



EMPATHIC PARENTING

Journal of the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Volume 26

Issue 3

Summer 2003

**"What's done to children,
they will do to society."**

Karl Menninger

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Punishing Children

Punishment, physical and otherwise, is common to Western child care.

. This is the area where "the horror is that there is no horror" is so clearly relevant.

Punishment must not only be avoided, it must not be done.

As practiced in child care it validates, condones and justifies cruelty, violence, sadism, torture and murder.

Punishment affirms "man's inhumanity to man" as legitimate and right. It originates in the King's armies, in war, in prisons and in slavery.

Its inclusion in child care is the means by which human violence and cruelty is perpetuated.

James Kimmel

WHAT IS EMPATHIC PARENTING?

Being willing and able to put yourself in your child's shoes in order to correctly identify his/her feelings, and

Being willing and able to behave toward your child in ways which take those feelings into account.

Empathic Parenting takes an enormous amount of time and energy and fully involves both parents in a co-operative, sharing way.

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Many articles from past issues of Empathic Parenting are available on the Internet at:

<http://www.empathicparenting.org>

There you will find links to all our sites:

- Empathic Parenting
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- Psychopathy and Consumerism
- Daycare is for Parents Not
Infants and Toddlers
- The Fastest Growing Religion
- Physical Punishment in the
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- A Certificate for Parenting

Good Consumers or Healthy Children?

Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn

In the overwhelmingly consumer-oriented culture of today, parents can easily be seduced into making decisions and choosing lifestyles in which their babies come to experience the world more through objects than through sustained contact with people. Instead of the huge array of “child-oriented” products enhancing a parent’s relationship with a child, the products that are supposed to make parenting easier can easily become a replacement for the essential *human* interactions a child needs so much.

For example, a baby might be carried for a minute and then put in a car seat, then carried from the car in the car seat into the store, then back home, where she may be placed in a crib or a baby seat, and later put into a stroller for a walk. Most of the baby’s day could be spent passively contained and touching lifeless objects. The ambient sounds that dominate her world might very well come from the TV or radio. At naptime and bedtime she may again be left alone and untouched.

If the parents are not mindful of the world of experience *from the point of view of the baby*, the child’s environment can easily become adult centered, utilitarian, chaotic, disembodied, and disjointed. Whether the objects the baby touches are made of plastic or natural materials, they are still objects – cold, unmoving, disconnected from the warmth, the stimulation, the responsiveness of a parent’s body, soul, and spirit.

When we continually put our children aside while we do something else, relying on objects to hold them and entertain them, winding up the swing, playing a taped story, turning on the TV, we inadvertently encourage them to be passive, powerless recipients rather than active participants in a living, responsive, reciprocal world.

In addition, because of the time pressures that parents are experiencing as we pursue our careers, provide for our family, and try to manage all the different demands being placed on us, our children, at younger and younger ages, are often expected to do more and more for themselves and by themselves.

There is even a style of parenting babies called *self-soothing*, which, according to William and Martha Sears in *The Baby Book*, “. . . emphasizes techniques of teaching babies how to comfort themselves-by leaving them alone or setting them up to devise their own methods rather than allowing babies to rely on mother or father.” They go on to say why this philosophy of parenting is so potentially damaging: “This school of thought ignores a basic principle of infant development: A need that is filled in early infancy goes away; a need that is not filled never completely goes away but recurs later in ‘diseases of detachment’ — aggression, anger, distancing or withdrawal, and discipline problems:”

As a consequence of such trends, with sometimes seemingly minor and innocu-

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ous changes in our lifestyles, little by little we run the risk of losing precious interactions with our children, and they, of losing a certain kind of nourishment from us. Rather than getting caught up completely in what is “the best” product to buy, we might bring a degree of mindfulness to how these products will affect our child’s experience of the world and her relationship with us.

For instance, we may put an infant in a carriage without giving it any thought. But, if we consider what it might be like for her, we might see that in a carriage, she will be squarely facing out to the world, with no protection from all the stimuli, bodies, noise, and energy that are coming directly toward her.

We might also see that, while all these unpredictable stimuli are coming, unfiltered, at this very new being, she is physically removed from what she knows best and from what helps center her in her world – her parents.

As an alternative, we might decide to hold her in our arms, or carry her in a sling or cloth carrier close to the body. Here, she is in the world and yet protected from it at the same time.

When children reach a certain size and weight, carriages are very useful, and by that time, the child is ready for that kind of interface with the world. But for a one- to two-year-old, while a carriage might be useful at times, the child’s expe-

Products are created to “free us up” so that we can do other things. ... But if we are not paying attention, we may overuse them, and find they have become barriers and substitutes for human interaction and presence.

rience will be far richer if he or she is also worn on the back in a child carrier. In that way, she gets to feel the movement and warmth of her parent’s body, and can reach out and touch his face and hair. In this position, people’s faces are right at eye level so that she can communicate with them over her parent’s shoulder, or lean

into his body if feeling shy. All the while, the child’s feet ride the foot bar, push against it, moving her whole body up and down, stretching. A sense of security and a whole world of sensory stimulation and responding come just from being carried.

