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Beyond Sentimentality: American Childhood as a Social and Cultural Construct

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Nowhere is it easier to romanticize childhood than in Mark Twain's hometown of Hannibal, Missouri. In this small Mississippi riverfront town, where Mark Twain lived, off and on, from the age of four until he was seventeen, many enduring American fantasies about childhood come to life. There is a historical marker next to a fence like the one that Tom's friends paid him for the privilege of whitewashing. There is another marker pointing to the spot where Huck's cabin supposedly stood. There is also the window where Huck hurled pebbles to wake the sleeping Tom. Gazing out across the raging waters of the Mississippi, now unfortunately hidden behind a floodwall, one can easily imagine the raft excursion that Huck and Jim took seeking freedom and adventure.

Hannibal occupies a special place in our collective imagination as the setting of two of fiction's most famous depictions of childhood. Our cherished myth about childhood as a bucolic time of freedom, untainted innocence, and self-discovery comes to life in this river town. But beyond the accounts of youthful wonder and small-town innocence, Twain's novels teem with grim and unsettling details about childhood's underside. Huck's father Pap was an abusive drunkard who beat his son for learning how to read. When we idealize Mark Twain's Hannibal and its eternally youthful residents, we suppress his novels' more sinister aspects.[1]

Twain's real-life mid-nineteenth-century Hannibal was anything but a haven of stability and security. It was a place where a quarter of the children died before their first birthday, half before they reached the age of twenty-one. Twain himself experienced the death of two siblings. Although he was not physically abused like the fictional Huck, his father was emotionally cold and aloof. There were few open displays of affection in his boyhood home. Only once did he remember seeing his father and mother kiss, and that was at the deathbed of his brother Ben. Nor was his home a haven of economic security. His boyhood ended before his twelfth birthday when his father's death forced him to take up a series of odd jobs. Before he left home permanently at seventeen, he had already worked as a printer's apprentice; clerked in a grocery store, a bookshop, and a drug store; tried his hand at blacksmithing; and delivered newspapers. Childhood ended early in Twain's hometown, though full adulthood came no more quickly than it does today.[2]

A series of myths cloud public thinking about the history of American childhood. One is the myth of a carefree childhood. We cling to a fantasy that once upon a time childhood and youth were years of carefree adventure, despite the fact that for most children in the past, growing up was anything but easy. Disease, family disruption, and early entry into the world of work were integral parts of family life. The notion of a long childhood devoted to education and free from adult-like responsibilities is a very recent invention, a product of the past century and a half, and one that only became a reality for a majority of children after World War II.

Another myth is that of the home as a haven and bastion of stability in an ever-changing world. Throughout American history, family stability has been the exception, not the norm. At the beginning of the twentieth century, fully a third of all American children spent at least a portion of their childhood in a single-parent home, and as recently as 1940, one child in ten did not live with either parent—compared to one in twenty-five today.[3]

A third myth is that childhood is the same for all children, a status transcending class, ethnicity, and gender. In fact, every aspect of childhood is shaped by class—as well as by ethnicity, gender, geography, religion, and historical era. We may think of childhood as a biological phenomenon, but it is better understood as a life stage whose contours are shaped by a particular time and place. Childrearing practices, schooling, and the age at which young people leave home are all the products of particular social and cultural circumstances.

A fourth myth is that the United States is a peculiarly child-friendly society when, in actuality, Americans are deeply ambivalent about children. Adults envy young people their youth, vitality, and physical attractiveness, but they also resent children's intrusions on their time and resources and frequently fear their passions and drives. Many of the reforms that nominally have been designed to protect and assist the young were also instituted to insulate adults from children.

Lastly, the myth that is perhaps the most difficult to overcome is the myth of progress and its inverse, the myth of decline. There is a tendency to conceive of the history of childhood as a story of steps forward over time: of parental engagement replacing emotional distance, of kindness and leniency supplanting strict and stern punishment, of scientific enlightenment superceding superstition and misguided moralism. This progressivism is sometimes seen in reverse, that is, that childhood is disappearing: children are growing up too quickly and wildly and losing their innocence, playfulness, and malleability.

Various myths and misconceptions have contributed to this undue pessimism about the young. There has never been a golden age of childhood when the overwhelming majority of American children were well cared for and their experiences were idyllic. Nor has childhood ever been an age of innocence, at least not for the overwhelming majority of children. Childhood has never been insulated from the pressures and demands of the surrounding society and each generation of children has had to wrestle with the particular social, political, and economic constraints of its own historical period. In our own time, the young have had to struggle with high rates of family instability, a deepening disconnection from adults, and the expectation that all children should pursue the same academic path at the same pace, even as the attainment of full adulthood recedes ever further into the future.

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD

The history of children is often treated as a marginal subject, and there is no question that the history of children is especially difficult to write. Children are rarely obvious historical actors. Compared to adults, they leave fewer historical sources, and their powerlessness makes them less visible than other social groups. Nevertheless, the history of childhood is inextricably bound up with the broader political and social events in the life of the nation—including colonization, revolution, slavery, industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and war—and children's experience embodies many of the key themes in American history, such as the rise of modern bureaucratic institutions, the growth of a consumer economy, and the elaboration of a welfare state. Equally important, childhood's history underscores certain long-term transformations in American life, such as an intensifying consciousness about age, a clearer delineation of distinct life stages, and the increasing tendency to organize institutions by age.

Childhood is not an unchanging, biological stage of life, and children are not just "grow'd," like Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Rather, childhood is a social and cultural construct. Every aspect of childhood—including children's relationships with their parents and peers, their proportion of the population, and their paths through childhood to adulthood—has changed dramatically over the past four centuries. Methods of child rearing, the duration of schooling, the nature of children's play, young people's participation in work, and the points of demarcation between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are products of culture, class, and historical era.[4]

Childhood in the past was experienced and conceived of in quite a different way than today. Just two centuries ago, there was far less age segregation than there is today and less concern with organizing experience by chronological age. There was also far less sentimentalization of children as special beings who were more innocent and vulnerable than adults. This does not mean that adults failed to recognize childhood as a stage of life, with its own special needs and characteristics, nor does it imply that parents were unconcerned about their children and failed to love them and mourn their deaths. Rather, it means that the experience of young people was organized and valued very differently than it is today.

Language itself illustrates shifts in the construction of childhood. Two hundred years ago, the words used to describe childhood were far less precise than those we use today. The word *infancy* referred not to the months after birth, but to the period in which children were under their mother's control, typically from birth to the age of 5 or 6. The word *childhood* might refer to someone as young as the age of 5 or 6 or as old as the late teens or early twenties. Instead of using our term adolescent or teenager, Americans two centuries ago used a broader and more expansive term *youth*, which stretched from the pre-teen years until the early or mid-20s. The vagueness of this term reflected the amorphousness of the life stages; chronological age was less important than physical strength, size, and maturity. A young person did not achieve full adult status until marriage and establishment of an independent farm or entrance into a full-time trade or profession. Full adulthood might be attained as early as the mid- or late teens, but usually did not occur until the late twenties or early thirties.[5]

How, then, has childhood changed over the past two hundred years? The transformations that have taken place might be grouped into three broad categories. The first involves shifts in the timing, sequence, and stages of growing up. Over the past two centuries, the stages of childhood have grown much more precise, uniform, and prescriptive. Before the Civil War, children and teens moved sporadically in and out of the parental home, schools, and jobs, in an irregular, episodic pattern that the historian Joseph F. Kett termed "semi-dependence.". . .

