

# DISCOVERY

## Notes on the history of childhood

by Henry F. Smith, M.D.

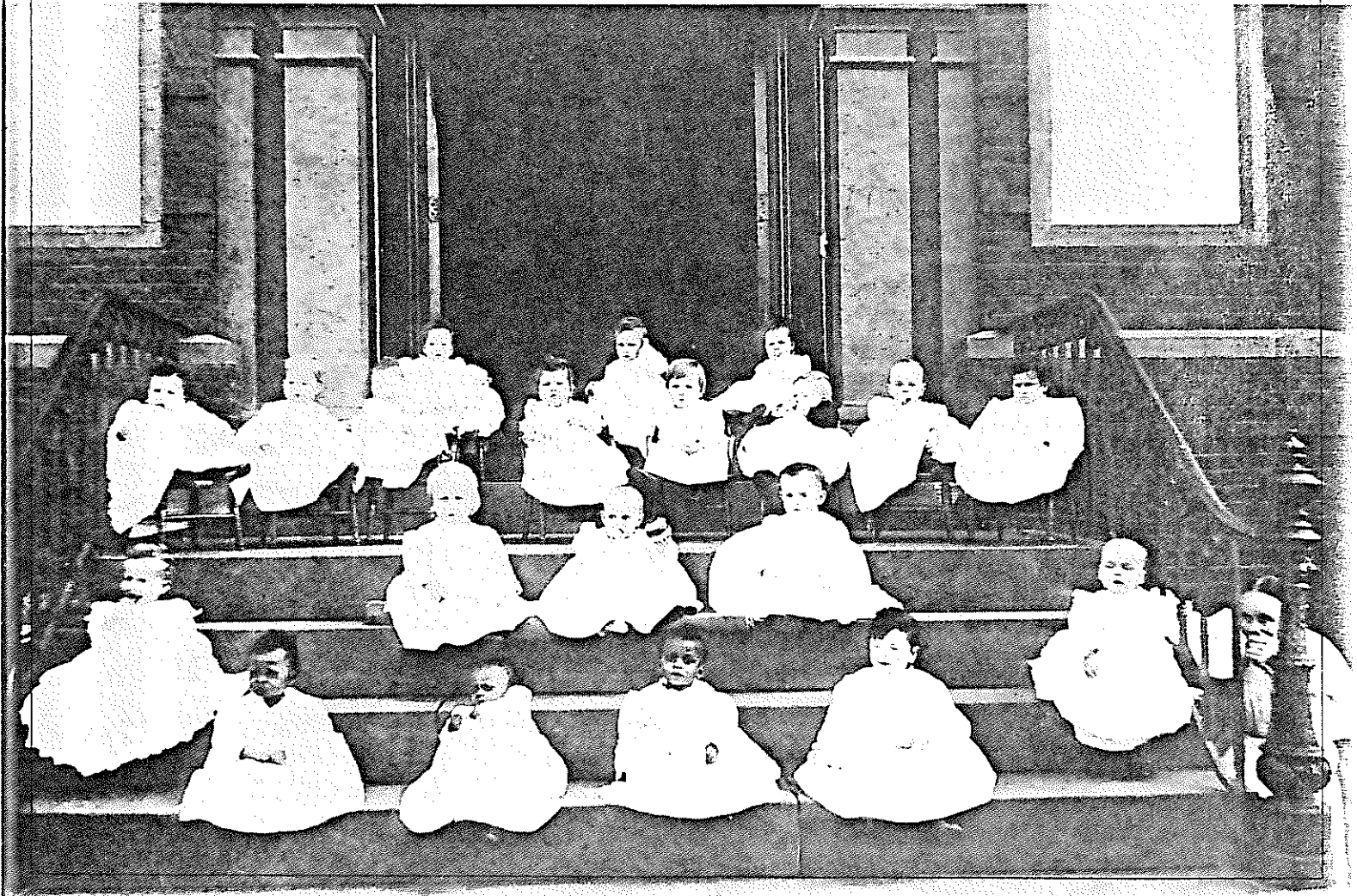
Remember, big fish,  
when you couldn't swim  
and simply slipped under  
like a stone frog?

We are accustomed these days to startling revelations about the true history of all sorts of things, but few histories have been so completely ignored as that of children and of childhood itself. Children by and large did not appear in the history books we read in school. They scarcely appeared in our literature until the nineteenth century. In his seminal *Centuries of Childhood* (1960)

Philippe Ariès has suggested that childhood itself did not exist as a concept until the seventeenth century. But children did exist, as did some of the peculiar child-rearing practices to which they fell victim. It was not until the last two decades, with such works as J. Louise Despert's *The Emotionally Disturbed Child* and, more recently, Elisabeth Badinter's *Mother Love* and Valerie Suransky's *The Erosion of Childhood*, that writers began to call our attention to a particularly disturbing pattern in the treatment of children over the centuries. In *The History of Childhood*, a group of psychohistorians led by Lloyd DeMause researched the subject in considerable detail, and while I take exception to their psychogenic expla-

*Infants, New York City Almshouse System, circa 1900. Photographer unknown.*

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nation of historical change, the sobering facts they revealed cry out for explanation. As DeMause himself wrote, "The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only just begun to awaken." What interests me is the manner and extent of our awakening. In examining the roots of this problem as it appears in Western history, I shall be drawing heavily on the documentation presented in the works cited above.

