The demise of child-rearing

Public Interest, Fall, 2000 by Lyric Wallwork Winik

CHILD-REARING is America's cultural third rail. It is the gateway for debating everything from family structure (or the lack thereof) to exactly who should care for those regarded as the most vulnerable and malleable among us: very young children. And it has become far from a private debate, to be had around the kitchen table after the kids have brushed their teeth and gone to bed. Today, there are all manner of mental health professionals, child development experts, counselors, researchers, authors, and radio call-in hosts ready and waiting to dispense advice and guidelines. Even various arms of the federal government have weighed in with their estimations of what's best for their smallest citizens. In the name of the children, federal tax law offers a $500-per-child tax credit (interestingly enough, a similar policy was first proposed by Theodore Roosevelt for the same sum), and federal law enforcement made armed raids to snatch Elian Gonzalez and to save the supposedly abused children in the Branch Davidi an compound at Waco.

Indeed, "think of the children" has become a contemporary mantra, and, with some 200 years of child development theorizing, from Locke to Spock to Penelope Leach, there is no shortage of accumulated thought about infants and children and no shortage of prescriptions for mental stimulation, emotional well-being, or the fostering of creativity and autonomy. But in many respects, not since four- and five-year-old children were sent down into the mines or consigned to the factory floor has it been harder to be a child. Children are more medicated than ever before. They are routinely exposed to sexual situations sooner, as well as to violence, illicit drugs, and alcohol. With the rise of sexual predators, they are for the most part no longer free to hop on their bikes and
explore the suburban world; many are not allowed even to walk an urban or suburban block alone. Spontaneous play time has given way to scheduled play dates and organized pint-sized soccer leagues. There is structured day care or morning care and after care at school. Thus, at a time when human life spans are lengthening, there is sobering evidence that American childhood, as most of us have understood it, is eroding.

And for all the admonitions to "think of the children," there is also quite a bit of time in contemporary life when we do not think of them at all. Movie theaters, malls, and
supermarkets are promoting "drop-in centers," where children can be left so adults can
go about their business unencumbered. Our entertainment culture--movies, books, and
television--has, with the exception of kid-oriented programming, the occasional
household comedy, and a few "reality-based" dramas, largely airbrushed children out of
the picture. Where they do exist, it is primarily off screen, and even then, the most
dedicated celluloid parents do not race in with spit-up on their shirts or tear their hair
out looking for the binky in the diaper bag. Thus, when many Americans settle down to
be entertained, children are overwhelmingly unseen and unheard.

Root causes and revolutionary changes

All of this did not happen overnight. And while it might be nice simply to point to
some cultural tsunami, say the 1960s, that swept in and shattered centuries of
convention, it is also possible to look at a seven-year-old girl today dressed in a crop-
top or strappy halter with platforms and Gapri pants heading off to a hair and make-up
"makeover" birthday party and see an echo of Brueghel the Elder's painting of
children's games, in which the children were painted simply as small adults, with all the
same physical features, just reduced in size. Back then, in Brueghel's late medieval
Western world, once a child left the cradle, adult society beckoned. (Today, it may not
be so much adult society as a prolonged adolescence.)

But it remains true today, as was also true then, that our conceptions of childhood are
not static. Indeed, many of the current issues surrounding childhood--and no doubt
some of the ensuing contradictions and confusion--have their roots in various
conceptions and theories of childhood that have come down to us in broad brush from
the past. Many of our assumptions, and even the starting points for current debates and
arguments, are fully derivative of the best of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century views
on childhood and the child, from thinkers like Locke, Rousseau, and John Wesley.