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, however, there were growing efforts to regularize and systematize childhood experiences. Unable to transmit their status position directly to their children, through bequests of family lands, transmission of craft skills, or selection of a marriage partner, middle-class parents adopted new strategies to assist their children, emphasizing birth control, maternal nurture, and prolonged schooling. Less formal methods of childrearing and education were replaced by intensive forms of childrearing and prescribed curricula in schools. Unstructured contacts with adults were supplanted by carefully age-graded institutions. Activities organized by young people themselves were succeeded by adult sponsored, adult-organized organization. Lying behind these developments was a belief that childhood should be devoted to education, play, and character-building activities; that children needed time to mature inside a loving home and segregated from adult affairs; and that precocious behavior needed to be suppressed.[6]

Demography is a second force for change. A sharp reduction in the birth rate substantially reduced the proportion of children in the general population, from half the population in the mid-nineteenth century to a third by 1900. A declining birth rate divided families into more distinct generations and allowed parents to lavish more time, attention, and resources on each child; it also made society less dependent on children's labor and allowed adult society to impose new institutional structures on young peoples' lives reflecting shifting notions about children's proper chronological development.

The third category is attitudinal. Adult conceptions of childhood have shifted profoundly over time, from the seventeenth-century Puritan image of the child as a depraved being who needed to be restrained; to the Enlightened notion of children as blank slates who could be shaped by environmental influences; to the Romantic conception of children as creatures with innocent souls and redeemable, docile wills; to the Darwinian emphasis on highly differentiated stages of children's cognitive, physiological, and emotional development; to the Freudian conception of children as seething cauldrons of instinctual drives; and to the contemporary notions that emphasize children's competence and capacity for early learning.

The history of childhood might be conceptualized in terms of three overlapping phases. The first, pre-modern childhood, which roughly coincides with the colonial era, was a period in which the young were viewed as adults in training. Religious and secular authorities regarded childhood as a time of deficiency and incompleteness, and adults rarely referred to their childhood with nostalgia or fondness. Infants were viewed as unformed and even animalistic due to their inability to speak or stand upright. A parent's duty was to hurry a child toward adult status, especially through early engagement in work responsibilities, both inside the parental home and outside it, as servants and apprentices.

The middle of the eighteenth century saw the emergence of a new set of attitudes, which came to define modern childhood. A growing number of parents began to regard children as innocent, malleable, and fragile creatures who needed to be sheltered from contamination. Childhood was increasingly viewed as a separate stage of life that required special care and institutions to protect it. During the nineteenth century, the growing acceptance of this new ideal among the middle class was evident in prolonged residence of young people within the parental home; longer periods of formal schooling; and an increasing consciousness about the stages of young peoples' development, culminating in the "discovery" (or, more accurately, the invention) of adolescence around the turn of the twentieth century.

Universalizing the modern ideal of a sheltered childhood was a highly uneven process and one that has never encompassed all American children. Indeed, it was not until the 1950s that the norms of modern childhood defined the modal experience of young people in the United States. But developments were already under way that would bring modern childhood to an end and replace it with something quite different, a new phase that might be called postmodern childhood. This term refers to the breakdown of dominant norms about the family, gender roles, age, and even reproduction, as they were subjected to radical change and revision. Age norms that many considered "natural" were thrown into question. Even the bedrock biological process of sexual maturation accelerated. Today's children are much more likely than the Baby Boomers to experience their parents' divorce; to have a working mother; to spend significant amounts of time unsupervised by adults; to grow up without siblings; and to hold a job during high school. Adolescent girls are much more likely to have sexual relations during their mid-teens.[7]

Superficially, postmodern childhood resembles premodern childhood. As in the seventeenth century, children are no longer regarded as the binary opposites of adults, nor are they considered naïve and innocent creatures. Today, adults quite rightly assume that even preadolescents are knowledgeable about the realities of the adult world. But unlike premodern children, postmodern children are independent consumers and participants in a separate, semi-autonomous youth culture. We still assume that the young are fundamentally different from adults; that they should spend their first eighteen years in the parents' home; and devote their time to education in age-graded schools. But it is also clear that basic aspects of the ideal of a protected childhood, in which the young are kept isolated from adult realities, have broken down.[8]

DIVERSITY

Diversity has always been the hallmark of American childhood. In seventeenth-century America, demographic, economic, religious, and social factors made geographical subcultures the most important markers of diversity in children's experience. In the early period of settlement, colonial childhood took profoundly different forms in New England, the Middle Colonies, and the Chesapeake and southernmost colonies. In seventeenth century New England, hierarchical, patriarchal Calvinist families shaped children's experiences. In the Chesapeake colonies of Maryland and Virginia, in contrast, families were highly unstable and indentured servitude shaped children's experience. Only in the Middle Colonies, from New York to Delaware, did a childhood emphasizing maternal nurture and an acceptance of early autonomy emerge, yet even here, large numbers of children experienced various forms of dependence, as household and indentured servants, apprentices, or slaves.[9]

In the nineteenth century, a highly uneven process of capitalist expansion made social class, gender, and race more saliant contributors to childhood diversity. The children of the urban middle class, prosperous commercial farmers, and southern planters enjoyed increasingly longer childhoods, free from major household or work responsibilities until their late teens or twenties, whereas the offspring of urban workers, frontier farmers, and blacks, both slave and free, had briefer childhoods and became involved in work inside or outside the home before they reached their teens. Many urban working-class children contributed to the family economy through scavenging in the streets, vacant lots, or back alleys, collecting coal, wood, and other items that could be used at home or sold. Others took part in the street trades, selling gum, peanuts, and crackers. In industrial towns, young people under the age of 15 contributed on average about 20 percent of their family's income. In mining areas, boys as young as 10 or 12 worked as breakers, separating coal from pieces of slate and wood, before becoming miners in their mid- or late teens. On farms, children as young as 5 or 6 might pull weeds or chase birds and cattle away from crops. By the time they reached the age of 8, many tended livestock, and as they grew older they milked cows, churned butter, fed chickens, collected eggs, hauled water, scrubbed laundry, and harvested crops. A blurring of gender roles among children and youth was especially common on frontier farms. Schooling varied as widely as did work routines. In the rural North, the Midwest, and the Far West, most mid- and late-nineteenth-century students attended one-room schools for 3 to 6 months a year. In contrast, city children attended age-graded classes taught by professional teachers 9 months a year. In both rural and urban areas, girls tended to receive more schooling than boys.[10]

Late in the nineteenth century, self-described child-savers launched a concerted campaign to overcome diversity and universalize a middle-class childhood. This was a slow and bitterly resisted process. Not until the 1930s was child labor finally outlawed and not until the 1950s did high school attendance become a universal experience. Yet for all the success in advancing this middle-class ideal, even today, social class remains a primary determinant of children's well-being.[11]

In recent years, social conservatives have tended to fixate on family structure as a source of diversity in children's well-being, while political liberals have tended to focus on ethnicity, race, and gender. In fact, it is poverty that is the most powerful predictor of children's welfare. Economic stress contributes to family instability, inadequate health care, high degrees of mobility, poor parenting, and elevated levels of stress and depression. As in the nineteenth century, social class significantly differentiates contemporary American childhoods. There is a vast difference between the highly pressured, hyper-organized, fast-track childhoods of affluent children and the highly stressed childhoods of the one-third of children who live in poverty at some point before the age of eighteen. In many affluent families, the boundaries between work and family life have diminished, and parents manage by tightly organizing their children's lives. Yet, contradictorily, most affluent children have their own television and computer and therefore unmediated access to information and are unsupervised by their parents for large portions of the day. In many affluent families there are drastic swings between parental distance from children and parental indulgence, when fathers and mothers try to compensate for parenting too little. Yet at the same time, one-sixth of all children live in poverty at any one time, including 36 percent of black children and 34 percent of Hispanic children. This generally entails limited adult supervision, inferior schooling, and a lack of easy access to productive diversions and activities.

THE POLITICS OF CHILDHOOD

In recent years, two contrasting visions of childhood have collided. One is a vision of a protected childhood, in which children are to be sheltered from adult realities, especially from sex, obscenity, and death. The opposing vision is of a prepared childhood, of children who are exposed from a relatively early age to the realities of contemporary society, such as sexuality and diverse family patterns. Proponents of a prepared childhood argue that in a violent, highly commercialized, and hypersexualized society, a naïve child is a vulnerable child.