As a reminder of our current perspectives, I want to begin with a poem. It is a recent poem, from which the four lines above were taken, written by Anne Sexton and published in 1974, the year she died. I include it for its peculiarly modern sensitivity to the often painful inner life experience of the child. It is called "The Fury of Overshoes."

They sit in a row  
outside the kindergarten,  
black, red, brown, all  
with those brass buckles.  
Remember when you couldn't  
buckle your own  
overshoe  
or tie your own  
shoe  
or cut your own meat  
and the tears  
running down like mud  
because you fell off your  
tricycle?  
Remember, big fish,  
when you couldn't swim  
and simply slipped under  
like a stone frog?  
The world wasn't  
yours.  
It belonged to  
the big people.  
Under your bed  
sat the wolf  
and he made a shadow  
when cars passed by  
at night.

They made you give up  
your nightlight  
and your teddy  
and your thumb.  
Oh overshoes,  
don't you  
remember me,  
pushing you up and down  
in the winter snow?  
Oh thumb,  
I want a drink,  
it is dark,  
where are the big people,  
when will I get there,  
taking giant steps  
all day,  
each day  
and thinking  
nothing of it?

As an adult writing a poem *about* childhood, Sexton draws on both her intuition and her vivid childhood memories to re-experience and re-create the world as perceived by the child. Keats might have called this "negative capability"; the psychological literature refers to it as empathy. Whatever the label, Sexton's talent for it is clear and never so concretely illustrated as in the very structure of this poem, which begins with the voice of the adult ("Remember when . . .") and subtly shifts to that of the child ("where are the big people"). And it is the child's plaint that echoes at the close.

Because of the current enthusiasm for the child's voice in literature, we forget that this point of view is a very recent phenomenon in literary history. We almost take for granted today that childhood experience is important, that it has a bearing on our lives as adults, that children have feelings and needs that are different from those of adults but are nonetheless valid in their own right. It was not always the case. While the understanding that Sexton demonstrates may be very difficult for us truly to practice, it was throughout most of our history unimaginable.

Not only were children relegated for many centuries to the status of mere property; they were sometimes not even accorded the right to live after birth. Until relatively recent times the decision as to whether a newborn child would be allowed to live was the prerogative of either the

parent or the state. In ancient Sparta the newborn was examined by a council of elders, who determined whether he was strong enough to be permitted to live and serve the military state. In Athens, it was not a committee but the child's father who determined whether he would live or die, depending, it appears, upon whether the child would be a credit to him or a burden to an already large family. He was aided in this decision by a text published by the Greek gynecologist Soranus, entitled *How to Recognize the Newborn That Is Worth Rearing*, a work whose influence was felt for many centuries thereafter.

The parental privilege of deciding the fate of the newborn child was sanctioned by law throughout much of Western history and persisted in some parts of Europe into the nineteenth century. Evidence that the child was regarded as parental property can be found, above all, in the practice of child sacrifice, acknowledged in the Old Testament and extant as early as 7000 B.C. in Jericho, where children were sealed into the wall of Jericho to strengthen its structure. Later, children were sealed into building foundations and bridges for similar reasons. Today when children play "London Bridge is Falling Down" and catch the falling child at the end, they are unwittingly reenacting an ancient sacrifice to the river goddess.

Those most likely to be destroyed were the sick and the crippled, the same population most likely to be abused today, but equally at risk in earlier times were the illegitimate and the female—in sum, the unwanted. The discrimination against female children was open and acknowledged, and led to a disproportionately high ratio of men to women, not just in antiquity but well into the eighteenth century in Europe. Nineteenth-century midwives in Europe were still paid more for the delivery of a boy than a girl. French peasants were known to remark, "I have no children, *monseur*, only girls." And until the late nineteenth century in Naples, it was customary to hang out a small black flag when a girl was born, to save the neighbors the embarrassment of inquiring about it. Few were as blunt, however, as Hilarion in the first century B.C., who instructed his wife as she was about to give birth, "If it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, expose it."

Indeed, "exposure" was a common euphemism for the killing of unwanted children. Philo, the Jewish philosopher in the early Christian era, was the first to speak out against this practice, which he described in graphic detail:

Some of them do the deed with their own hands; with monstrous cruelty and barbarity they stifle and throttle the first breath which the infants draw or throw them into a river or into the depths of the sea. . . . Others take them to be exposed in some desert place, [where] all the beasts that feed in human flesh visit the spot.

