The almost silent video is short and sweet. And searing. It gives a glimpse of one reason for America’s urban regression, the family pathologies that drive the intergenerational transmission of poverty. At first glance the scene the video captures is sweet, a mother feeding her infant. Ten minutes later, at its end, you understand: the mother does not know how to mother.

Jim Egan, a clinical psychologist in Washington, says the video, from a steady camera focused on a twenty-two-year-old woman and her six-month-old baby, was made as part of a study of “failure to thrive.” The mother feeds the baby, which sits on her knee, with a spoon from a bowl. The spoon moves steadily, the baby makes no sound and neither does the mother. The only noise, every minute or so, is the soft sound of the baby vomiting. This occurs each time the baby turns with its hands extended, reaching for contact with the mother’s warmth. The mother reflexively—not unkindly, but stiffly—holds the baby away. Then the baby regurgitates the food swallowed since the last rebuff. Vomiting, says Egan, is the baby’s tactic for maintaining at least the attention of feeding.

Egan sees many babies with bald spots on the back of their heads, evidence that the babies are left for long stretches on their backs. A childcare—actually, noncare—product popular in some ghettos is a pillow made to hold a bottle next to an infant so the infant can take nourishment without an adult in attendance. But the baby in the video is more fortunate.

The baby’s mother, like most young mothers in Washington and many other inner cities, is unmarried. But she is not a moral failure, not what was once called a “fallen woman.” One cannot fall down from where she started. She has an emotionally disturbed mother, under whose care the child suffered dreadful diaper rashes. The study of “failure to thrive” is, for her, a school of mothering.

It is perhaps natural to think that parenting is a natural talent, a spontaneously acquired, unlearned skill. It is not. It is learned, as language is, early and largely by parental example. Parents generally parent as their parents did. As the woman feeds her baby she gives the sort of verbal stimulation she probably got from her mother: none.

Depressed, unstimulating or unavailable mothers produce in babies “maternal deprivation syndrome,” which suppresses infants’ development. A mother reared in poverty is apt to have a barren “inner world” of imagination and emotional energy, a consequence of impoverished early experiences. And such a mother nowadays may be the only nurturing adult in an infant’s life. A study of turn-of-the-century Massachusetts showed that 90 percent of households included three or more adults—two parents plus perhaps a grandmother, a bachelor uncle, a maiden aunt. Today many homes have but one adult, and infants are handed around to various caretakers. This can be disorienting and developmentally damaging early in life.

Until the 1940s it was widely believed that it did not matter who raised babies, if basic competence was assured. A good orphanage would do. However, subsequent studies documented the bewilderment, withdrawal and depression of infants who begin but do not adequately complete bonding with their mothers. In too many homes today, says Egan, “the lights are on but no one is home.” People are there, but not there. Inattentive parents are producing children who are like that: They seem normal but they are not what they should be, what they could have been.

Verbal stimulation of middle-class infants produces in their babies the sounds of the phonetic alphabet much earlier than those sounds occur in the babble of lower-class children. Will children reared in poverty catch up in school? Probably not. They are not just behind; they are, in a sense, crippled. Animals reared in nonstimulative isolation have been shown to have less brain weight than those reared amid the stimulation of company. Those reared in the stimulative environment have a higher ratio of differentiated (specialized functioning) to undifferentiated brain cells. Egan’s chilling inference is that an infant can fail to develop some early brain functions as a consequence of social deprivation.
Children, says Egan, are like computers in that what goes in comes out. And each child gets only one floppy disk. He says there is a critical period early in the developmental process of every infant: The merry-go-round goes around only once and the infant does or does not get the brass ring of the full enjoyment of the potential that was his or her birthright. This fact should shock American sensibilities because it refutes the assumption that equality of opportunity is a fact as long as there are no obvious formal, legal, institutional impediments to it. Hence the vast—and increasingly misplaced—faith in schools as the great equalizers of opportunity for upward mobility in a meritocratic society. But studies of early childhood development indicate that school comes too late for many children. Before they cross their first schoolyard, severe damage has been done to their life chances. Even superb schools could not correct the consequences of early deprivation, and superb schools are not frequently found in the neighborhoods where children damaged by their social environment sustain their damages.

Failing families concentrated in a particular class cause urban regression, but Americans recoil from the fact of class. We see our society through ideologically tinted spectacles that filter out unpleasant evidence, such as: 15 percent of IQ points are experientially rather than genetically based, and the preschool experiences of ghetto children can cost them a significant portion of those points.

Studies of “failure to thrive” babies and their mothers suggest a strategy for combating the syndrome, but the studies also indicate that the strategy cannot be a public health policy. Very early intervention, involving close and protracted supervision of young unmarried mothers, can “jump-start” their mothering skills. But there are too many single mothers who need this long, labor-intensive and therefore expensive attention.

As regards incompetent parenting, there also are, Egan emphasizes, gilded ghettos. Their residents include “privileged” children of parents too affluent for their children’s good, parents able and eager to give children anything but attention, measuring out what these parents are pleased to call “quality time” in dribs and drabs. There are more ghettos—and more damages to children—than meet the eye.