Clashes between conflicting conceptions of childhood are not new. For four hundred years, childhood has been a highly contested category. The late twentieth-century culture war—pitting advocates of a "protected" childhood, who sought to shield children from adult realities, against proponents of a "prepared" childhood—was only the most recent in a long series of conflicts over the definition of a proper childhood. In the seventeenth century, there were bitter struggles between Puritans who regarded even newborn infants as sinful, humanistic educators who emphasized children's malleability, and Anglican traditionalists who considered children as symbols of values (including the value of deference and respect for social hierarchy) that were breaking down as England underwent the wrenching economic transformations that accompanied the rise of modern capitalist enterprise. In the late eighteenth century, battles raged over infant depravity and patriarchal authority, conflicts that gave added resonance to the American revolutionaries' struggle against royal authority. At the turn of the twentieth century, conflict erupted between the proponents of a useful childhood, which expected children to reciprocate for their parents' sacrifices, and advocates of a sheltered childhood, free from labor and devoted to play and education.[12]

PARENTING

Anxiety is the hallmark of modern parenthood. Today's parents agonize incessantly about their children's physical health, personality development, psychological well-being, and academic performance. From birth, parenthood is colored by apprehension. Contemporary parents worry about sudden infant death syndrome, stranger abductions, and physical and sexual abuse, as well as more mundane problems, such as sleep disorders and hyperactivity.

Parental anxiety about children's well-being is not a new development, but parents' concerns have taken dramatically different forms over time. Until the mid-nineteenth century, parents were primarily concerned about their children's health, religious piety, and moral development. In the late nineteenth century, parents became increasingly attentive to their children's emotional and psychological well-being, and during the twentieth century, parental anxieties dwelt on children's personality development, gender identity, and their ability to interact with peers. Today, much more than in the past, guilt-ridden, uncertain parents worry that their children not suffer from boredom, low self-esteem, or excessive school pressures.[13]

Today, we consider early childhood life's formative stage and believe that children's experiences during the first two or three years of life mold their personality, lay the foundation for future cognitive and psychological development, and leave a lasting imprint on their emotional life. We also assume that children's development proceeds through a series of physiological, psychological, social, and cognitive stages; that even very young children have a capacity to learn; that play serves valuable developmental functions; and that growing up requires children to separate emotionally and psychologically from their parents. These assumptions differ markedly from those held three centuries ago. Before the mid-eighteenth century, most adults betrayed surprisingly little interest in the very first years of life and autobiographies revealed little nostalgia for childhood. Also, adults tended to dismiss children's play as trivial and insignificant.

Parenting has evolved through a series of successive and overlapping phases, from a seventeenth-century view of children as "adults-in-training" to the early nineteenth-century emphasis on character formation; the late-nineteenth century notion of scientific childrearing, stressing regularity and systematization; the mid-twentieth century emphasis on fulfilling children's emotional and psychological needs; and the late twentieth century stress on maximizing children's intellectual and social development. Seventeenth-century colonists recognized that children differed from adults in their mental, moral, and physical capabilities and drew a distinction between childhood, an intermediate stage they called youth, and adulthood. But they did not rigidly segregate children by age. Parents wanted children to speak, read, reason, and contribute to their family's economic well-being as soon as possible. Infancy was regarded as a state of deficiency. Unable to speak or stand, infants lacked two essential attributes of full humanity. Parents discouraged infants from crawling and placed them in "walking stools," similar to today's walkers. To ensure proper adult posture, young girls wore leather corsets and parents placed rods along the spines of very young children of both sexes.

During the eighteenth century, a shift in parental attitudes took place. Fewer parents expected children to bow or doff their hats in their presence or stand during meals.

Instead of addressing parents as "sir" and "madam," children called them "papa" and "mama." By the end of the eighteenth century, furniture specifically designed for children, painted in pastel colors and decorated with pictures of animals or figures from nursery rhymes, began to be widely produced, reflecting the popular notion of childhood as a time of innocence and playfulness. There was a growing stress on implanting virtue and a capacity for self-government.

By the early nineteenth century, mothers in the rapidly expanding Northeastern middle class increasingly embraced an amalgam of earlier childrearing ideas. From John Locke, they absorbed the notion that children were highly malleable creatures and that a republican form of government required parents to instill a capacity for self-government in their children. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romantic poets, middle-class parents acquired the idea of childhood as a special stage of life, intimately connected with nature and purer and morally superior to adulthood. From the evangelicals, the middle class adopted the idea that the primary task of parenthood was to implant proper moral character in children and to insulate children from the corruptions of the adult world.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, middle-class parents began to embrace the idea that childrearing needed to become more scientific. The Child Study movement, through which teachers and mothers under the direction of psychologists identified a series of stages of childhood development, culminating with the "discovery" of adolescence as a psychologically turbulent period that followed puberty. The belief that scientific principles had not been properly applied to childrearing produced new kinds of childrearing manuals, of which the most influential was Dr. Luther Emmett Holt's *The Care and Feeding of Children*, first published in 1894. Holt emphasized rigid scheduling of feeding, bathing, sleeping, and bowel movements and advised mothers to guard vigilantly against germs and undue stimulation of infants. At a time when a well-adjusted adult was viewed as a creature of habit and self-control, he stressed the importance of imposing regular habits on infants. He discouraged mothers from kissing their babies and told them to ignore their crying and to break such habits as thumb-sucking.[14]

During the 1920s and 1930s, the field of child psychology exerted a growing influence on middle-class parenting. It provided a new language to describe children's emotional problems, such as sibling rivalry, phobias, maladjustment, and inferiority and Oedipus complexes; it also offered new insights into forms of parenting (based on such variables as demandingness or permissiveness), the stages and milestones of children's development, and the characteristics of children at particular ages (such as the "terrible twos," which was identified by Arnold Gesell, Frances L. Ilg, and Louise Bates Ames). The growing prosperity of the 1920s made the earlier emphasis on regularity and rigid self-control seem outmoded. A well-adjusted adult was now regarded as a more easy-going figure, capable of enjoying leisure. Rejecting the mechanistic and behaviorist notion that children's behavior could be molded by scientific control, popular dispensers of advice favored a more relaxed approach to childrearing, emphasizing the importance of meeting babies' emotional needs. The title of a 1936 book by pediatrician C. Anderson Aldrich—*Babies Are Human Beings*—summed up the new attitude.[15]

The Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II greatly intensified parental anxieties about childrearing. During the postwar era, there was an intense fear that faulty mothering caused lasting psychological problems in children. Leading psychologists such as Theodore Lidz, Irving Bieber, and Erik Erikson linked schizophrenia, homosexuality, and identity diffusion to mothers who displaced their frustrations and needs for independence onto their children. A major concern was that many boys, raised almost exclusively by women, failed to develop an appropriate sex role identity. In retrospect, it seems clear that an underlying source of anxiety lay in the fact that mothers were raising their children with an exclusivity and in an isolation unparalleled in American history.[16]

Since the early 1970s, parental anxieties have greatly increased both in scope and intensity. Many parents sought to protect children from every imaginable harm by babyproofing their homes, using car seats, and requiring bicycle helmets. Meanwhile, as more mothers joined the labor force, parents arranged more structured, supervised activities for their children. A variety of factors contributed to a surge in anxiety. As parents had fewer children, they invested more emotion in each child. An increase in professional expertise about children, coupled with a proliferation of research and advocacy organizations, media outlets, and government agencies responsible for children's health and safety made parents increasingly aware of threats to children's well-being and of ways to maximize their children's physical, social, and intellectual development. Unlike postwar parents, who wanted to produce normal children who fit in, middle-class parents now wanted to give their child a competitive edge. For many middle-class parents, fears of downward mobility and anxiety that they would not be able to pass on their status and class to their children, made them worry that their offspring would underperform academically, athletically, or socially. . . .

MORAL PANICS OVER CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Americans are great believers in progress in all areas but one. For more than three centuries, Americans have feared that the younger generation is going to hell in a handbasket. Today, many adults mistakenly believe that compared to their predecessors, kids today are less respectful and knowledgeable, and more alienated, sexually promiscuous, and violent. They fear that contemporary children are growing up too fast and losing their sense of innocent wonder at too young an age. Prematurely exposed to the pressures, stresses, and responsibilities of adult life, they fear that the young mimic adult sophistication, dress inappropriately, and experiment with alcohol, drugs, sex, and tobacco before they are emotionally and psychologically ready.