It is worth remembering at this point that Sophocles's Oedipus, whose murder of his father and sexual relationship with his mother have become as famous as the plays themselves, was goaded into the patricide by his father—who literally struck him on the head with a two-pointed goad—and had been himself an abandoned child; before he was a day old, his mother Jocasta had pinned his ankles together and given him to a herdsman, to be exposed on a "trackless mountain." Sophocles knew the custom of his day.

But this, too, appears to have been a practice not just for antiquity but for all time. It was the twelfth-century

pope Innocent III who, appalled at the sight of "countless" infant bodies floating in the Tiber, encouraged the spread of foundling homes in Italy. It didn't help much. As late as 1527 a priest recorded that "the latrines resound with the cries of children who have been plunged into them." The practice was modified in the seventeenth-century American colonies, where a premium was placed on children to work the farms, and where there was more land to divide amongst many heirs; only illegitimate infants were killed outright. But in the 1890s, dead babies were still reported to be a common sight in the streets of London.

In response to tightening laws on child murder, which were written as early as 374 A.D. in Rome but only sporadically enforced, an increasing number of children were simply abandoned. This gave rise to a new phenomenon—foundling hospitals, the first of which was established in Milan, in 787 A.D. The foundling hospital movement grew throughout Europe, but as we can imagine, children did not fare well in such institutions. With full sanction of the police, the Parisian ones sometimes sold infants to beggars, who would cripple them to invoke sympathy and alms, or to wet nurses to replace children who had died under their care. Those who survived might have wished that they hadn't. The ubiquitous child begging on a crutch, romanticized in modern versions of earlier street life, had often been deliberately maimed so as to earn his keep; others were sent off to steal outright or to prostitute themselves on the streets.

In the late eighteenth century in France, one of the darkest periods in history for children, officials began keeping careful statistics on abandonment, because it was feared that this was the true cause of the country's alarmingly slow growth in comparison with the rest of Europe. The findings were ominous: between 1773 and 1790, 5,800 children were abandoned every year in Paris; of those abandoned, 82 percent died; the mortality rate in Rouen was 90 percent. And these were not merely children of the poor; one third were from the middle class

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and one quarter were children of artisans and merchants. In the late nineteenth century a visitor to a private foundling hospital in Moscow recalled a scene reminiscent of the Holocaust of the Second World War: a roomful of babies, piled high, awaiting spring burial.

Commitment to the foundling hospital was not the only form of child abandonment. Parents had the right from earliest times to sell their children into slavery or into many other unsavory ventures, like "eunuch factories" and prostitution. Indeed, the connection between childhood and servitude is laid bare on the very level of language—in the French "garçon," meaning at once "servant" or "waiter," and "boy," as well as in the English

"boy," used not only as a term of endearment, but also as one of condescension, by slave owners to address their slaves. Child slavery was occasionally reported in the eighteenth century amongst European families, who sent their offspring to America in response to frequent advertisements for cheap labor. Runaway and pauper children were also at a premium in the New World. In parts of Russia, the sale of children was not outlawed until the nineteenth century.

For those infants who had been acknowledged and chosen by their parents to live, there were wet nurses—a practice that had begun at least as early as ancient Greece, and which did not decline until the introduction of purified bottled milk, or baby formula. If abandonment and infanticide were rare in Colonial America, wet-nursing was very common and reached its peak here and in France in the eighteenth century. There was another French peak in the mid nineteenth century that continued nearly to the present day. In 1780, of the 21,000 children born in Paris only 2,000, or 10 percent, were nursed at home, and only half of those by their mothers. The other 90 percent were sent to the country to be nursed for two to four years, but more than 50 percent of them died before the age of two. Seventy years later, in 1850, 80 percent of those children died. It was well known that the mortality rate was half of that for babies kept at home. In Lyons, one working mother exclaimed, "Is there no way for poor women of the common folk who cannot nurse to save their children?" But if wet-nursing was a necessity for infants of the poor (since the nurse required only a fraction of the day's wages), the practice was also nearly universal for infants of the middle class and the rich.

Eighteenth-century French police reports describe a scene reminiscent of the ships of the slave trade or the transport of the boys in *Pinocchio*: babies packed into carts like sardines on their way to wet nurses in the country. Some never made it, dying or falling off en route. The nurses themselves were haphazardly hired (often met by chance on a street corner), and so poorly paid that they frequently left the children swaddled and alone while going off to work a shift in the fields. Others took on several charges at a time, including their own children, whom they invariably nursed first. Some rural nurses abandoned their own children to even more cheaply paid nurses so that they could earn a slight premium nursing the children of the wealthy. That the practice of wet-nursing was not confined to the poor is evidenced by a Frenchman's description of a large, festive, late-eighteenth-century Parisian reception celebrating the delivery of a child to wealthy and socially prominent parents. The only odd fact was that the newborn was never mentioned by the guests and was not, in fact, in his cradle, having already been sent off to the wet nurse. For some parents, wet nurses served a different function. Well known in Eastern Europe as "killer nurses" and in Germany as "angel makers," these were surrogates on whom parents could depend to effect a swift demise for unwanted children.