But amid this seeming consistency, there is one staggering change: For 1999, the
Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that roughly only one in four children was being
raised by a stay-at-home, nonemployed mom. Other numbers are even lower: The
Clinton administration and various interest groups cite the figure that nearly eight in ten mothers work outside the home, while evaluations of the most recent U.S. Census claim that only 18 percent of children will have their mom at home full-time from childhood through adolescence. Even allowing within these demographics for a higher number of mothers who stay home with an infant, as opposed to those who remain at home with a school-age six-year-old, those numbers may be telling us something important: What is changing may be less our conceptions of childhood and even child-rearing than our conceptions of mothers, parenthood, and parents. Where once the raising of a child was rooted in notions of parental self-sacrifice, today it is being pushed aside by demands for adult freedom and choice. In fact, childhood isn't so much about the kids anymore. It's about the parents. And for this, there is no easy historical echo, no ready road map.

In the beginning ... was Locke

After the Bible--which guided centuries of child-rearing with such aphorisms as spare the rod and spoil the child, as well as the more nuanced story of an "abandoned" Moses plucked from the bulrushes by a princess, who in turn asks a "Hebrew" woman to nurse and look after the boy, who is, it turns out, the boy's mother, and thus either one of history's first nannies or an example of a powerful maternal drive--much of our first modern thoughts on child-rearing can be traced to the seventeenth-century works of John Locke.

Childless himself, Locke began to explore the topic at the behest of a cousin and her husband, who were seeking advice on the upbringing of their son. The result of his ruminations, Some Thoughts Concerning Education, was published in 1693. As John Cleverly and D.C. Phillips point out in Visions of Childhood: Influential Models From Locke to Spock, Locke began by discounting the notion that any "innate principles" arrived inborn with the infant. Instead, he proposed that a child entered the world as a tabula rasa or blank tablet upon which would be written the contents of the mind. And those contents were to be derived from experience, specifically from sensation or
sensory experience, such as hot or cold, light or dark, and from reflection or introspection, which would produce an understanding of mental function and eventually lead to mastery of such concepts as thinking, doubting, reasoning, and willing.

In certain respects, Locke was an optimist, hopeful about the general improvability of man. He begins Some Thoughts Concerning Education by writing, "I think I may say that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. 'Tis that which makes the great difference in mankind." But while education was the great improver, it was not a thorough equalizer. Blank though they may be, even Locke acknowledged that not all tablets were equally amenable to being written upon. Thus he would also write that there was a "greater distance" between some men and others with regard to understanding, apprehension, and reasoning, than "between some men and some beasts."

But this second line of reasoning was muted in an exuberant age struggling to slip the bonds of primogeniture and stratified class and move up the social ladder. Locke's notion of the power of education as a determining factor in human success gave credence to the meritocratic ideal. For example, a second son like George Washington, born into the middling gentry, could have taken quite a bit of heart from Locke's nine-tenths rule regarding education as he wrote out his list of 110 rules of conduct, including items like "don't spit in the fireplace" and "don't blow one's nose on the table cloth," to help facilitate his rise into society's higher strata. Indeed, Locke arrived at just the right time--when men might strike out to new lands to seek their fortunes, when one was not necessarily destined to adopt one's father's trade or even to spend an entire lifetime never venturing beyond one's own particular village or town.

These fundamental Lockean precepts are still with us. Some 50 percent of those surveyed for a recent New York Times report on American attitudes say that education played "a big role" in making them who they are, more so than their race, or religion, or their parent's personal wealth. Faith in the transforming power of education can also be
seen in current debates over school vouchers and funding for Head Start. Locke's general concepts have also trickled down in more far-flung forms today. Arguments that gender differences are not innate, but are merely artificial social constructs thrust upon young boys and young girls to which they must then conform, owe something of their genesis to Locke's depiction of the infant as a tabula rasa. Parents who ban "war toys" for their sons or who give dump trucks to their daughters are, consciously or not, working to shape that same sensory, even reflective, component of education that Locke first identified.

Tough love

But the Lockean model of childhood is not the only one to undergird the collective consciousness. Two very contradictory views, one espoused by John Wesley and his followers, the other by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, also do much to shape our present-day conceptions of childhood and child-rearing. The founder of the Methodist movement, Wesley had a conception of childhood that was rooted in the long-standing Christian doctrine of original sin: namely, that children were born flawed, inheriting the sins perpetrated by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Writing in the first half of the eighteenth century, Wesley's remedy was strict scheduling and the liberal use of corporal punishment. (His mother Susanna helped set him on this path by advocating set sleeping hours, family prayers, no food between meals, and use of "the rod" starting with children one year old, sometimes even earlier.) Wesley himself frowned on unsupervised time and the eighteenth century version of play days. His motto could be summed up by these words: "Break his will now, and his soul shall live."