A belief in the decline of the younger generation is one of this country's oldest convictions. In 1657, a Puritan minister, Ezekiel Rogers, admitted: "I find the greatest trouble and grief about the rising generation. . . . Much ado I have with my own family . . . the young breed doth much afflict me." For more than three centuries, American adults have worried that children are growing ever more disobedient and disrespectful. But wistfulness about a golden age of childhood is invariably misleading. Nostalgia almost always represents a yearning not for the past as it really was but rather for fantasies about the past. In 1820, children constituted about half of the workers in early factories. As recently as the 1940s, one child in ten lived apart from both parents and fewer than half of all high school students graduated. We forget that over the past century, the introduction of every new form of entertainment has generated intense controversy over its impact on children, and that the anxiety over video games and the Internet are only the latest in a long line of supposed threats to children that includes movies, radio, and even comic books. The danger of nostalgia is that it creates unrealistic expectations, guilt, and anger.[17]

Ever since the Pilgrims departed for Plymouth in 1620, fearful that "their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and be corrupted" in the Old World, Americans have experienced repeated panics over the younger generation. Sometimes these panics were indeed about children, such as the worries over polio in the early 1950s. More often, however, children stand in for some other issue, and the panics are more metaphorical than representational, such as the panic over teenage pregnancy, youth violence, and declining academic achievement in the late 1970s and 1980s, which reflected pervasive fears about family breakdown, crime, drugs, and America's declining competitiveness in the world.[18]

ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Concern about the abuse of children has waxed and waned over the course of American history. The seventeenth-century Puritans were the first people in the Western world to make the physical abuse of a children a criminal offense, though their concern with family privacy and patriarchal authority meant that these statutes were rarely enforced. During the pre-Civil War decades, temperance reformers argued that curbs on alcohol would reduce wife beating and child abuse. The first organizations to combat child abuse, which appeared in the 1870s, were especially concerned about abuse in immigrant, destitute, and foster families.[19]

Over half a century ago, Alfred Kinsey's studies found rates of sexual abuse similar to those reported today. His interviews indicated that exhibitionists had exposed themselves in front of 12 percent of preadolescent girls and that 9 percent of the girls had had their genitals fondled. But it was his findings about premarital and extramarital sex that grabbed the public's attention, not the sexual abuse of its children. Not until the publication of an influential article on "The Battered Child Syndrome" in 1962 was child abuse finally identified as a social problem demanding a significant governmental response. Even in succeeding years, however, public consciousness about abuse has fluctuated widely. In 1986, nearly a third of adults identified abuse as one of the most serious problems facing children and youth; in a survey a decade later abuse went unmentioned.[20]

We quite rightly focus on the way that young people are physically at risk, whether through physical or sexual abuse, neglect, or economic vulnerability. But across American history, some of the gravest threats to the young have involved their psychological vulnerability. Even worse than the physical sufferings under slavery were the psychological scars enslavement left. Worse than toiling in factories was the hidden curriculum that working class children were inferior to their supposed social betters, suited for little more than routine, repetitious labor. As the historian Daniel Kline has persuasively argued, contemporary American society subjects the young to three forms of psychological violence that we tend to ignore. First, there is the violence of expectations in which children are pushed beyond their social, physical, and academic capabilities, largely as an expression of their parents' needs. Then there is the violence of labeling that diagnoses normal childish behavior (for example, normal childhood exuberance or interest in sex) as pathological. Further, there is the violence of representation, the exploitation of children and adolescents by advertisers, marketers, purveyors of popular culture, and politicians, who exploit parental anxieties as well as young peoples' desire to be stylish, independent, and defiant, and eroticize teenage and preadolescent girls.

There is a fourth form of psychological abuse that is perhaps the most unsettling of all: the objectification of childhood. This involves viewing children as objects to be shaped and molded for their own good. Compared to its predecessors, contemporary American society is much more controlling in an institutional and ideological sense. We expect children to conform to standards that few adults could meet. Meanwhile, as the baby boom generation ages, we inhabit an increasingly adult-oriented society, a society that has fewer "free" spaces for the young, a society that values youth primarily as service workers and consumers and gawks at them as sex objects.

For more than three centuries, America has considered itself to be a particularly child-centered society despite massive evidence to the contrary. Today, no other advanced country allows as many young people to grow up in poverty or without health care, nor does any other western society make so poor a provision for child care or for paid parental leave. Still, Americans think of themselves as a child-centered nation. This paradox is not new. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the United States developed a host of institutions for the young, ranging from the common school to the Sunday school, the orphanage, the house of refuge, and the reformatory, and eventually expanding to include the children's hospital, the juvenile court, and a wide variety of youth organizations. It was assumed that these institutions served children's interests, that they were caring, developmental, and educational. In practice, however, these institutions frequently proved to be primarily custodial and disciplinary. Indeed, many of the reforms that were supposed to help children were adopted partly because they served the adults' needs, interests, and convenience. The abolition of child labor removed competition from an overcrowded labor market. Age-grading not only made it much easier to control children within schools, it also divided the young into convenient market segments. One of the most serious challenges American society faces is to act on behalf of children's welfare rather than adults'.

The most important lesson that grows out of an understanding of the history of childhood is the simplest. While many fear that American society has changed too much, the sad fact is that it has changed too little. Americans have failed to adapt social institutions to the fact that the young mature more rapidly than they did in the past; that most mothers of preschoolers now participate in the paid workforce; and that a near majority of children will spend substantial parts of their childhood in a single-parent, cohabitating-parent, or stepparent household. How can we provide better care for the young, especially the one-sixth who are growing up in poverty? How can we better connect the worlds of adults and the young? How can we give the young more ways to demonstrate their growing competence and maturity? How can we tame a violence-laced, sex-saturated popular culture without undercutting a commitment to freedom and a respect for the free-floating world of fantasy? These are the questions we must confront as we navigate a new century of childhood.

Notes

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READING 23

Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life

Annette Lareau

There are many studies that tell us of the detrimental effects of poverty on children's lives, but it is less clear what the mechanisms are for the transmission of class advantage across generations.

I suggest that social class has an important impact on the cultural logic of childrearing (see Lareau 2003 for details). Middle-class parents, both white *and* black, appear to follow a cultural logic of childrearing that I call "concerted cultivation." They enroll their children in numerous age-specific organized activities that come to dominate family life and create enormous labor, particularly for mothers. Parents see these activities as transmitting important life skills to children. Middle-class parents also stress language use and the development of reasoning. Talking plays a crucial role in the disciplinary strategies of middle-class parents. This "cultivation" approach results in a frenetic pace for parents, creates a cult of individualism within the family, and emphasizes children's performance.

Among white and black working-class and poor families, childrearing strategies emphasize the "accomplishment of natural growth." These parents believe that as long as they provide love, food, and safety, their children will grow and thrive. They do not focus on developing the special talents of their individual children. Working-class and poor children have more free time and deeper and richer ties within their extended families than the middle-class children. Some participate in organized activities, but they do so for different reasons than their middle-class counterparts. Working-class and poor parents issue many more directives to their children and, in some households, place more emphasis on physical discipline than do middle-class parents.

The pattern of concerted cultivation, with its stress on individual repertoires of activities, reasoning, and questioning, encourages an *emerging sense of entitlement* in children. Of course, not all parents and children are equally assertive, but the pattern of questioning and intervening among the white and black middle-class parents in the study contrasts sharply with the definitions of how to be helpful and effective observed among the white and black working-class and poor families. The pattern of the accomplishment of natural growth, with its emphasis on child-initiated play, autonomy from adults, and directives, encourages an *emerging sense of constraint* [Table 23.1]. Members of these families, adults as well as children, tend to be deferential and outwardly accepting (with sporadic moments of resistance) in their interactions with professionals such as doctors and educators. At the same time, however, compared to their middle-class counterparts, the white and black working-class and poor families are more distrustful of professionals in institutions. These are differences with long-term consequences. In a historical moment where the dominant society privileges active, informed, assertive clients of health and educational services, the various strategies employed by children and parents are not equally valuable. In sum, differences in family life lie not only in the advantages parents are able to obtain for their children, but also in the skills being transmitted to children for negotiating their own life paths.