Not everyone condoned these customs, and of course not everyone practiced them, but the exceptions appear to have been few, their voices muted by the general chorus. In the eighteenth century there were various exhortations to mothers to take care of their own children, and

in 1766, because of the scandalous facts regarding infants sent to wet nurses, a group of mothers in France created an even greater scandal by breast-feeding their children in public. But the chorus of indifference continued.

**W**e should briefly consider the practice of swaddling, which, as noted above, allowed babies to be left alone for long periods of time. The term has become hallowed by association with the infant Christ Child. After reading the historical material, we are struck chiefly by two facts—first, that it was not unusual for mothers to give birth and to nurse their newborns in a manger or similar spot (there being rarely “room in the inn” for a pre- or postpartum mother and her child). And second, that swaddling was a custom practiced from antiquity, in part for practical reasons, to keep the child warm and safe from household or farm animals (he could be hung on a hook like a sack of potatoes), in part for unrealistic ones, such as the worry that he would hurt himself, dislocate his joints, or not develop a straight spine and erect posture. In later Christian eras swaddling reflected people’s fear of the child as born in original sin and therefore the repository of evil and animal instincts. If not tightly tied, he would “crawl like an animal” and reveal his lustful nature by touching his body parts. How far we are, here, from an understanding of the child as a naturally developing being, with feelings and experiences no less deserving of his parents’ attention for differing in kind from their own!

While variously practiced, swaddling was an elaborate, painstaking procedure, often requiring two hours to bind the entire body, save the face, in a firm, erect, adult-like posture. Although artistic convention is probably largely responsible for the stiff, elongated figures of the infant Christ so familiar to us from medieval painting—images used by Ariès, incidentally, to buttress his claim that medieval children were perceived only as miniature adults—there is no doubt that real-life swaddling did elongate and distort the proportions of children, often to the detriment of their health. It has been said that the procedure constricted the circulation, slowed the heart rate, and led to many painful skin ulcers festering under the bandages, especially in the diaper areas, which were infrequently changed. And yet, swaddling continued through the nineteenth century in France and is still practiced in parts of Eastern Europe.

Along with the indifference to wet-nursing and its consequences, these facts suggest a particular attitude toward the mother’s relationship with her infant. There is an unmistakable fear of, indifference to, or defense against the attachment that we feel today is so critical to the growth and development of the child. There is ample evidence from ancient Greece to the present day that some children become very attached to their nurses, nannies, and other caretakers, and love them more than their absent mothers. Most, however, did not have even this opportunity, because of the succession of brief stays with multiple wet nurses, sudden separations, and abrupt weaning. The real question is whether, since a swaddled infant can neither hug nor be hugged, an early attachment to a mothering figure can even begin to take place. Could it be that the point of all these customs is to prevent such attachment?

Indeed, that would seem a partial explanation for such apparent inability to value the child’s experience. What

is it that causes an eighteenth-century French mother to exclaim on the death of her child, “Ah, well, another angel in heaven”? This at a time when, as a police lieutenant remarked, “hunters marked their dogs, butchers distinguished the animals they sacrificed,” but parents sent their children away to wet nurses without any method of identifying them, or knowing what would become of them, or whether the child they got back was the one they sent. In 1867 Dr. Charles Monot remarked, “The state knows the number of cattle, horses, and sheep that

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die each year, but not the number of children.” In 1871 in a landmark case in New York, protective services for an abused child named Mary Ellen could be invoked only through the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which had been founded five years earlier—eight years before a similar organization would exist for the protection of children.

**I**n attempting to understand these events, we cannot ignore the fact that the times were in many respects very different from our own, especially brutal no doubt for most people living in eighteenth-century France, or nineteenth-century Russia, or in the Middle Ages in Europe; from 1340 to 1374, for example, the bubonic plague struck in four waves. During the summer months of 1348 more than half the inhabitants of Florence and Sienna died. By September only 45,000 of the 90,000 people within the walls of Florence were still living; Sienna’s population was reduced from 42,000 to 15,000. The years between the plagues were marked by excesses of every kind, far greater than during the era between the two World Wars in this country. We can also look at medieval witchcraft, which was a real threat and a real phenomenon, despite all the later persecution of innocent lives. For so-called witches probably did steal children and may even on occasion have eaten them, just as it is told in the fairy tales.