Making these kinds of choices may entail somewhat more work for us in the short run. However, there are wonderful gifts and pleasures that come to us from

parenting in this way, that mirror what our children are receiving from us. We are closer, more in touch, and more in tune with them. Feeling them close to us, we also feel more secure. We are less likely to miss a child’s subtle communications, whether a smile or a sound, or the light touch of a hand. . . moments of pure pleasure.

*

Walking my dog along a bike path with a friend, we are passed from behind by a woman wearing a Walkman and walking fast, pushing a toddler in a car-

riage. She passes us and is about ten steps ahead when I hear her say in a loud, commanding voice, "Dog!" Listening to her Walkman, in her own world, her timing is off. By the time she is identifying this "dog" to her child, we are well behind her and the dog is a complete abstraction, out of context, disconnected, disembodied.

*

Products are created to "free us up" so that we can do other things. They are acquired with the expectation that they will make our lives easier or entertain us. But if we are not paying attention, we may overuse them, and find they have become barriers and substitutes for human interaction and presence. They can end up isolating and depriving

our children, or overwhelming their nervous systems. We may find ourselves paying many times over for the time that was freed up, when we are faced with children who are acting out because they are hungry for attention, physical contact, and human warmth, or who crave constant stimulation. Children in this needy state are tremendously demanding, as they should be. Repairing the damage is much more difficult and much less satisfying than meeting their needs in the first place.

When our son was in nursery school, his teacher was struck by something that happened one morning. She recounted to us the following story. As the children sat on the floor in a circle, she asked each of

them what they liked to hold when they went to sleep at night. Some children mentioned stuffed animals, others, their baby blankets and the like.

When our son's turn came, he looked at her and said simply, without embarrassment, "My mommy."

Each object that takes the place of a human interaction has the potential of robbing us and our children. Relationships are built on shared moments.

There are certainly times when objects of convenience are both useful for parents and fun for children. But as parents, we have to keep looking at the whole of our child's daily experience. The key is to find the right balance. We might use a carriage when we need to, and yet make sure there are many other times when we hold or carry our baby or toddler. We might play a story tape

in the car, and read or tell stories to our children before they go to bed. Stuffed animals and baby blankets can be wonderfully comforting, but they shouldn't be the only or the main source of comfort in our child's life.

We might ask ourselves, is it healthier for our child to be bonded to objects or to people, to be reaching for blankets and toys when they are distressed or reaching out to human beings? Each object that takes the place of a human interaction has the potential of robbing us and our children. Relationships are built on shared moments. If we're not careful, the child with "everything" may end up being a child with nothing. ☹

"The horror is that there is no horror."

Dr. James Kimmel

I believe that it is very important that we strongly convey our perception of the harm that is done to children by our conventional infant and child care practices and the harm that these practices do to all of us.

I think our over-protective concern about how people will respond to a strong, critical message is insulting to them and an indication of how little respect we have for them and how little belief we have that they can change.

Having worked at one time with disabled people I know the thing they hate the most is to ignore or deny their disability. And we are a disabled people (which many of us know). How can we not be viewed as disabled when we do not give priority to children and the mothering they need in their lives, and condone and support practices that are cruel, sadistic, and unsocial to the life we create.

Our disability as a people lies in our blindness to what we do to children and what was done to us as children. Without being helped to see the harm (the horror), and without discovering that they are contributing to it, why would anyone change. It is our responsibility, because we see the horror, to disturb the guilty; to get them to see and feel what we see and feel.

Jean Liedloff in the Introduction to the revised edition of her book, "The Continuum Concept", talks about the guilt, regret, depression and anger that some mothers with grown children experienced after reading her book.

Jim Kimmel and I exchanged many emails several years ago while working together with others on a project. I recently reviewed all these emails while looking for a particular comment he had made about consumerism and was struck by his wisdom and clarity of thought throughout. This and the next three pages capture some of his thinking. Sadly he is with us no longer, but his writings and a bio can be found on Jan Hunt's superb website at http://www.naturalchild.com/james_kimmel/index.html -- ETB

One mother, for example, wrote:

"I think your book was one of the cruellest things I've ever read. I am not suggesting that you should not have written it, I am not even saying that I wish I had not read it. It's simply that it impressed me profoundly, hurt me deeply, intrigued me greatly. I do not want to face the possible truth of your theory and I am trying my best to avoid facing it....(God forgive you for that sequence about what babies go through, by the way, because in the deathless words of Noel Coward, I never shall!)... It's a wonder to me, as a matter of fact that you were not tarred and feathered at some stage... Every mother who reads it must do everything she can to avoid its implications."