METHODOLOGY

Study Participants

The study is based on interviews and observations of children eight to ten years of age and their families. A team of graduate research assistants and I collected the data. The first phase involved observations in third-grade public school classrooms, mainly in a metropolitan area in the Northeast. The schools serve neighborhoods in a white suburban area and two urban locales—one a white working-class neighborhood and the other a nearby poor black neighborhood. About one-half of the children are white and about one-half are black. One child is interracial. The research assistants and I carried

TABLE 23.1 ***Argument of Unequal Childhoods: Class Differences in Childrearing***

	Childrearing Approach	
	Concerted Cultivation	*Accomplishment of Natural Growth*
Key Elements	Parent actively fosters and assesses child's talents, opinions, and skills	Parent cares for child and allows child to grow
Organization of Daily Life	*multiple child leisure activities orchestrated by adults	*child "hangs out" particularly with kin
Language Use	*reasoning/directives *child contestation of adult statements *extended negotiations between parents and child	*directives *rare for child to question or challenge adults *general acceptance by child of directives
Interventions in Institutions	*criticisms and interventions on behalf of child *training of child to take on this role	*dependence on institutions *sense of powerlessness and frustrations *conflict between childrearing practices at home and at school
Consequences	Emerging sense of entitlement on the part of the child	Emerging sense of constraint on the part of the child

out individual interviews (averaging two hours each) with all of the mothers and most of the fathers (or guardians) of 88 children, for a total of 137 interviews. We also observed children as they took part in organized activities in the communities surrounding the schools. The most intensive part of the research, however, involved home observations of 12 children and their families. Nine of the 12 families came from the classrooms I observed, but the boy and girl from the two black middle-class families and the boy from the poor white family came from other sites. Most observations and interviews took place between 1993 and 1995, but interviews were done as early as 1990 and as late as 1997. This chapter focuses primarily on the findings from the observations of these 12 families since the key themes discussed here surfaced during this part of the fieldwork. I do include some information from the larger study to provide a context for understanding the family observations. All names are pseudonyms.

Intensive Family Observations

The research assistants and I took turns visiting the participating families daily, for a total of about 20 visits in each home, often in the space of one month. The observations were not limited to the home. Fieldworkers followed children and parents as they took part in school activities, church services and events, organized play, kin visits, and medical appointments. Most field observations lasted about three hours; sometimes, depending on the event (e.g., an out-of-town funeral, a special extended family event, or a long shopping trip), they lasted much longer. In most cases, there was one overnight visit. We often carried tape recorders with us and used the audiotapes for reference in writing up field notes. Families were paid $350, usually at the end of the visits, for their participation.

A Note on Class

My purpose in undertaking the field observations was to develop an *intensive*, realistic portrait of family life. Although I deliberately focused on only 12 families, I wanted to compare children across gender and race lines. Adopting the fine-grained differentiation of categories characteristic of current neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian empirical studies was not tenable. My choice of class categories was further limited by the school populations at the sites I had selected. Very few of the students were children of employers or of self-employed workers. I decided to concentrate exclusively on those whose parents were employees. Various criteria have been proposed to differentiate within this heterogeneous group, but authority in the workplace and “credential barriers” are the two most commonly used. I assigned the families in the study to a working-class or middle-class category based on discussions with each of the employed adults. They provided extensive information about the work they did, the nature of the organization that employed them, and their educational credentials. I added a third category: families not involved in the labor market (a population traditionally excluded from social class groupings) because in the first school I studied, a substantial number of children were from households supported by public assistance. To ignore them would have restricted the scope of the study arbitrarily. The final sub-sample contained 4 middle-class, 4 working-class, and 4 poor families.

CHILDREN’S TIME USE

In our interviews and observations of white and black middle-class children, it was striking how busy they were with organized activities. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of middle-class children’s daily lives is a set of adult-run organized activities. Many children have three and four activities per week. In some families, every few days activities conflict, particularly when one season is ending and one is beginning. For example in the white middle-class family of the Tallingers, Garrett is on multiple soccer teams—the “A” traveling team of the private Forest soccer club and the Intercounty soccer team—he also has swim lessons, saxophone lessons at school, private piano lessons at home, and baseball and basketball. These organized activities provided a framework for children’s lives; other activities were sandwiched between them.

These activities create labor for parents. Indeed, the impact of children’s activities takes its toll on parents’ patience as well as their time. For example, on a June afternoon at the beginning of summer vacation, in a white-middle-class family, Mr. Tallinger comes home from work to take Garrett to his soccer game. Garrett is not ready to go, and his lackadaisical approach to getting ready irks his father:

> Don says, "Get your soccer stuff—you're going to a soccer game!" Garrett comes into the den with white short leggings on underneath a long green soccer shirt; he's number 16. He sits on an armchair catty-corner from the television and languidly watches the World Cup game. He slowly, abstractedly, pulls on shin guards, then long socks. His eyes are riveted to the TV screen. Don comes in: "Go get your other stuff." Garrett says he can't find his shorts. Don: "Did you look in your drawer?" Garrett nods. . . . He gets up to look for his shorts, comes back into the den a few minutes later. I ask, "Any luck yet?" Garrett shakes his head. Don is rustling around elsewhere in the house. Don comes in, says to Garrett, "Well, Garrett, aren't you wearing shoes?" (Don leaves and returns a short time later): "Garrett, we HAVE to go! Move! We're late!" He says this shortly, abruptly. He comes back in a minute and drops Garrett's shiny green shorts on his lap without a word.

This pressured search for a pair of shiny green soccer shorts is a typical event in the Tallinger household. Also typical is the solution—a parent ultimately finds the missing object, while continuing to prod the child to hurry. The fact that today's frenzied schedule will be matched or exceeded by the next day's is also par:

> Don: (describing their day on Saturday) Tomorrow is really nuts. We have a soccer game, then a baseball game, then another soccer game.

This steady schedule of activity—that none of the middle-class parents reported having when they were a similar age—was not universal. Indeed, while we searched for a middle-class child who did not have a single organized activity we could not find one, but in working-class and poor homes, organized activities were much less common and there were many children who did not have any. Many children "hung out." Television and video games are a major source of entertainment but outdoor play can trump either of these. No advanced planning, no telephone calls, no consultations between mothers, no drop-offs or pickups—no particular effort at all—is required to launch an activity. For instance, one afternoon, in a black working-class family, Shannon (in 7th grade) and Tyrec (in 4th grade) walk out their front door to the curb of the small, narrow street their house faces. Shannon begins playing a game with a ball; she soon has company:

> (Two boys from the neighborhood walk up.) Shannon is throwing the small ball against the side of the row house. Tyrec joins in the game with her. As they throw the ball against the wall, they say things they must do with the ball. It went something like this: Johnny Crow wanted to know. . . . (bounces ball against the wall), touch your knee (bounce), touch your toe (bounce), touch the ground (bounce), under the knee (bounce), turn around (bounce). Shannon and Tyrec played about four rounds.

Unexpected events produce hilarity:

> At one point Shannon accidentally threw the ball and it bounced off of Tyrec's head. All the kids laughed; then Tyrec, who had the ball, went chasing after Shannon. It was a close, fun moment—lots of laughter, eye contact, giggling, chasing.