Wesley's conceptions of innate child behavior have been credited with partially shaping everything from the mid-twentieth-century fiction classic Lord of the Flies to rigid British schooling systems designed, it was believed, to remedy the deplorable nature of the untutored boy. It is easy enough today also to see the Wesley model underlying debates about whether or not spanking is appropriate or is a form of child abuse. And his strict message is repeated by contemporary "tough love" parenting gurus like John
Rosemond, whom the New York Times once dubbed the pro-punishment Spock, and who advocates judicious spanking; serious household chores; unpleasant, memorable punishment for all disobedience, no matter how small the infraction; and a three- to five-day plan for toilet training by age two. Popular among some Baby Boom parents and Christian evangelicals, Rosemond also believes that the current emphasis on developing self-esteem is corrupt, producing not children who say "I can" but a culture of narcissism whose children say "I am special." And in a more circumscribed vein, even many childhood sleep experts and sleep consultants today don't sound too far removed from Susanna Wesley when they advocate set bedtimes and sleep periods for young children.

But scratch the surface of Wesley's concept of a manageable child and one is reminded of the current debate over the use of behavior-altering drugs like Ritalin and Prozac. Here, misbehavior and disruption don't stem from a moral disease but rather are identified as physical malfunctionings. Certainly, there are children and families for whom maladies like Attention Deficit Disorder are both disruptive and devastating. But the mushrooming diagnoses of such afflictions--and far more frequently in boys than in girls--raise the specter that in place of Wesley's stern child-rearing prescriptions, through which parents and educators could gain control of willful children, Americans are now turning not to the rod but to the prescription pad. Whether the means are moral education or medical management, the ends remain strikingly similar--gaining mastery and control over the willful or difficult child.

Obedience, self-control, and discipline were to be achieved in children, Wesley thought, by a method of corporal punishment that many today might find uncomfortably harsh. But a century or so from now, another generation may ask whether in this era it was also the unruly who were singled out to be subdued, this time not through education, but with medication to make them more compliant, more manageable, more conformist, and, in the process, perhaps to behave less like young males. Indeed, Francis Fukuyama has postulated that as a society we are nudging our
children toward androgyny, employing Prozac to make girls less like girls and Ritalin to render boys less like boys.

Naturally good

The antithesis of the Wesley approach is represented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed in man's natural goodness. As such, evil is not a necessary part of our fallen condition but rather enters into the world as man moves from a state of nature to organized society. Rousseau's educational prescription, not surprisingly, involved granting more freedom rather than less to the young child, for children should follow their natural impulses. But Rousseau also favored a carefully supervised education, in which a knowledgeable adult controlled and carefully selected just what children were exposed to and what they experienced. By this circumscribed means, childhood could be made incorrupt.

Under Rousseau's influence, leading British intellectuals like William Hazlitt, Erasmus Darwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft tried to undo the corrupting influences of civilization; among England's elite, it became fashionable for children to grow up illiterate, living in the natural countryside, just as Rousseau had prescribed in his educational work Emile. Further down through the years, Rousseauian notions have reappeared in many guises, whether in the form of permissive parenting (which is hardly a late twentieth-century phenomenon--Confederate president Jefferson Davis permitted no bedtimes and little in the way of set schedules for his children); or educational reforms like the unstructured, open classroom of the 1970s, where students could select whatever subject they wanted to work on; or even homeschooling, which is the most closely supervised form of education available to parents.

Of course, onto this particular slate, there have been many significant overlays since Locke, Wesley, and Rousseau developed their educational theories. From Darwin to Marx and Engels to Freud to Dewey and to Skinner, there have been periodic reassessments and additions to the general pool of thought on child-rearing. Freud in particular added a powerful psychosexual component to childhood that has impacted
much of the twentieth century. But these intellectual roots are also not the sole story. If we are heirs to some very powerful European ideas regarding children and child-rearing, we have also grafted onto them some particularly American notions and anxieties.