(This woman later became a strong supporter of the continuum theory)

The nature of Liedloff's response to guilty mothers is illustrated in the title she gives to that section of her Introduction: "WHY NOT TO FEEL GUILTY ABOUT NOT HAVING BEEN THE ONLY ONE IN WESTERN CIVILIZATION TO TREAT YOUR CHILD CORRECTLY." Under this heading she states: "Does any of us, therefore, have the right to take the guilt, or even the awful sense of having been cheated, upon herself, or himself, as though one alone could have known better? If, on the other hand, fearing that unreasonable sense of personal guilt, we refuse to acknowledge what we all do to each other then how can we hope to change."

I think Jean really has it right.

Jim

The Ten Most Important Topics for “Parents-To-Be”

Dr. James Kimmel

1. WHAT TO EXPECT

How your life and daily living will change. ALL plans, decisions, and activities, will have to take into account the new person in your family (who at birth and for many years) will be totally dependent on his parents or their chosen “substitutes”. This is a necessary commitment, if the life you have created is to develop as a “healthy” human being.

2. WHAT YOUR BABY WILL EXPECT

As all babies, yours will expect (in terms of his biology and genetic makeup) to be nurtured by his mother. Support of the mother’s nurturing efforts by the father and others (and in their own interaction, if nurturing) with the newborn, will be happily accepted by he or she.

But we must remember, in our efforts to gain greater equality for women with men in our society, that just as babies evolved to be nurtured by their mothers, mother’s evolved to nurture and nurse their babies with human milk.

When they do not practice what they have evolved to do, they run grave risks (physically and emotionally), and put their child and society at risk. It is becoming increasingly clear that our substitutes for a “nurturing mother” are not equal to her (what nature took millions of years to evolve.)

3. AVOID TRYING TO BECOME A “PARENT”

Do not try to be a “good” parent but aim at just having a personal relationship with your child. Parenting is an abstract concept which is different for men and women usually, and determined by a culture’s values and priorities. What our culture believes to be a “good” parent is not very good for babies or children. As a mother and/or a father, what really counts is what goes on between you and your child.

4. LEARNING ABOUT AND DEVELOPING A NURTURING ATTITUDE

Getting in touch with your own need for nurturing, and tenderness from others, (which you probably had to repress, suppress and deny in your own childhood) or you will not recognize it in your child.

5. LEARNING ABOUT CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN THE NATURAL CONTEXT OF ATTACHMENT AND NURTURANCE

[The normal biological, genetic and social way we evolved to care for the new life we create] — so that he or she will

become a nurturing, caring and socially appropriate human being, which our conventional ways of caring for babies and young children are unable to do. Our child rearing methods allow children to become adults who fit our society (alienated, separate individuals).

6. VALIDATING THE CHILD'S EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

Responding immediately and appropriately to infants crying, smiling, laughter, frustration, anger, etc. By ignoring these, the child does not receive validation that his feelings exist or are real. Responding inappropriately (example: hitting or spanking a crying child transforms their need for tenderness to a need to hurt others).

7. IMPORTANCE AND NECESSITY OF PHYSICAL CLOSENESS

(Holding, touch, sleeping with child, breast feeding. Developing in arms)

8. BREAST FEEDING AND HUMAN MILK

Learning about their importance from current research, biology, evolution etc.

9. DISCIPLINE AND PUNISHMENT

Both violate the nurturing attitude, human sociability, and the child. They are methods of child rearing which are borrowed from the military, treatment of criminals, Rulers, prisoners of war, and sadists. They have no place in the nursery. They hurt children physically and emotionally, and teach them to violate and harm other human beings. They are, despite their supposedly or even real purpose to get children to behave properly, a major example of the imposition by one person on another — behavior which, except for criminals and children, is illegal and not allowed in our society. Along with other deficiencies in nurturing, discipline and punishment are at the root of all violence, antisocial and asocial behavior in our society.

10. NOT IN YOUR IMAGE

Allow your child to develop naturally in a nurturing environment. Do not play God and tried to make them in your image. Try to empathize, understand and learn from your child's behavior which is not like yours or which makes you anxious, frightened or angry. "Vive la difference" has been applied to male and female. It also should apply to children and adults. We have much to learn from those who are newly alive.

**We have much to learn
from those who are newly alive.**

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from those who are newly alive.**

I think that the letter by Marnie, in relation to the kind of commitment parents make to the life they bring into the world, should be included, in part or in whole.

Jim

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A Calgary Herald article in 1998 written by Catherine Ford's, "Let's Blame Mom", presented the idea that working mothers are condemned for their "choice" to work outside the home. This idea persists today. It is perceived that there is this war between stay at home moms and working moms.

It is a fact that more and more people in society, including well-respected authors, journalists and medical professionals, are loudly speaking out about the importance of full-time parental care for children. Mothers are at a biological advantage for the role of full-time caregiver, having both the uterus required to bear a child, the breasts required to nurture that child with optimal nutrition and emotional development, and the hormones necessary for an intuitive connection to their child. However, the issue is PARENTAL care, and both mothers and fathers, when they choose to have children, have a responsibility and an obligation to provide the full-time care their child needs.