Soon a different game evolves. Tyrec is on restriction. He is supposed to remain inside the house all day. So, when he thinks he has taught a glimpse of his mom returning home from work, he dashes inside. He reappears as soon as he realizes that it was a false alarm. The neighborhood children begin an informal game of baiting him:

> The kids keep teasing Tyrec that his mom's coming—which sends him scurrying just inside the door, peering out of the screen door. This game is enacted about six times. Tyrec also chases Shannon around the street, trying to get the ball from her. A few times Shannon tells Tyrec that he'd better "get inside"; he ignores her. Then, at 6:50 [P.M.] Ken (a friend of Tyrec's) says, "There's your mom!" Tyrec scoots inside, then, says, "Oh, man. You were serious this time."

Informal, impromptu outdoor play is common in Tyrec's neighborhood. A group of boys approximately his age, regularly numbering four or five but sometimes reaching as many as ten, play ball games together on the street, walk to the store to get treats, watch television at each other's homes, and generally hang out together.

LANGUAGE USE

In addition to differences by social class in time use, we also observed differences in language use in the home. As others have noted (Bernstein, 1971; Heath, 1983) middle-class parents used more reasoning in their speech with children while working-class and poor parents used more directives. For example, in observations of the African American home of Alex Williams, whose father was a trial lawyer and mother was a high level corporate executive, we found that the Williamses and other middle-class parents use language frequently, pleasurably, and instrumentally. Their children do likewise. For example, one January evening, Alexander is stumped by a homework assignment to write five riddles. He sits at the dinner table in the kitchen with his mother and a fieldworker. Mr. Williams is at the sink, washing the dinner dishes. He has his back to the group at the dinner table. Without turning around, he says to Alex, "Why don't you go upstairs to the third floor and get one those books and see if there is a riddle in there?"

> Alex [says] smiling, "Yeah. That's a good idea! I'll go upstairs and copy one from out of the book." Terry turns around with a dish in hand, "That was a joke—not a valid suggestion. That is not an option." He smiled as he turned back around to the sink. Christina says, looking at Alex: "There is a word for that you know, plagiarism." Terry says (not turning around), "Someone can sue you for plagiarizing. Did you know that?" Alex: "That's only if it is copyrighted." They all begin talking at once.

Here we see Alex cheerfully (though gently) goading his father by pretending to misunderstand the verbal instruction to consult a book for help. Mr. Williams dutifully rises to the bait. Ms. Williams reshapes this movement of lightheartedness by introducing a new word into Alexander's vocabulary. Mr. Williams goes one step further by connecting the new word to a legal consequence. Alex upstages them both. He demonstrates that he is already familiar with the general idea of plagiarism and that he understands the concept of copyright, as well.

In marked contrast to working-class and poor parents, however, even when the Williamses issue directives, they often include explanations for their orders. Here, Ms. Williams is reminding her son to pay attention to his teacher:

> I want you to play close attention to Mrs. Scott when you are developing your film. Those chemicals are very dangerous. Don't play around in the classroom. You could get that stuff in someone's eye. And if you swallow it, you could die.

Alex chooses to ignore the directive in favor of instructing his misinformed mother:

> Alex corrects her, "Mrs. Scott told us that we wouldn't die if we swallowed it. But we would get very sick and would have to get our stomach pumped." Christina does not follow the argument any further. She simply reiterates that he should be careful.

Possibly because the issue is safety, Ms. Williams does not encourage Alex to elaborate here, as she would be likely to do if the topic were less charged. Instead, she restates her directive and thus underscores her expectation that Alex will do as she asks.

Although Mr. and Ms. Williams disagreed on elements of how training in race relations should be implemented, they both recognized that their racial and ethnic identity profoundly shaped their and their son's everyday experiences. They were well aware of the potential for Alexander to be exposed to racial injustice, and they went to great lengths to try to protect their son from racial insults and other forms of discrimination. Nevertheless, race did not appear to shape the dominant cultural logic of childrearing in Alexander's family or in other families in the study. All of the middle-class families engaged in extensive reasoning with their children, asking questions, probing assertions, and listening to answers. Similar patterns appeared in interviews and observations with other African American middle-class families.

A different pattern appeared in working-class and poor homes where there was simply less verbal speech than we observed in middle-class homes. There was also less speech between parents and children, a finding noted by other observational studies (Hart and Risley, 1995). Moreover, interspersed with intermittent talk are adult-issued directives. Children are told to do certain things (e.g., shower, take out the garbage) and not to do others (e.g., curse, talk back). In an African American home of a family living on public assistance in public housing, Ms. McAllister uses one-word directives to coordinate the use of the single bathroom. There are almost always at least four children in the apartment and often seven, plus Ms. McAllister and other adults. Ms. McAllister sends the children to wash up by pointing to a child, saying, "Bathroom," and handing him or her a washcloth. Wordlessly, the designated child gets up and goes to the bathroom to take a shower.

Children usually do what adults ask of them. We did not observe whining or protests, even when adults assign time-consuming tasks, such as the hour-long process of hair-braiding Lori McAllister is told to do for the four-year-old daughter of Aunt Dara's friend Charmaine:

> Someone tells Lori, "Go do [Tyneshia's] hair for camp." Without saying anything, Lori gets up and goes inside and takes the little girl with her. They head for the couch near the

> television; Lori sits on the couch and the girl sits on the floor. [Tyneshia] sits quietly for about an hour, with her head tilted, while Lori carefully does a multitude of braids.

Lori's silent obedience is typical. Generally, children perform requests without comment. For example, at dinner one night, after Harold McAllister complains he doesn't like spinach, his mother directs him to finish it anyway:

> Mom yells (loudly) at him to eat: "EAT! FINISH THE SPINACH!" (No response. Harold is at the table, dawdling.) Guion and Runako and Alexis finish eating and leave. I finish with Harold; he eats his spinach. He leaves all his yams.

The verbal world of Harold McAllister and other poor and working-class children offers some important advantages as well as costs. Compared to middle-class children we observed, Harold is more respectful towards adults in his family. In this setting, there are clear boundaries between adults and children. Adults feel comfortable issuing directives to children, which children comply with immediately. Some of the directives that adults issue center on obligations of children to others in the family ("don't beat on Guion" or "go do [her] hair for camp"). One consequence of this is that Harold, despite occasional tiffs, is much nicer to his sister (and his cousins) than the siblings we observed in middle-class homes. The use of directives and the pattern of silent compliance are not universal in Harold's life. In his interactions with peers, for example on the basketball "court," Harold's verbal displays are distinctively different than inside the household, with elaborated and embellished discourse. Nevertheless, there is a striking difference in linguistic interaction between adults and children in poor and working-class families when compared to that observed in the home of Alexander Williams. Ms. McAllister has the benefit of being able to issue directives without having to justify their decisions at every moment. This can make childrearing somewhat less tiring.

Another advantage is that Harold has more autonomy than middle-class children in making important decisions in daily life. As a child, he controls his leisure schedule. His basketball games are impromptu and allow him to develop important skills and talents. He is resourceful. He appears less exhausted than ten-year-old Alexander. In addition, he has important social competencies, including his deftness in negotiating the "code of the street."[1] His mother has stressed these skills in her upbringing, as she impresses upon her children the importance of "not paying no mind" to others, including drunks and drug dealers who hang out in the neighborhoods which Harold and Alexis negotiate.

Still, in the world of schools, health care facilities, and other institutional settings, these valuable skills do not translate into the same advantages as the reasoning skills emphasized in the home of Alexander Williams and other middle-class children. Compared to Alexander Williams, Harold does not gain the development of a large vocabulary, an increase of his knowledge of science and politics, a set of tools to customize situations outside the home to maximize his advantage, and instruction in how to defend his argument with evidence. His knowledge of words, which might appear, for example, on future SAT tests, is not continually stressed at home.

In these areas, the lack of advantage is *not* connected to the intrinsic value of the McAllister family life or the use of directives at home. Indeed, one can argue raising children who are polite and respectful children and do not whine, needle, or badger their parents is a highly laudable childrearing goal. Deep and abiding ties with kinship groups are also, one might further argue, important. Rather, it is the specific ways that institutions function that ends up conveying advantages to middle-class children. In their standards, these institutions also permit, and even demand, active parent involvement. In this way as well, middle-class children often gain an advantage.