Bruno Bettelheim has recently published a wonderful study of the value of fairy tales to modern children, entitled *The Uses of Enchantment*. His thesis is that for all their brutality fairy tales speak the child’s language, the language of his fears and fantasies, and give him hope that he will grow up one day and overcome the obstacles he faces, obstacles like Anne Sexton’s overshoes. As we read the history of childhood we cannot help but be struck by the fact that what is now mainly fantasy for children was once a reality. At the time when fairy tales were evolving out of the oral folk tradition, there were witches, and punishing ogre-like fathers, and wicked stepmothers, for with such a short life expectancy for all people there was much remarriage, during certain epochs, and there-

fore many stepmothers burdened by the responsibility of other people's children. There were periods of severe famine when children themselves may have been eaten, and there was the constant threat of murder or abandonment. In this regard even "Hansel and Gretel" reads like reality, if not for the wicked witch who will eat the children or the famine that has struck the family, then most certainly for the stepmother who leads them into the woods to be exposed and devoured by wild animals. With such a world around them and so little maternal care, we have to wonder if some children did not die from having given up the will to survive. Under these bleak conditions, the fairy tales may have implicitly pleaded *against* that giving up, speaking to the child's extraordinary resilience, his ability to adapt and endure through all manner of unthinkable circumstances.

**M**oreover, with infant mortality soaring upwards to nearly 100 percent, we have to acknowledge that parents could not afford to attach themselves to their children. It was too great an emotional risk and, practically speaking, there was no future in it. Thus Montaigne remarked, "I have lost two or three children in their infancy, not without regret but without great sorrow." Partly out of self-protection, perhaps, he concluded with others that "children have neither mental

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activities nor recognizable bodily shape." Others called infancy "the most vile and abject state of human nature, second only to death." When in *As You Like It*, Jacques describes the "infant / Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms," he speaks as a man of his time. In *Les cacquets de l'accouchée* (*The Cackling of a Woman Lying In*), a seventeenth-century French piece, a woman who has just given birth and is now the mother of five "little brats," as she calls them, is consoled by a neighbor, who says, "Before they are old enough to bother you, you will have lost half of them or perhaps all of them."

The inevitability of death was graphically illustrated by an early fifteenth-century sculpture known as "the marriage capital," in the ducal palace in Venice. The eight sides of the capital depict eight stages in the life of a young couple—one of many medieval harbingers of Jacques's seven ages of man. We are shown, successively, the engagement; the fitting of the wedding dress; the ceremony and the kiss; the marriage bed, in which the couple lies naked; the birth of the child, wrapped in swaddling clothes; the couple alone; and then, a family portrait, in which each parent is holding the child by the shoulder and a hand. This is where the sequence might stop today. The eighth and final face of the capital, however, following as the night the day, depicts the family in mourning: the child has died and is stretched out on his bed with his arms folded.

As a sign of this fatality, and correspondingly, of the incapacity to see children as individuals in their own

right, identical names were sometimes given in the Middle Ages to siblings, who were then distinguished by order of birth—"the First," "the Second," etc. As late as the nineteenth century in this country, a dead child's name might be given to a sibling born later on, as if one could replace the other.

Cotton Mather knew this problem well. Of his fourteen children, only one, Samuel, lived beyond the age of twenty to survive his father. So we can understand the need through such practices as wet-nursing and swaddling to keep some distance from these fragile creatures whose loss could break your heart—even if that very distance may have sealed their fate. An instructive case in point, Cotton Mather also documents a particular way in which Puritan fathers gave up responsibility for the loss of their children by regarding it as God's will. When his daughter Nancy fell into the fire and burned herself badly, Mather cried out, "Alas for my sins the just God throws my child into the fire." Believing himself justly punished for his sins, he took no corrective or protective practical action; soon two other daughters were badly burned as well. And his daughter Nibby would have certainly burned to death but for a "person accidentally passing by the window." He responded to the dark events by preaching a sermon entitled "What use ought parents to make of disasters befalling their children." We see in this a passive resignation, in which guilt is felt but misplaced. As DeMause has pointed out, the parent cannot then recognize a realistic guilt, perhaps for leaving the child unprotected or with inadequate safety precautions.

A more actively cruel displacement of responsibility is that of an American father whipping his four-year-old son, tied naked in the cellar, for being unable to read. Severe physical punishment was throughout the years frequently justified by variations on the theme of "spare the rod and spoil the child." Thus the Reverend John Eliot in 1678, quoting Proverbs 23:13-14, "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell." The father of the boy who could not read gives a revealing description of the event, rife with his own projections:

I felt all the force of divine authority . . . that I ever felt in any case in all my life. . . . But under the all controlling influence of such a degree of angry passion and obstinacy as my son had manifested, no wonder he thought he "should beat me out," feeble and tremulous as I was, and knowing as he did that it made me almost sick to whip him. At that time he could neither pity me nor himself.

In other words, not only God but the father's own son made him do it. This is the kind of statement that might come from an abusive parent today, who will so commonly betray the same confusion of motives, holding the child responsible for the punishment and the pity as well as the plainly felt anguish of the parent's own situation. A mother will say of her infant, "I couldn't stand the way he was looking at me; he looked so mean just like his father; I had to do it."

