with Spanish Time Use Data

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This paper uses Spanish couple-level time use data to investigate differences in parental care time across different levels of education. The goal is to provide new insights in the educational determinants of the quality and quantity of parental inputs that children receive at different developmental stages. Parental involvement was considered a critical predictor of the socio-emotional and cognitive abilities that children develop from infancy to late childhood (Heckman, 2006: Waldfogel, 2006). Parental education has been defined as a crucial variable in explaining variations in parent-child interactions associated with children's human capital (Bianchi et al., 2006). Previous research suggested that highly-educated parents not only have the highest socioeconomic and cultural resources to transmit educational advantage to their children, but they also conform to the parenting norms and practices associated with children's accumulation of human capital, which in turn may explain the persistence and reproduction of social and educational inequalities (Bianchi et al., 2004; Esping-Andersen, 2009; McLanahan, 2004; Lareau, 2003; Sayer et al., 2004; Yeung et al., 2001). Yet, the literature on parent-child relationships paid very little attention to investigate how couples of different socioeconomic resources spend time in different parenting activities linked to children's age-specific developmental needs. We argue that examining how parenting activities diverge across couples with different educational resources is a critical task to shed light on the quality of care and development of children from different parental backgrounds.

Child-rearing has been defined as a multidimensional practice (Bittman et al., 2004; Folbre et al., 2005). Parents can nurture their children through a variety of ways that are positive for child development. These activities range from 'physical care' (i.e. feeding and medical care) and 'parental supervision' (i.e. monitoring children's activities), to 'intellectual stimuli' (i.e. teaching, helping with homework) and 'interpersonal' activities (i.e. playing and conversations) (Bianchi et al., 2006; Kalil et al., 2012). A number of studies contributed to our understanding of how different socioeconomic and demographic

* This extended abstract was prepared for a paper presentation at the 2013 PAA (New Orleans, Louisiana).

variables are correlated with mothers' and fathers' participation in different types of parenting activities (Bianchi et al., 2006; Bittman et al., Craig, 2006; Sullivan, 2010). However, the ideal distribution of the types of parenting activities that children need to acquire socio-emotional and cognitive abilities varies by the developmental stage of the child. Although children require active parental care, supervision, and responsiveness throughout their different developmental stages, some types of parent-child interactions are more effective to stimulate children's abilities in certain developmental stages, and less in others (Waldfogel, 2006). Whereas basic care (i.e. feeding, medical care, intensive physical care, emotional responsiveness) represents the most fundamental parenting activity that infants require to enhance their future socio-emotional and cognitive skills, children require an increasing variety of parental inputs as they grow up, including teaching practices, active playing, verbal interaction, or daily parental supervision (e.g., Marsiglio, 1991; Kalil et al., 2012). During the late pre-school years, say when children are aged 3 to 5, the brain becomes more complex for abstract conceptualizations, verbal abilities, and psychological reasoning, and thereby children need increasing amounts of parental engagement in teaching involvement and intellectual stimulation in order to gain cognitive and intellectual competence (Gelman, 2008). In mid and late childhood, children achieve more physical and intellectual autonomy, but their cognitive development, cultural capital, and social skills still depend on parents' active engagement in stimulating children's intellectual abilities and monitoring non-school related activities that enhance their cultural and social skills (Guralnick, 2008; Lareau, 2003). Therefore, to provide knowledge on the types of parental care that children of different educational backgrounds receive, we need to pay special attention to differences in the distribution of parenting across children's developmental stages (Belsky, 1984; Kalil et al., 2012).

How do couples of different levels education adjust their parental care investments to their children's age-specific developmental needs? Our research question remains largely understudied in the family and stratification literatures. Previous studies found an education gradient in parental care time across different countries (Bianchi et al., 2006; Sayer et al., 2004). Yet these studies did not examine differences across children's developmental stages. Only two studies have analyzed how mothers or fathers with different levels of education allocate time to age-specific child care activities that are critical for child development in different age-specific stages. Using data from the '2003-2007 American Time Use Survey', Kalil and colleagues (2012) found that college-educated mothers adjust their distribution of child care investments that are most suitable for their future human capital development at different developmental stages. Similarly, Gracia (2012), found with Spanish time use data that fathers adjust their parental time investments in child care to their children's age-specific developmental needs. These two studies found that both paternal and maternal education have a particularly remarkable impact on

parental engagement in families with preschoolers, a period in which child development is associated with the most intensive parental care support (Heckman, 2006; Waldfogel, 2006). Despite the contribution of these two studies, a couple-level perspective has been omitted from the literature. We argue that using a couple-level approach to the allocation of parental care time contributes to our understanding of parent-child relations in two important ways: (i) by providing evidence of the educational determinants of the total parental inputs received by children in intact families; (ii) by offering a richer picture than the literature has so far provided on how partners of different levels of education distribute their child care activities that are most suitable for child development.

Our empirical analyses investigate how Spanish couples of different levels of education spend time in four parenting activities: physical care, non-teaching interactive care, teaching care, and parental supervision. These child care activities are studied across families with the youngest child at five age-related developmental stages: infancy (ages 0-1), toddlerhood (ages 2-3), late pre-school period (ages 4-5), primary school (ages 6-11), and low secondary school (ages 12-16). Drawing on the study of Kalil's et al. (2012), we assume that parental education is associated with different child-rearing norms, strategies, and practices. Thus, we expect to find an education gradient in child care associated with the most suitable parenting practices for child development. Unlike previous studies, we use couple-level time use data for households with the youngest child in the five predefined developmental stages. Even if longitudinal time use surveys are not available for our empirical goals, the '2003 Spanish Time Use Survey' (STUS) provides couple-level diary data for a large representative sample of Spanish heterosexual couples with children (n = 3,531). This makes possible to construct five representative subsamples of couples with children at different life stages. Our empirical analyses offer insights on how couples of different educational backgrounds spend time in parenting activities that are important predictors of children's future development. This fact contributes to our understanding of the potential mechanisms for the intergenerational reproduction of educational inequalities.