In today's economy, for many couples that may mean delaying having children until the couple is financially able to have a parent at home to raise the children during the formative years. It may also require flexibility and initiative on the part of both parents, one or both of whom may find a way to telecommute, work at home, run a small home business, or otherwise contribute financially to the household without consigning the child to a part-time orphanage. However, the easiest way to afford a child is to be prepared to make sacrifices to have one. That means waiting on a bigger house, a newer car, a vacation, and investment in a pension fund.

The child-raising years are a small blip in couple's financial lifetime. Five years of living frugally can easily be caught up. Five years of missing your child growing up are gone forever.

We must ask the question: WHO IS DAYCARE FOR? Daycare is not for the children, who do not benefit in any way from being ripped away from their parents before the age of three, and placed into care with strangers with no vested interest in their future well-being. Daycare, with a ratio of three babies to one inconsistent, changing caregiver, who at any time may leave for a better job or to care for their own family, is for PARENTS.

Journalist Ford hammered this point home repeatedly when she continually focused on the women's choice and women's "rights" to presumably have it all - a career, and parenting for two hours before and after work, even at the expense of a child.

Nowhere did Ford consider the needs of the small baby or child who has no choices and no rights. And that is true for most of today's society. It's all about what women want and need. It's not about babies. A woman can CHOOSE to work, but her child cannot CHOOSE NOT to be raised by a daycare, babysitter, or nanny. No infant would CHOOSE stranger care over parent care.

Enough about women's rights to choose. Their right to choose is less important than a child's rights to full-time care by a parent with a vested interest in their emotional well-being. Women "choose" when they have children.

If and when men and women CHOOSE to have children, they have a responsibility to raise them, full-time for the first few years where such care is so crucial. Not just before and after work at their own selfish and self-serving convenience. ☺

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Home-Along America

Mary Eberstadt

More details on the “parent-free home”

Yet another proposition to which social science now gives near-unanimous consent is this: Overall child welfare is not only declining as measured by statistics like those on the obvious cases of child abuse and suicide and mental health, but also by more ephemeral measures.

One such is the matter of parental attention. Economist Victor Fuchs, who is cited by numerous analysts on this point, has estimated that “between 1960 and 1986, parental time available to children per week fell ten hours in white households and twelve hours in black [Arlie Hochschild’s formulation].” Citing the work of two other economists, Harvard’s Richard Gill writes similarly that “It is estimated that between 1965 and the late 1980s, the amount of time the average American child spent interacting with a parent (either mother or father) dropped by 43 percent — from around thirty hours a week to around seventeen.”

Absent adults are also the sine qua non of another social phenomenon whose impact has only increased with time, whether it remains on the front pages of news magazines or not. This is the case of latchkey children, defined here (as in Census Bureau literature) as those aged 5 to 14 who “care for self” outside of school.

As Hochschild puts it, “most researchers agree that what was once called ‘the plight of latchkey kids’ is now, in fact, a major problem.” Most estimates of the nationwide number of such children fall in the range of 5 million to 10 million, though Gill, for example, notes that some go as high as 15 million. Yet even estimates on the low end suggest a public problem of serious proportions. The Census Bureau in 1994, to take another example, estimated that roughly a fifth of the total age group in question were “latchkey children,” or some 4.5 million.

Certain unmistakable consequences follow from this autonomy. As Hochschild reports, for example, “a study of nearly five thousand eighth-graders and their parents found that children who were home alone for eleven or more hours a week were three times more likely than other children to abuse alcohol, tobacco or marijuana.” Plenty of other studies attest to the same sorts of connections between an empty nest in the after-school hours — empty, that is, of adults — and the sorts of activities that adolescents will try to get away with when no one censorious is watching: drinking, smoking, drug-taking, and, of course, sex. There is also the related question of what those hours of uninterrupted access to the violence and pornography of the internet are doing to adolescents nationwide — a question only be-

Due to space limitation the last issue contained only the first half of Home-Along America - the second half appears here. Reprinted with kind permission from Mary Eberstadt Consulting Editor to Policy Review magazine and a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution. This article first appeared in Policy Review June & July 2001, Number 107 published by Hoover Institution. Thanks also to Michael Mendizza and **Touch the Future** where this article was first seen.

ginning to be studied, but whose seriousness is attested to by swelling ranks of school officials and therapists, in particular.⁴

In another development that should perhaps come as no great surprise, the increasingly younger ages at which sexual activity begins have coincided directly with the increasing absence of adults from the home. This ongoing sexualization of young adolescents is also borne out by the numbers. According to the Council of Economic Advisors in a major study published in May 2000, for example, “data from the National Survey of Family Growth shows that in 1988, 11 percent of girls under the age of 15 had had sex. In 1995, this fraction had increased to 19 percent.” The National Center for Health Statistics similarly estimates that by the age of 15, one-third of girls have had sex, compared with less than 5 percent in 1970. The trends in sexually transmitted diseases among the young are simply horrific.⁵ In fact, it is hard to find a report, statistical or anecdotal, that does not confirm the trend toward earlier sexual activity across class, race, and sex.