**T**he rationalization for punishment and the projection of blame were well delineated in the early medieval belief that children who cried all the time were not neglected infants but changelings, placed there by the devil or by fairies to vex their mothers, and who could justifiably be beaten, purified by hot brands of fire, or destroyed. Martin Luther said of them, "They often

take the children of women in childbed and lay themselves down in their place and are more obnoxious than ten children with their crapping, eating, and screaming." The fifteenth-century *Malleus Maleficarum* told parents how to identify a changeling: "They always howl most piteously and even if four or five mothers are set on to suckle them, they never grow." Failure to grow or thrive, as we call it, is a well-known symptom of true maternal neglect. Every medical student has the experience of

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watching such children recover miraculously under the loving care of a hospital staff, only to languish again at home.

The diagnosis of the problem as one of maternal deprivation was subtly and poignantly conveyed through the voice of the child in an early Scottish folktale, handed down by word of mouth. It goes by the dual names of "The Fairy Changeling" and "Johnnie in the Cradle," and tells the following story:

A man and his wife were not long married, and they had a wee kiddie called Johnnie, but he was always crying and never satisfied. There was a neighbor near, a tailor, and it came to market day, and Johnnie was aye greeting [crying sorrowfully], and never growing. And the wife wanted to get a day at the market, so the tailor said he'd stay and watch wee Johnnie. So he was sitting sewing by the fire, and a voice said: "Is ma mother and ma faither awa'?" . . . And there it was, sitting up, with its wee hands gripping the sides of the cradle. "There's a bottle of whiskey in the press," it says. "Gie's a drink." Sure enough, there was one, and they had a drink together.

The baby and the tailor drink, talk, and play on the bagpipes, and then

the wee thing said, "Is ma mother and ma faither coming home?" And when they came, there he was "Nya, nya, nya," in the cradle. By this time the tailor knew it was a fairy they had there, so he followed the farmer into the byre, and told him all that had happened.

The father can't believe it, so he and the tailor trick the neglected child into thinking his parents have gone back to market.

"Is ma mother and ma faither gone?" said the wee thing, and the mother could just hardly believe her ears. But when they heard the piping through the cornstae, they kent [knew] it was a fairy right enough, and the farmer went in to the room, and he set the griddle on the fire and heated it red hot, and he fetched in a half bagful of horse manure, and set it on the griddle, and the wee thing looked at him with wild eyes. When he went to grip it, and put it on the griddle, it flew straight up the lum [chimney], and as it went it cried out, "I wish I had a been longer with my mother. I'd a kent her better."

Add then to the frustration of caring for a "greeting" infant the disappointment that the child is not more loving, more nurturing, more, in fact, like a mother to the mother, which is also voiced throughout history—and memorialized in the words of Medea when, after killing her children, she laments that now she will have no one to look after her—and we may begin to understand contemporary parents of abused children, themselves so often the victims of abuse in their own childhoods. The words of one mother speak for many of these: "I have

never felt loved all my life. When the baby was born, I thought he would love me. When he cried all the time it meant he didn't love me. So I hit him."

What I think is sobering is to imagine what the history of childhood in this century will look like. Accurate statistics on violence toward children are hard to come by because children learn, as in the case of incest, to "keep it in the family"; but the figures we have are not encouraging. They indicate clearly our continuity with the past. It is estimated that as many as six and a half million children are abused in the United States every year. Furthermore, as in eighteenth-century France, child abuse is not merely a problem of the poor; it embraces all socioeconomic groups and, as we have noted, most affects those who have always been at highest risk—the premature, the sick, and the otherwise unwanted. In 1970 the Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children reported that more children under the age of five in this country are killed each year by their parents than die from disease.

It is not that we don't have the facts at our fingertips. Even as I write, the nightly television news is reporting, "Experts indicate that every two minutes a child in the United States is sexually abused; one in every five children will fall victim." But as we have learned, facts, even from "experts," have never been of much use to us.

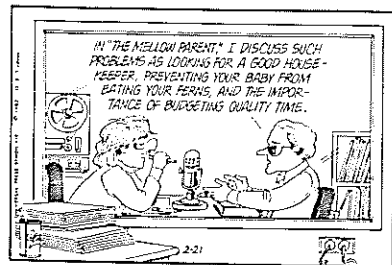
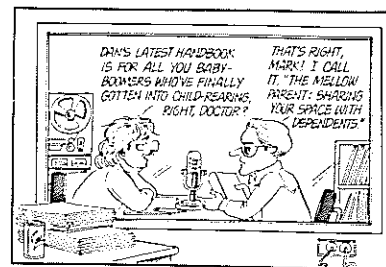
We have a great national experiment in day care, to which I am not in principle opposed. But it is clear from well-documented observations that many day care centers offer hopelessly inadequate custodial care for infants and small children. According to Valerie Suransky the profit-making centers are, in general, less successful in meeting the needs of the child than the state-supported ones. There is a twelve-franchise corporate chain of centers in the Southwest, each of which is open from 6:30 a.m. to 1:30 a.m., nineteen hours a day. They are licensed for fifty children each, who come and go constantly. Children and teachers scarcely know each other. The franchise serves corporate, not children's, goals, and plays only a modern variation on past themes—less brutal, less hopeless, perhaps, but betraying a similar unwillingness to consider the needs of the child.