INTERVENTION IN INSTITUTIONS

Children do not live their lives inside of the home. Instead, they are legally required to go to school, they go to the doctor, and many are involved in church and other adult-organized activities. In children's institutional lives, we found differences by social class in how mothers monitored children's institutional experiences. While in working-class and poor families children are granted autonomy to make their own way in organizations, in the middle-class homes, most aspects of the children's lives are subject to their mother's *ongoing* scrutiny.

For example in an African American middle-class home, where both parents are college graduates and Ms. Marshall is a computer worker and her husband a civil servant, their two daughters have a hectic schedule of organized activities including gymnastics for Stacey and basketball for Fern. When Ms. Marshall becomes aware of a problem, she moves quickly, drawing on her work and professional skills and experiences. She displays tremendous assertiveness, doggedness, and, in some cases, effectiveness in pressing institutions to recognize her daughters' individualized needs. Stacey's mother's proactive stance reflects her belief that she has a duty to intervene in situations where she perceives that her daughter's needs are not being met. This perceived responsibility applies across all areas of her children's lives. She is no more (or less) diligent with regard to Stacey and Fern's leisure activities than she is with regard to their experiences in school or church or the doctor's office. This is clear in the way she handles Stacey's transition from her township gymnastics classes to the private classes at an elite private gymnastic program at Wright's.

Ms. Marshall describes Stacey's first session at the club as rocky:

> The girls were not warm. And these were little . . . eight and nine year old kids. You know, they weren't welcoming her the first night. It was kinda like eyeing each other, to see, you know, "Can you do this? Can you do that?"

More importantly, Ms. Marshall reported that the instructor is brusque, critical and not friendly toward Stacey. Ms. Marshall cannot hear what was being said, but she could see the interactions through a window. A key problem is that because her previous instructor had not used the professional jargon for gymnastic moves, Stacey does not know these terms. When the class ends and she walks out, she is visibly upset. Her mother's reaction is a common one among middle-class parents: She does not remind her daughter that in life one has to adjust, that she will need to work even harder, or that there is nothing to be done. Instead, Ms. Marshall focuses on Tina, the instructor, as the source of the problem:

> We sat in the car for a minute and I said, "Look, Stac," I said. She said, "I-I," and she started crying. I said, "You wait here." The instructor had come to the door, Tina. So I went to her and I said, "Look." I said, "Is there a problem?" She said, "Aww . . . she'll be fine. She just needs to work on certain things." Blah-blah-blah. And I said, "She's really upset. She said you-you-you [were] pretty much correcting just about everything." And [Tina] said, "Well, she's got—she's gotta learn the terminology."

Ms. Marshall acknowledges that Stacey isn't familiar with specialized and technical gymnastics terms. Nonetheless, she continues to defend her daughter:

> I do remember, I said to her, I said, "Look, maybe it's not all the student." You know, I just left it like that. That, you know, sometimes teaching, learning and teaching, is a two-way proposition as far as I'm concerned. And sometimes teachers have to learn how to, you know, meet the needs of the kid. Her style, her immediate style was not accommodating to—to Stacey.

Here Ms. Marshall is asserting the legitimacy of an individualized approach to instruction. She frames her opening remark as a question ("Is there a problem?"). Her purpose, however, is to alert the instructor to the negative impact she has had on Stacey ("She's really upset."). Although her criticism is indirect ("Maybe it's not all the student . . ."), Ms. Marshall makes it clear that she expects her daughter to be treated differently in the future. In this case, Stacey does not hear what her mother says, but she knows that her wishes and feelings are being transmitted to the instructor in a way that she could not do herself.

Although parents were equally concerned about their children's happiness, in working-class and poor homes we observed different patterns of oversight for children's institutional activities. For example in the white working-class home of Wendy Driver. Wendy's mother does not nurture her daughter's language development like Alexander Williams' mother does her son's. She does not attempt to draw Wendy out or follow up on new information when Wendy introduces the term mortal sin while the family is sitting around watching television. But, just like Ms. Williams, Ms. Driver cares very much about her child and just like middle-class parents she wants to help her daughter succeed. Ms. Driver keeps a close and careful eye on her Wendy's schooling. She knows that Wendy is having problems in school. Ms. Driver immediately signs and returns each form Wendy brings home from school and reminds her to turn the papers in to her teacher.

Wendy is "being tested" as part of an ongoing effort to determine why she has difficulties with spelling, reading, and related language-based activities. Her mother welcomes these official efforts but she did not request them. Unlike the middle-class mothers we observed, who asked teachers for detailed information about every aspect of their children's classroom performance and relentlessly pursued information and assessments outside of school as well, Ms. Driver seems content with only a vague notion of her daughter's learning disabilities. This attitude contrasts starkly with that of Stacey Marshall's mother, for example. In discussing Stacey's classroom experiences with fieldworkers, Ms. Marshall routinely described her daughter's academic strengths and weaknesses in detail. Ms. Driver never mentions that Wendy is doing grade-level work in math but is reading at a level a full three years below her grade. Her description is vague:

> She's having problems. . . . They had a special teacher come in and see if they could find out what the problem is. She has a reading problem, but they haven't put their finger on it yet, so she's been through all kinds of special teachers and testing and everything. She goes to Special Ed, I think it's two classes a day . . . I'm not one hundred percent sure—for her reading. It's very difficult for her to read what's on paper. But then—she can remember things. But not everything. It's like she has a puzzle up there. And we've tried, well, they've tried a lot of things. They just haven't put their finger on it yet.

Wendy's teachers uniformly praise her mother as "supportive" and describe her as "very loving," but they are disappointed in Ms. Driver's failure to take a more active, interventionist role in Wendy's education, especially given the formidable nature of her daughter's learning problems. From Ms. Driver's perspective, however, being actively supportive means doing whatever the teachers tell her to do.

> Whatever they would suggest, I would do. They suggested she go to the eye doctor, so I did that. And they checked her and said there was nothing wrong there.

Similarly, she monitors Wendy's homework and supports her efforts to read:

> We listen to her read. We help her with her homework. So she has more attention here in a smaller household than it was when I lived with my parents. So, we're trying to help her out more, which I think is helping. And with the two [special education] classes a day at the school, instead of one like last year, she's learning a lot from that. So, we're just hoping it takes time and that she'll just snap out of it.

But Ms. Driver clearly does not have an *independent* understanding of the nature or degree of Wendy's limitations, perhaps because she is unfamiliar with the kind of terms the educators use to describe her daughter's needs (e.g., a limited "sight vocabulary," underdeveloped "language arts skills"). Perhaps, too, her confidence in the school staff makes it easier for her to leave "the details" to them: "Ms. Morton, she's great. She's worked with us for different testing and stuff." Ms. Driver depends on the school staff's expertise to assess the situation and then share the information with her:

> I think they just want to keep it in the school till now. And when they get to a point where they can't figure out what it is, and then I guess they'll send me somewhere else. . . .

Her mother is not alarmed, because "the school" has told her not to worry about Wendy's grades:

> Her report card—as long as it's not spelling and reading—spelling and reading are like F's. And they keep telling me not to worry, because she's in the Special Ed class. But besides that, she does good. I have no behavior problems with her at all.

Ms. Driver wants the best possible outcome for her daughter and she does not know how to achieve that goal without relying heavily on Wendy's teachers:

> I wouldn't even know where to start going. On the radio there was something for children having problems reading and this and that, call. And I suggested it to a couple different people, and they were like, wait a second, it's only to get you there and you'll end up paying an arm and a leg. So I said to my mom, "No, I'm going to wait until the first report card and go up and talk to them up there."