A deeper meaning of the latchkey phenomenon may be this: Parents who can barely be on hand for real emergencies can hardly be expected to stay apprised of the many lower-intensity conflicts that are routine facts of childhood and adolescence. The parent-free home, by necessity, defines “emergency” up, rather than down. In *The Time Bind*, again, Hochschild captures just this, writing of the employed parents of “Amerco” that “while medical emergencies were fairly clear-cut, the difficult issue of what might be called semichronic problems — children who were depressed, failing in their studies, isolated, or hanging around with the wrong kids — which cried out for more parental

time and attention, were rarely raised at all.”⁶

Conversely, of course, the presence of an adult in the home when children are there makes intervention of all kinds more likely. Forget, for the sake of argument, about the influence of parents on long-term personality, career prospects, cognitive development, and the rest. Assume, even, that parents have only a negligible effect on all long-range outcomes, as contrarian critic Judith Rich Harris argued in her explosive 1998 book *The Nurture Assumption*. The fact still remains that a parental or other adult presence in the house is nevertheless a presence much preferable to its absence, *if only because that presence exercises a day-to-day chilling effect on adolescent impulses*.

Here too, social science verifies what common sense might suggest. Robert Putnam, for example, cites a widely-discussed 1980 article in *Child Development* about child maltreatment in two socioeconomically similar neighborhoods. One finding was that “kids in low-risk neighborhoods were more than three times as likely as kids in high-risk areas to find a parent home after school.” Similarly, in the aforementioned much-publicized recent study by the Council of Economic Advisors, the chief conclusion was that “significant differences were noted between teens who eat dinner with their parents at least five times a week and teens who do not.” Those with parent(s) at the table were said to have half the risk for drinking, somewhat less the risk for smoking, half the risk for marijuana use, half the risk for suicide attempts, and so on.

It is of course absurd to infer — as some commentators dutifully did — that eating dinner as a family confers talismanic benefits, whether to teenagers or anyone else. But it is equally absurd to

ignore, as the authors of the study itself did, the elementary meaning of the results. Whatever else goes on in the dinner-eating statistics, being at the table means that somebody — namely an adult somebody whose mere presence in the place makes certain activities more problematic than they would be otherwise — is actually *there* to exercise such influence, however tacit, occasional, or even unintentional it may be.

Work v. homework

A final possibility just beginning to emerge from the evidence is, if anything, perhaps even more politically and socially loaded. It is the possibility of a connection between parental absenteeism and the consistently mediocre performance of American students.

Nothing, of course, could be more familiar than the idea that American education badly needs reform. In the words of an emblematic recent *New York Times* headline, “Students in U.S. Do Not Keep Up In Global Tests.” In this particular study, as in numerous others over the years, 9,000 tested eighth graders demonstrated again what critics have long complained about — that American students lag their international peers in advanced countries by significant margins, and that the gap in science and math especially grows wider as the student ages. As readers will know, also over the years many different explanations — demographic, sociological, pedagogical, economic — have been offered for this gap, and many reforms, from charter schools to vouchers and the rest, devised to address it.

One possible explanation that has *not* enjoyed wide circulation is the one dictated by Ockham’s razor: that many children need help and supervision with their

homework, that in many homes nobody is there to provide that kind of support after school, that some children are physically ready for sleep, not study, by the time their parents return home, and that preoccupied adults who do find themselves supervising homework after a long and busy day away may be understandably less than efficient and patient about it. And yet all of these are facts so plainly related to school achievement that educators themselves are beginning to acknowledge the connections, if only because it is they who are frequently blamed for the consequences.

Not long ago, for example, the *New York Times* published an interesting short piece by Richard Rothstein, “Add Social Changes to the Factors Affecting Declining Test Scores.” In it, the director of the Iowa Department of Education “speculates that even greater social change may be a factor. . . . With parents less available, children may get less support at home for learning, Mr. Stillwell surmises.” The same report also mentioned a problem now familiar to many teachers, namely the shrinking number of parents available for schoolday events — from conferences to field trips to class parties to volunteer work to sudden developments requiring parental attention. As a teacher with 18 years’ experience in Iowa observed, “This year, in her class of 23, there are only three mothers she can phone at home if a problem arises during school.”

This same point — that today’s parents as a whole simply are not as available for school and school activities as educational success may require — suggests itself even more emphatically if certain comparative facts are taken into account. Much has been made, for example, of Asian students’ overall superiority on standardized tests and other academic

endeavors, and much has been written about the factors cultural, economic, and even (witness *The Bell Curve*) psychometric that are argued to account for this difference. But little has been said publicly about a factor requiring no theory whatsoever — that, as Fukuyama has noted, and as those familiar with Japan and Korea, for example, will already know, “part of the reason that children in both societies do so well on international tests has to do with the investments their mothers make in their educations.”