Experts know best?

As John Cleverly and D.C. Phillips point out in Visions of Childhood, it is not insignificant that one member of the Puritan clergy who did not thoroughly embrace the swift corporal-punishment doctrine that would come to be touted in England was early eighteenth-century New World Boston minister Cotton Mather. Instead of Wesley's iron discipline, Mather preferred to use blows sparingly, hoping that a show of disappointment and perhaps some verbal approbation would first do the trick. That is not to say that Mather wasn't a strict parent, but he represents an early hint of the unease some Americans have had with strictly proscribing the behavior of their children.

For every George Washington, writing down and mastering his rules of conduct, it seems there was also a Theodore Roosevelt, allowed by his parents to practice taxidermy with impunity on birds and small animals in the bathrooms and kitchens of hotels as the family traveled across England, littering the basins with feathers and carcasses in the process. Indeed, historian Margaret Leech notes that among the noises of Civil War-era Washington were "the same screaming, precocious children that travelers observed elsewhere in the United States." Thus it may not be as long a trip as some imagine from the Victorian era to the four-year-old screaming this morning in the supermarket. Nor should it be fully surprising. After all, in a nation that accepted the breaking of rules more easily than most established European societies, and where the concept of the frontier made it possible for a man to strike out for new territory if the rules or the neighbors got to be too much for him, strict restraint of children could be seen as something of an oxymoron. Some may bemoan the Baby Boomers as the most
indulged and rule-flouting generation in history, but they are nevertheless not the first ones.

Indeed, even the very notion of adolescence is largely an early-twentieth-century, American-invented concept that brought with it the possibility of postponing adulthood. It arose in part as the population base began its irreversible shift from the farm to the city to the newly forming suburbs, and at a time when industrial and especially office jobs began to require more workers than agriculture. Leisure time, education, and consumerism all contributed to changing the timetable for entering full adulthood.

But along with a more laissez-faire notion of child behavior comes a corresponding, and potentially contradictory, reliance on experts to guide the process of raising a child. Fascination with expertise, the desire to professionalize and thus to lay a claim to holding some particular, learned skill, have long been bound up in the fabric of American public and workplace life. Doctors once used it to gain respect and social position; so too have teachers. But bringing experts into the realm of child-rearing adds a new dimension to a process that had once been largely private. And it is not simply Dr. Spock or T. Berry Brazelton or Penelope Leach, with their manuals designed to direct parents through the life-stages and needs of their children, who have made "expertise" so pervasive in the approach to children. Rather, it is also the legions of scientific studies and psychological observations, meticulously recording and measuring the cognitive and social and behavioral skills of the developing child.

From these studies, we get pronouncements about childcare practices, such as "high-quality child care is more stimulating than leaving the child with a nanny, low-quality child care less so." We learn that children in child care still maintain attachments to their mothers, even if their mother is, hour-for-hour, not the primary caregiver. Other scientific studies have given rise to small-scale political movements, such as Rob Reiner's "I Am Your Child" Foundation, which, through a combination of celebrity and political support, touts the primacy of brain development in ages 0-3. (It should be
noted, however, that this is hardly the first time that child theories have dovetailed into politics. For example, new thoughts about the importance of families and family structure, specifically the rise of the concept of the child-centered nurturing family, helped impel abolitionists in the nineteenth century to crusade for keeping black families together as part of their efforts to end slavery. As Civil War historian James McPherson has pointed out, the classic abolitionist work Uncle Tom's Cabin "homed in on the breakup of families as the theme most likely to pluck the heartstrings of middle class readers who cherished children and spouses of their own.")