More worrisome still is the extent to which the advantages of such social programs are taken for granted, their real effects on children hardly subject to proper scrutiny. Even if on balance the child is benefited, there is an inherent hypocrisy in the advertising, for these programs are designed primarily to meet the needs of the parent, the corporation, and, in the short run, the society. Rationalization and denial are thereby fostered, and parents, whose capacity to evaluate and respond to the individual needs and experience of their children has always been tenuous, are encouraged to give over this function to the institution or to society at large, and in some cases even to close their eyes to the evidence before them.

It is not surprising that with our critical faculties thus blindfolded, shocking abuses of the system will take place, as they have in the day care center in California that for years was apparently a mere front for sexual molestation. One mother could admit in retrospect that she had noticed her children were panicked when she brought them to the center each morning, but she insisted they continue the program. She may have been listening to experts, who say, "Send the child to school"—not bad

# DOONESBURY

by G.B. Trudeau.



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advice when dealing with a phobia, but what about when the dangers are real? However much we may be enlightened by experts and their opinions, our cultural dependence on them has an inhibiting effect. Parents look to the books rather than to the terror on their children's faces. Their trust in their own intuition is undermined, and they thereby distance themselves further from a personal involvement in their child's experience.

Out of this entanglement books are now being written by children for other children, as at the Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge. One of their projects, *The Kids' Book of Divorce*, addresses another massive twentieth-century phenomenon, the impact of which we can only begin to guess. That divorce has an impact, the book makes clear. It is a primer for how to make the best of a bad situation. I know an eight-year-old who said with disbelief when his parents announced their divorce plans, "I'm too young for this to happen." No one had warned him that divorce now precedes death on the Venetian marriage capital. Forty percent of children born today will be faced with the divorce of their parents. Twenty percent will have this experience twice. Furthermore, one of the riskiest times in any marriage is soon *after*, not *before* the birth of a child. There are a growing number of "custody" battles in which neither parent wants the child. No wonder children get the feeling it may be their fault.

My point is no more to condemn divorce than to argue against day care; the alternatives now as in the past are not rosy ones. But again, the pernicious factor is the extent to which the event is rationalized, the impact on the child overlooked. Such defenses are understandable when parents are so anguished by separation themselves, but it does not stop with the settlement. Children so often continue to be used as instruments of barter in the marriage that has not ended with divorce.

The public attention that we pay to all of this has, I think, a paradoxical impact. In his review of the recent television drama about incest, Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* spoke of the trivializing effect of such coverage. It makes the unacceptable acceptable. We saw this in the news reports from Vietnam. The same paradox is inherent in the attempt to raise the public's awareness of the danger of nuclear war. The media attention takes

these events out of the realm of the personal even when the statement is a personal one. The form belies the content. Or the content itself may trivialize the experience. The message at the end of the drama Canby reviewed was: acknowledge the incest; understand the needs of both the abusing parent and the child; psychotherapy will heal your wounds. The trouble is it doesn't work like that. The wounds may close; closure may form scars; but scars distort the body shape, and the evidence of the wound remains. Psychotherapy may assist the healing process but not erase the event itself. Thus even psychotherapy can be used, like other culturally advocated solutions, to minimize the necessity for parental involvement in the child's pain.

Being at the bottom of the social heap, children feel all the traumas above them, but their cries are muffled by the weight on top. Societal indifference to their needs is felt in the shockingly low salaries of child care workers or, for that matter, of teachers. When governmental funds are short, those budgeted for children often are the first to go, regardless of the lip service paid to child welfare. Children know this. When the tax-cutting Proposition 2½ first arrived in Massachusetts, and the sports programs that had sustained her in the wake of her parents' divorce were being eliminated, one twelve-year-old girl said to me, "Why do they always fuck us over?"

The hypocritical contradiction between the apparent value we place on children's needs and the clear priority given to adults is illustrated most clearly in the individual relationship between parent and child. Gary Trudeau celebrated it in *Doonesbury* with the character he introduced shortly before ending the strip, the expert Dr. Dan Asher, and his advice about "quality time."

Such advice is legion. In May 1982 there appeared in the "Travel" section of the *Boston Sunday Globe* an article headlined "Europe: Bring the Children." After a brief introduction, the author launched the following appeal: "Consider instead the immediate rewards and lifetime benefits that will come your way from travelling *en famille*." She proceeded to outline, first, all the parental benefits of having the children along. They will make friends for you, lead you to activities you wouldn't consider, and keep you from overdoing your sightseeing to the point of exhaustion. Here then the child serves the

parent's needs. After a brief description of the educational benefits accruing to the child (always of concern to parents since the seventeenth century), and sidestepping the issue of the emotional bond formed by traveling with children, the writer continued, "Europe is beautifully organized for taking care of children should you want to leave them." She then listed a multitude of babysitting services, day care centers, and camps, concluding:

In addition, Europe offers a wide choice of children's holiday homes. Austria, Belgium, Germany, Holland and Switzerland specialize in homes away from home for children under six (including infants) in chalets, cottages, and country houses; weekly prices including food are about \$40. . . . Among grander establishments that deserve the name of luxury hotels for children is the Botei, a dollhouse château in Épernon near Paris, sleeping forty children of kindergarten age on up complete with airy rooms, turreted towers, pony stable, marionette theater, a park, as well as indoor arts, crafts, and games.