Another piece of suggestive evidence linking parental absence to school outcomes appears in *The Widening Gap: Why America’s Working Families Are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*, a recent book by Harvard School of Public Health researcher Jody Heymann. In a study of 1,623 children, she “found that a parental absence between 6 and 9 p.m. was particularly harmful. For every hour a parent worked during that interval, a child was 16 percent more likely to score in the bottom quarter of a standardized math test. . . . *The results held true even after taking into account family income, parental education, marital status, the child’s gender and the total number of hours the parents worked* [emphasis added].”

From praxis to theory

One reason why the problems of

home-alone America appear to be intractable is that, despite all the data, few writers acquainted with the facts have cared to do more than describe them and move on. Their reticence is understandable, as the handful of critics who have ventured into these troubled waters know well. As Richard Gill has observed, for example, “The claim that any mother anywhere is harming her child by virtue of her full-

time job or career is probably the claim most violently rejected by supporters of the present status quo.” Likewise, as Brian C. Robertson notes, “A good deal of the neglect [of the data on child and adolescent problems], no doubt, derives from the reluctance . . . of many academics and opinion leaders to be seen as hostile to the social advancement of women.”

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At the same time, however, it is difficult to imagine the status quo changing without the countervailing pressure of a substantial body of argument. Over the past decade, to take a related example, there has been a quiet, significant, and utterly unexpected revision in the literature on another once-sacrosanct subject, single parenthood. Not so long ago — just 10 or so years ago — to oppose the idea that one parent was as good as two was to invite ridicule, as Vice President Quayle famously found. Yet today it is hard to think of a public figure who has *not* volunteered, in one form or another, an opinion on single parenthood more akin to Quayle’s than to his critics.

This evolution in thought did not come about because of any rightward drift in the populace, but rather by the steady accretion of evidence testifying to the connections between single parenthood and child problems — Barbara Defoe Whitehead's famous 1993 *Atlantic Monthly* piece (followed by a book) entitled "Dan Quayle was Right"; David Blankenhorn's *Fatherless America*; Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *When the Bough Breaks*, and a host of other revisionist books and articles up to and including Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher's emblematic and controversial recent work, *The Case for Marriage*. But perhaps the preeminent scholar in this reconfiguring of debate, again, has been the psychologist Judith Wallerstein, whose studies of the effects of divorce have turned out to resonate emotionally more than all the available longitudinal data.

As *New Republic* writer and editor Margaret Talbot put it recently in the *New York Times Book Review* in what amounted to an unexpected statement of vindication for Wallerstein's work, "She, more than anyone else, has made us face the truth that a divorce can free one or both parents to start a new and more helpful life and still hurt their children."

Home-alone America, by contrast, has no such body of opposing thought toward which actual or would-be reformers might turn, though exceptions are beginning to appear. In a brilliant short book published in 1999, for example, Kay S. Hymowitz broke particularly important

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theoretical ground. She examined the state of American childhood not from the bottom but from the top — at the level of the numerous contemporary theories that have served to justify parental disengagement. *Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers their Future — and Ours* outlined how, in field after field (law, education, psychology both popular and academic), the past 30 years have seen a transformation in the way children are

perceived and portrayed — one that deemphasizes adult guidance and authority, while simultaneously ultraemphasizing the intrinsic capacities of the child in the absence of such guidance.⁷ Uniting all these apparently disparate theories, she demonstrated, is "the idea of children as capable, rational, and autonomous, as beings endowed

with all the qualities necessary for their entrance into the adult world — qualities such as talents, interests, values, conscience and a conscious sense of themselves."

In another important book published a year later, Christina Hoff Sommers added further evidence to what Hymowitz called the "anti-cultural" character of these theories. In *The War Against Boys*, Sommers examined in detail the effects of feminist theories of education on modern boyhood. Like Hymowitz, Sommers reviewed the depressing trends in teen behavior, including suicide rates, anxiety and depression rates, drug-taking both pre-

scribed and illicit, educational failure, and the rest. Like Hymowitz, she also concluded that children — specifically, boy children — are being harmed by theories now dominant in educational and therapeutic circles and inimical to (male) human nature. For all her emphasis on theory, however, Sommers also did not hesitate to offer a real-life explanation for why such counterintuitive ideas about male children have been allowed to take root in the first place. The larger reason why boys in particular have come to be widely regarded as a “problem,” she charged memorably, is that “there are now large numbers of adults who have defected altogether from the central task of civilizing the children in their care, leaving them to fend for themselves.”