Hillary Clinton has signed on with the 0-3 movement, having hosted an all-day conference in 1997 on brain development in young children. Indeed, this brand of brain science is repeatedly cited in the push to improve child care and expand Head Start. [1] And failure to make the most of these early years is declared to contribute to a range of societal pandemics, including crime, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, child abuse, welfare dependence, and homelessness. If only everyone would focus on making those early brain connections, the argument seems to go, our world would be a better place.

But all this scientific measurement of childhood has also had some profound cultural consequences, unintended or not. Perhaps chief among them is an erosion of parental authority. As Dana Mack argues in her book, The Assault on Parenthood: How Our Culture Undermines The Family, child welfare agencies and educational institutions have a pervasive anti-parent bias, and many institutions designed for children actually undermine parental and familial values. For example, it is more than just an institutional issue when schools revise curriculums without parental input and when "scientific" inquiry and conclusions trump the decisions and instincts of parents. In the age of the expert, parents are faced with the pressure of wondering whether their actions are somehow damaging their child. Indeed, parents, through their supposed errors, can be seen to be as toxic as lead leaching in through the pipes.

And a corresponding message is that parents are also replaceable; other caring adults can do their jobs just as well, if not better. We have books to tell us that peer groups are
more important in shaping children than parents; we have instituted day-care certification processes, and there is an entire industry specializing in nanny-placement services. The ultimate test is not who cares for the child but whether his or her developmental needs are being met. Thus parents who are not stimulating (or ensuring the stimulation of) their toddlers' minds are now seen as contributing to their educational and developmental degradation. Thus it is with all earnestness that mothers whose children are being cared for at day-care centers can walk in at six o'clock at night and insist upon knowing what was done to stimulate their infant mentally. (Often, the real answer is not much; employees spend most of the day changing dirty diapers.) And thus, across the scientific universe of child-rearing, parents are but one set of cogs in the developmental machine.

This, however, begins to raise another set of questions. Between the 300 or so years of child-development theories and another century or so of child-centered scientific research, is it not unreasonable to ask if we have over-thought childhood? Perhaps we have accumulated an excess of information, which instead of leading us closer toward enlightenment has instead carpet-bombed us with contradictions and left us in a state of quasi-paralysis. How can we experientially and nonjudgmentally mold the child as tabula rasa while simultaneously allowing him his instinctual freedom and making the most of his neural connections and intellectual hard-wiring by age three? No amount of self-esteem building is likely to get a parent out of this one. And thus we have, as a society, helped to make child-rearing and childhood that much harder.

But the problem is not simply too much theorizing and too many experts. For it is not only our notions of childhood that are changing but also our notions of parents. Parents may find themselves being devalued, questioned, or rendered replaceable; and conversely, they themselves are sometimes opting to take a very different path. Especially the mothers.

Are you my mommy?
Allegra Goodman is a young woman of letters, a regular in Commentary and the New Yorker, and the author of a well-received short-story collection and an equally well-received novel. Her characters come from the Jewish community; in the case of the novel, Kasterskill Falls, from the Hasidim to be exact. And, like their real-life counterparts, there is a surfeit of children among the characters in this novel. I point this out because that makes Goodman, within her own particular sphere, something of an anomaly, someone who writes about more traditionally organized families and whose central characters are not young, urban singles or the middle-aged caught in the throes of breakdown or adultery.

So it was with some small measure of surprise that upon picking up the anthology Child of Mine: Writers Talk About the First Year of Motherhood, I found her contribution, titled "Student Mother," beginning thus:

When my baby was six weeks old, I realized that I was not going to finish my Ph.D. at Stanford while he slept on my lap. I wasn't going to get my degree while bouncing him, rocking him, or even by wearing him in a baby sling. Ezra enjoyed all these things for about ten minutes, but then his patience ran out. He would cough politely three times as fair warning, and then begin to scream. It was time to find a babysitter.

Frank, direct, descriptive, that one passage encapsulates a sea-change in how a significant segment of our culture has come to view the raising of a child. And it should be noted that in terms of family structure, Goodman's is a more conventional choice; she has not opted for the route of single-parenthood or cohabitation. She is even biologically something of an increasing rarity: a young mother, still rather fresh into her twenties when this first child was born, albeit also a young mother who works.