Sound good? Children have been used to this kind of candy from strangers since time immemorial.

It is not within the scope of this article to explore fully the causes of the problem I have been investigating. In that respect this treatment remains primarily descriptive, not explanatory. Nor do I propose to suggest what we can do about it. In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller illustrated in greater detail the type of parent-child relationship discussed herein and observed its transmission from generation to generation. In *For Your Own Good* she reviewed some of the same historical material and traced such large-scale expressions of sadism as the Holocaust of World War II to hidden cruelty in child rearing. "Human destructiveness," Miller wrote, "is a reactive (and not an innate) phenomenon." The implication is that if we can just do it better with our children, all manner of benefits will ensue. DeMause took this one step further. He felt we have gradually been doing it better all along, so that now we have entered a far more benign period, which he characterized by what he called the "helping mode" of child rearing.

My view is different. It is not so optimistic, nor do I see a clear developmental or evolutionary change in our attitudes toward children. Perhaps this is because the roots of our sadism and its "cure" are more complex than these authors would have us believe.

While I think we have come into an era in which childhood experience is given more value, partly because we believe it affects our lives as adults, the basic ingredients in the way we see children have not changed very much. We do not treat them as frequently, perhaps, with the same overt brutality, but children are still regarded in many ways as the property of parents, and on a psychological level, as extensions of the parents' own inner lives, saddled with the burden of satisfying parental needs. I do not believe it will ever be completely different, because of the contradictions inherent in raising children. It is clear, for example, that the ingredients that get us into trouble are the very ones that are most necessary for being a parent.

I am speaking, above all, of the empathic understanding of the child's experience. Such understanding entails two contradictory ways of thinking and feeling. First, the parent must be able to feel at one with the child as if they both were one person, creating the kind of transient fusion demonstrated in Anne Sexton's poem. Second, the parent must be able to allow the child all the distance

necessary for each of them to acknowledge that they are, in fact, separate beings. This is a difficult task indeed, especially because, instead of simply romanticizing our own childhood in a hazy glow of nostalgia, as is our wont, it means remembering and reliving the vulnerable and painful moments so perfectly captured in "The Fury of Overshoes":

Oh overshoes,  
don't you  
remember me,  
pushing you up and down  
in the winter snow?

Oh thumb,  
I want a drink,  
it is dark,  
where are the big people,  
when will I get there . . .

Sir Thomas More, for one, knew that pain. He was a strong opponent of the prevailing brutal discipline of children in the sixteenth century and conveyed his love in a letter to his own children:

It is not so strange that I love you with my whole heart, for being a father is not a tie which can be ignored. Nature in her wisdom has attached the parent to the child and bound them spiritually together with a Herculean knot. This tie is the source of my consideration for your immature minds, a consideration which causes me to take you often into my arms. This tie is the reason why I used to dress you in silken garments and why I never could endure to hear you cry. You know, for example, how often I kissed you, how seldom I whipped you. My whip was invariably a *peacock's tail*. Even this I wielded hesitantly and gently so that sorry welts might not disfigure your tender seats. Brutal and unworthy to be called a father is he who does not himself weep at the tears of his child. How other fathers act I do not know, but you know well how gentle and devoted is my manner toward you, for I have always profoundly loved my own children and I have always been an indulgent parent—as every father ought to be. But at this moment my love has increased so much that it seems to me I used not to love you at all.

This "man for all seasons" was an exception in his own time and is nearly as exceptional today, for Sir Thomas More has been joined by only a few others to speak as sweet solo voices against a dark and dominant chorus. It is a chorus that tells of a deep and abiding ambivalence toward children, even a hatred for children, sometimes obvious, never far below the surface, and variously expressed according to the custom of the time—frank brutality in some periods, indifference in others. The peculiarly American blend of professed concern, reflected in our obsession with "parenting," and rationalized indifference toward children on the part of the corporate and bureaucratic world seems to have its roots in the theocracies of the American colonies. The hypocrisy of this concern is revealed in the ease with which it is relinquished when other needs beckon, as well as in the sudden outbursts of violence that shatter the peaceful coexistence children seem to enjoy with us in our world. This counterpoint of placid denial and sudden violence makes up the chorus of our time.

If we are ever to develop a deeper concern for children, it will be only through knowledge of our past and of ourselves. It is not our responsibility to bring happiness to our children. That they will seek for themselves. It is our responsibility to recognize our capacity for causing them pain and not to call it by another name.

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