Important as these and other efforts have been, however, they face enormous competition from exactly the sources Hymowitz enumerated — the towering stack of books, both expert and popular, that give people advice about and justification for hands-off parenting. Almost all leading cultural authorities, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, have managed a good word for the putative benefits of “early socialization,” which is to say, nonparental child-rearing. The country’s leading popular child-care experts have revised downward over the years their views on just how much young children need their mothers — with every single one concluding that children need less of their mothers’ time and presence than was previously thought, not more.⁸ Then there is the literature for children themselves, some of it detailed in Hochschild’s *The Time Bind* and much of it available in bookstores, which emphasizes parental needs and resolutely draws a happy face over children’s longings — from pamphlets exhorting those too young to tie their shoes

to “independence” to the stories and articles and self-help columns sharing the message that the happy and fulfilled (i.e., less encumbered) parent is also the better parent.

And, of course, there are the letter-writers and reporters and opinion leaders who will rise in opposition to any study that impinges on parental (i.e., maternal) autonomy. Consider the response to a recent and much publicized study of day care by the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development. Its data suggested a link between time spent in day care and instances of aggression emerging at kindergarten age. Many critics immediately proffered in harsh terms the counterargument that the “aggression” cited was within normal bounds. Yet as Stanley Kurtz of the Hudson Institute has noted, the implications of the study may be even *worse* than feared. As he observed, “chances are, if a significant percentage of children in day care evidence clear behavioral problems, or show up as insecurely attached to their mothers, then there are plenty of other children in less obvious, but still significant trouble.”

A more welcome message today, to judge by the critical acclaim the book won, might be the one contained in reporter Ann Crittenden’s *The Price of Motherhood*. Crittenden unexpectedly decided to rear her own child and found herself forgoing money and status in order to do so (also unexpectedly, it appears). The book fits into a genre of recent works aimed at ameliorating what they take to be the unique plight of mothers in today’s society. To Crittenden’s credit, some of the practical reforms she recommends, such as the re-introduction of alimony and easier access to a father’s employee benefits by at-home mothers, have real bite. In fact, it is not hard to imagine good reasons why they

may ultimately enjoy public and political support.

At the same time, however, most of what Crittenden wants — and what she believes most mothers want, too — is a series of reforms in "family law" that will make life easier for mothers who want to work outside the home: extra write-offs for child care, easier access to trained foreign nannies, more paid maternity leave. In other words, her definition of helping American mothers is enforcing laws that will make it easier and easier for those women to be around their children less and less.

The problem that has a name

A final proposition to which current thinking gives agreement is this: that "there is definitely no going back," in the words of Putnam and nearly every other theorist quoted earlier, to the time when most children could expect the company of related adults, particularly their mothers, in the home and much of the time. If the social **scientists are right, then** in practical terms there is no transforming home-alone America.

Such unadulterated fatalism, particularly when it seems so universal, of course invites objection. Plenty of behaviors that in certain times and places seemed the unremarkable norm have sooner or later found themselves objects of stigma elsewhere. Might not a similar social and intellectual turnaround — perhaps less a restigmatization than a swing in the social pendulum — someday come to characterize the contemporary social practice of leaving children to manage without their parents a great deal of the time? In an interesting volume cited earlier, *There's No Place Like Work*, Brian C. Robertson for one argued yes. "Although the devel-

oping consensus on illegitimacy and divorce may have led to a new appreciation of the father's indispensable role in the emotional, behavioral, and character development of children," he reasoned, "this makes the relative neglect in recent years of the *mother's* formative role all the more difficult to account for [*italics in the original*]." On this reading, a revised and more sensible notion of what benefits children most — like today's ongoing revision of the wisdom of single parenthood — is only a matter of time. Interestingly, in May the *Washington Post* trumpeted a University of Michigan study on its front page purporting to show a significant increase in the amount of time parents spent with their children in 1997 compared to 1981.

This is indeed one plausible direction for the post-"mommy-war" world. But the story may be more complicated than that. The authors of the Michigan study, for example, used the same data in a September 2000 paper to show that "the proportion of time . . . taken up by school or day care, personal care, eating, and sleeping increased significantly" from 1981 to 1997, and that "a portion of this change . . . was due to maternal employment." They concluded, "there may be a basis for the concern that shared family activities are declining," and that the "question of the relationship of time to child behavior and well-being" requires further study.

This points us to another and less happy alternative. In the piece quoted earlier by journalist Marjorie Williams, the author explains, as she hopes someday to explain to her five-year-old, that "what I do at that desk," as she puts it, "feels as necessary to me as food or air." These are evocative words in more ways than one. They are the sort of things mothers have also said about their children.

The point here is not to single out

Williams or the many, many other mothers who feel just the way she does about her not-home career and all of the benefits — material and meditative, public and private — that it demonstrably confers. The point is not even to exhort any of those mothers to choose otherwise — on reflection, in fact, far from it. To look back on the “mommy wars” is to realize, counter to expectation, that there was something incoherent about such public exhortation all along. After all, if what is supposedly the most elemental force of all — maternal instinct — does not compel those women who have a choice in the matter to opt unbidden for the company of their own children, it is hard to see how disputed esoterica from the latest social-science survey could be expected to accomplish the same end.