This is not to say that women have never worked, or that the well-to-do in the past have not liberally employed nannies, governesses, and wet nurses. Indeed, much of so-called women's work was backbreaking, and older children were often left to watch and care for their infant siblings while the mother tackled the task of running the house, beating the rugs, tending the vegetable garden, heaving the laundry up and down the
washboard. One might well argue that only the rise of vacuum cleaners and washing machines has fully allowed for the development of one-on-one child-rearing and stimulation, epitomized by phonics and flash cards and trips to Gymboree. But the notion of balancing a career--as in an outside, paying job or professional vocation--and motherhood is something relatively new.

And while there is anecdotal evidence that fewer mothers may be opting to take this path and that more affluent, professional women in the fields of law and business are increasingly, without shame or regret, pursuing the previously maligned "mommy track," there isn't much, if any, hard data to back up these assertions. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the traditional family--mom at home, dad working--fell from 43 percent of all families in 1980 to 27 percent of all families with children in 1995. For 1999, the figure was solidly stuck at 28 percent. So, while a number of women (and even a very few men, 4.3 percent as of last year) may well be leaving their jobs altogether in favor of spending precious time with their kids, the actual figure appears closer to a trickle than a tidal wave. Moreover, as some will argue, not all women are economically able to make this choice, especially the growing legions of single mothers and mothers who are cohabitating but not married. For them, the stay-at-home option has been peremptorily foreclosed. Finally, there are those who simply choose to work. In some instances raised by their mothers and teachers with the words, "You have opportunities I never had," they are striving to make good on them. Educated and skilled, they have tasted the proverbial apple and don't want to go back.

Choices, choices, choices

But what is so striking is less the validity of these choices--although each side has partisans that will defend them with a tenacity reminiscent of the extremes of the abortion debate--than how parents, specifically mothers, have come to define their lives through the master-idea of choice. I choose to stay home. I choose to work. "I realized I was not going to finish my Ph.D...." Repeatedly, the focus is more on the "I" than on the child, even if the choice is being made with the express desire of putting the
interests of the child first. Even the movement of "single mothers by choice" is centered largely on the notion that these women, who have forgone or been denied marriage, want to experience the joy of mothering. In fact, across much of our culture, the very phrase "child-rearing" has evolved into the notion of "parenting." One centers linguistically on the child, the other on the parents.

Where previous generations touted the notion of parental sacrifice for their children, today, the focus is less on the future and more on the present, and by extension on the parent. A Locke, a Wesley, or a Rousseau would not have dwelled on whether or not the parental experience was rich. After all, parents had already been children; they had already been raised. The task at hand was squarely defined in terms of bringing up the next generation. The same cannot be said of the world today.

Where this particular road and the emerging concepts of choice and parenting will take us is a very interesting and highly unresolved question. A couple of centuries hence, we may find these new concepts informing our actions just as subconsciously and intuitively as the precepts of men like Locke, Wesley, and Rousseau do today. A good many have already embraced them as "societally liberating." Or, conversely, we may find these concepts rejected and discredited, though that is rarely the way for most social change. We may even find that the entire notion of childhood has undergone a profound transformation. With the age of sexual maturity dropping almost every generation, with girls as young as eight menstruating, we may find childhood shrinking to a kind of late-stage infancy and adolescence lengthening out to a decade and beyond. What we do know is that the foundation for this future is being laid now, and we are shaping it, choice by choice.

LYRIC WALLWORK WINIK is a contributing editor to Parade magazine and author of Run East: Flight From the Holocaust (University of Illinois Press, 1997).

(1.) There is, however, a legion of newer research showing that 0-3 is not necessarily all-crucial. Key brain development also occurs in Later adolescence when the brain prunes the number of synapses and connections. Selecting age three as an artificial cut-
off in brain development and placing extremely heavy emphasis on those early years
risks ignoring the no less crucial growth that takes place later.

COPYRIGHT 2000 The National Affairs, Inc.
COPYRIGHT 2002 Gale Group