

You Can't Always Get What You Want: Cultural models, parenting practices, and child development

The breadth and depth of cultural influences on human development and experience are old concerns for anthropology that have gained fresh urgency from current challenges including health disparities and ethnic diversity. This presentation tracks one approach to these questions, using a bioecocultural perspective on the development of emotion regulation to assess the nature and impact of cultural models about young child parenting. Parent efforts are informed by shared cultural views about child developmental needs and good parenting aimed to promote desirable child outcomes. But to what extent are the intended aims actually achieved? The question is pursued with a sample of middle class, ethnically diverse, single and partnered urban American parents. These parents clearly articulated and largely implemented cultural models for young child development and appropriate parenting that emphasized simplicity and predictability of daily life. Parents also regarded absorption of stressors as part of good parenting. Our fine-grained longitudinal measures of activity in relation to family ecology and child psychobehavioral outcomes under a naturalistic stressor partially support cultural models of child developmental need and appropriate parenting. But we also discovered that following these models have unexpected side effects on parent stress that have direct implications for family policy.