But there, in all its impotence, is exactly the point. Much has been made, particularly in an era enamored of evolutionary psychology and related reductionist theories, of the “social construction” of fatherhood — meaning the way in which cultural norms must step in to fill the gap between problematic “male instinct,” on the one hand, and what society believes to be proper paternal care of one’s offspring, on the other. Perhaps something unexpectedly profound has come to be taken for granted here. Perhaps what all those unmoored children really suggest is that it’s time for a new look at the “social construction” of motherhood — the ways in which a complicated schema of stigmas and rewards and social understandings, most of them now long gone from the scene, came together to create “motherhood” as the thing itself has been known and admired.

This is not to say that there is no such thing as maternal instinct — one might as well deny the moon — but only

that its presumed place in the firmament of other human impulses and desires may be less fixed than has been commonly supposed. If so, then the data now accumulating about the children of home-alone America may just be the beginning, and what we are in for next may be worse than anyone has guessed. ☹

Notes

⁴ See, for example, Holman W. Jenkins Jr.’s “Pornography, Main Street to Wall Street,” in the February-March edition of *Policy Review*.

⁵ According to widely used sources like the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Guttmacher Institute, for example, some 3 million teenagers are infected with a sexually transmitted disease each year, and chlamydia in particular — which has been linked in women to both infertility and certain forms of cancer — is actually *more* common among teenagers than among adult men or women.

⁶ Hochschild’s book offers many examples. In one typical household, “the children were on an elaborate Rube Goldberg assembly line of child care, continually sent from one ‘workstation’ to the next.” She is also unflinching in reporting how parents squeezed for time because of work end up “outsourcing” even the smallest of once-domestic chores (for example, haircutters who visit the day care center). Also profiting, she reports, is a burgeoning “self-care” industry armed with books and pamphlets for anxious parents with titles like “Teaching Your Child to be Home Alone” and “I Can Take Care of Myself.” She concludes that “many of today’s children may suffer from a parental desire for reassurance that they are free of needs” and describes a “childhood of long waits for absent parents.”

⁷ According to the progressive and neoprogressive theories dominant in education, for example, children are self-motivated, inherently cooperative “learners” who will “invent” their own “strategies” on impulse. The idea of the self-sufficient child — even the self-sufficient baby and toddler — is also ingrained in current psychology. Experts from Piaget onward have stressed the rational, competent, information-processing of the child, writing off any friction with this happy scenario to “developmental stages.” Influenced partly by such theories, forward-looking legal theorists — Hillary Rodham Clinton, among many others — have also stressed the autonomy and rights of the child against those of the parents (a movement driven particularly, as Hymowitz argued, by the political desire to allow minors easy access to abortion).

⁸ For a review of these changes in the literature, see my article “Putting Children Last” in the May 1995 edition of *Commentary*.

The Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

The CSPCC is working to change those things in Canadian society that are making it difficult for parents to give their children the care they need to grow into healthy, confident, non-violent, loving adults.

In general we are working for:

- ◆ a shift from arbitrary male dominance to no-one's arbitrary dominance
- ◆ a shift from the essential beliefs of our society's consumer religion -- envy, selfishness and greed -- to trust, empathy and affection in a community-centred, sustainable society
- ◆ a shift from violence and sexism as the warp and woof of entertainment
- ◆ a shift from treating children as sinful or stupid to empathizing with them and fulfilling their expanding and particular needs

In particular we are working to:

- ◆ raise the status of parenting
- ◆ implement universal parenting education from kindergarten to grade eight
- ◆ encourage parents to make their children's emotional needs their highest priority during the critical first three years
- ◆ facilitate a positive birthing experience for every father, mother and baby
- ◆ promote extended breastfeeding with child-led weaning
- ◆ make it easier for parents to meet the emotional needs of each child by encouraging a minimum three year spacing between siblings
- ◆ increase awareness of the potential long term hazards of separations between children under three and their mothers



Recognizing that the capacity to give and receive trust, affection and empathy is fundamental to being human.

Knowing that all of us suffer the consequences when children are raised in a way that makes them affectionless and violent, and;

Realizing that for the first time in History we have definite knowledge that these qualities are determined by the way a child is cared for in the very early years.

CREDO



WE BELIEVE THAT:

- The necessity that every new human being develop the capacity for trust, affection and empathy dictates that potential parents re-order their priorities with this in mind.
- Most parents are willing and able to provide their children with the necessary loving empathic care, given support from others, appropriate understanding of the task and the conviction of its absolute importance.
- It is unutterably cruel to permanently maim a human being by failing to provide this quality of care during the first three years of life.

THERE IS AN URGENCY THEREFORE TO:

- Re-evaluate all our institutions, traditions and beliefs from this perspective.
- Oppose and weaken all forces which undermine the desire or ability of parents to successfully carry out a task which ultimately affects us all.
- Support and strengthen all aspects of family and community life which assist parents to meet their obligation to each new member of the human race.