Thus, in looking for the source of Ms. Driver's deference toward educators, the answers don't seem to lie in her having either a shy personality or underdeveloped mothering skills. To understand why Wendy's mother is accepting where Stacey Marshall's mother would be aggressive, it is more useful to focus on social class position, both in terms of how class shapes worldviews and how class affects economic and educational resources. Ms. Driver understands her role in her daughter's education as involving a different set of responsibilities from those perceived by middle-class mothers. She responds to contacts from the school—such as invitations to the two annual parent-teacher conferences—but she does not initiate them. She views Wendy's school life as a separate realm, and one in which she, as a parent, is only an infrequent visitor. Ms. Driver expects that the teachers will teach and her daughter will learn and that, under normal circumstances, neither requires any additional help from her as a parent. If problems arise, she presumes that Wendy will tell her; or, if the issue is serious, the school will contact her. But what Ms. Driver fails to understand, is that the educators expect her to take on a pattern of "concerted cultivation" where she actively monitors and intervenes in her child's schooling. The teachers asked for a complicated mixture of deference and engagement from parents; they were disappointed when they did not get it.

CONCLUSIONS

I have stressed how social class dynamics are woven into the texture and rhythm of children and parents' daily lives. Class position influences critical aspects of family life: time use, language use, and kin ties. Working-class and middle-class mothers may express beliefs that reflect a similar notion of "intensive mothering," but their behavior is quite different. For that reason, I have described sets of paired beliefs and actions as a "cultural logic" of childrearing. When children and parents move outside the home into the world of social institutions, they find that these cultural practices are not given equal value. There are signs that middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions.

Note

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READING 24

How Families Still Matter: A Longitudinal Study of Youth in Two Generations

Vern L. Bengston, Timothy J. Biblarz,
and Robert E. L. Roberts

How Families Still Matter casts doubt on much conventional wisdom about family decline during the last decades of the twentieth century. Generation X youth, who came of age in the 1990s, have been described as a "generation at risk" because they are the first cohort to have grown up in families with very high rates of divorce, "fatherlessness," and working mothers. There is concern that a decrease in family "togetherness" has spawned a generation of "slackers," because their achievements have appeared, at least in some studies, lower than that of previous generations. Authors Bengtson, Biblarz, and Roberts examine this claim and the evidence for and against the general proposition often advanced by politicians and pundits that the American family is at risk and declining in influence.

The authors draw from one of the longest-running longitudinal studies of families in the world—the Longitudinal Study of Generations, conducted at the University of Southern California—to discover whether parents are really less critical in shaping the life orientations and achievements of youth than they were a generation ago. Using survey data collected from as early as 1971, they compare the influence of parents (on self-confidence, values, and levels of achievement) on the Baby Boomer generation with that of Baby Boomer parents on their own Generation X children. The findings will be surprising to many readers.

The authors find, first, that the Generation X youth display higher, not lower, achievement orientations than did their Baby Boomer parents when they were young almost thirty years earlier. This is especially true for Generation X women, who have far outpaced their mothers' educational and occupational aspirations and are more ambitious than their male counterparts. Second, the strength of parents' influence on life choices and achievement is significant—and at about the same level—as that of the Baby Boomers' parents. Third, the negative effect of parental divorce on Generation X youths' achievement orientations has been small—certainly much lower than the "divorce is disaster" literature would predict. Maternal employment has had no impact on achievement orientations. Finally, while Generation X members' education and career aspirations and self-esteem are higher than that of their parents and youth, the data show similar values about individualism and humanism across generations. These findings indicate the resilience of family intergenerational bonds in the context of massive social changes since the 1960s. They suggest that in the twenty-first century, families and cross-generational connections will still be vitally important in influencing youths' values, choices, and their life course. The authors offer three new hypotheses about the processes that may be underlying their findings: (1) extended kin relations—particularly the role of grandparents—are more important than ever; (2) today's two-parent families may be more successful than ever before; and (3) through ups and downs, most mothers and fathers seem to continue to find ways to take good care of their children.

First, children's *feelings of solidarity and closeness* with their parents—particularly their mothers—were high in both generations, even though Generation Xers in childhood experienced rates of family disruption and maternal employment that were never experienced by their Baby Boomer parents. Solidarity with parents, in turn, was among the strongest positive predictors of youths' self-esteem and aspirations both today (Generation Xers) and in the previous generation (Baby Boomers).

Second, the effects of *parental divorce* on younger generations were not as significant as we had expected. Our evidence shows that three core dimensions of children's identity—aspirations, self-esteem, and values—are not strongly affected by the rise in divorce rate over the past thirty years. Most important, the experience of parental divorce did not erode the self-confidence of Generation X youth. Both Generation X youth who experienced parental divorce and those from traditional families had high and roughly equivalent levels of self-esteem. The late-adolescent Generation Xers who experienced their parents' divorce did have slightly lower aspirations than their Generation X counterparts whose parents did not divorce. While Generation X youth who experienced parental divorce were more materialistic than those who did not, they also held more collectivistic and less individualistic value orientations.

Third, the impact of *maternal employment* on child well-being was also not as significant as we had expected; in fact, it was negligible. One of our most important findings is that across two generations and twenty-six years, mothers' labor force participation did not harm children's status aspirations, self-esteem, or prosocial value orientations, and in some cases maternal employment proved beneficial to children (e.g., in the case of sons, maternal employment was associated with heightened self-esteem). Overall, it made little difference whether mothers worked or stayed home.

Fourth, when we examined parental influences on youths' aspirations, self-esteem, and values—the measure of the family's success in the socialization of its children—we found that *parents*' ability to *influence their children has not declined over recent generations.*

Contrary to the hypothesis of family decline, our data indicate that the importance of parental influences for the self-esteem, aspirations, and values of their children has not diminished across generations.

Fifth, we found that *intergenerational transmission processes* are still working effectively to shape achievement orientations of youth. For one thing, these data indicate that *children learn from and model themselves after their parents* in occupational and educational aspirations and values. Children hold for themselves the values they learned from parents, such as high individualism or low materialism. For another, these data indicate the crucial role of *parental affirmation and intergenerational solidarity* in the transmission process. Children who are close to their parents have higher self-esteem and educational and occupational aspirations than those who are not close. Finally, *status inheritance* processes are important in achievement orientations. The social standing and resources of families continue to be crucial predictors of what youth come to aspire for themselves. Parental education and occupational status has a strong resemblance to the aspirations of youth in both generations—the Gen Xers as well as the Baby Boomers. Moreover, parental status and resources had the same effect on children from divorced families as they did in two-parent, long-married families.

In this study we compared the magnitude and direction of intergenerational influences on child outcomes, and the average child outcomes themselves, among families who were raising children in very different social milieus (the 1950s and 1960s in the case of our G2/G3 parent/child dyads, and the 1980s and 1990s in the case of our G3/G4 dyads), and in very different kinds of family structures and family divisions of labor over time. Our data indicate more continuity than contrast in the processes of intergenerational transmission and in the course of generational progress. With some exceptions, our families seem to be able to do well by their children, even under a variety of more or less taxing and challenging conditions. The contemporary families in our analysis, changed in many ways from their predecessors by high divorce rates and the shifting market and nonmarket responsibilities of parents, have been relatively successful in raising a generation of youth that appears well equipped to face the challenges of adulthood.

To sum up, our results demonstrate the continuing influence and enduring importance of families across recent generations, despite the effects of divorce, alternative family forms, and changing gender roles on family commitments and functions. The family is still fulfilling its basic task, the socialization of children, but in a world very different from that of the late 1950s. Its forms are more fluid, its relationship ties are both ascribed and chosen. Traditional "nuclear" family forms are no longer the norm in American society. Marriages, having evolved from "institutional" to "companionate" relationships based largely on bonds of affection, are more fragile. But despite this, family influences across generations are strong, and families still matter—much more than advocates of the family decline hypothesis would admit.

WHY FAMILIES STILL MATTER

These findings about *how* families are important raise the question of *why*. This is particularly relevant in light of other research and family decline theory predicting that recent social trends and changes in the family have significantly diminished intergenerational transmission processes and negatively affected child outcomes. Parental divorce, for example, has been shown to create emotional distress, behavioral or school difficulties and related problems for children in the short term (Dawson 1991; Kline, Johnson, and Tschann 1991) and over several decades (according to Wallerstein et al. 2000). The modal pattern is that children suffer substantial economic loss following divorce (since children most often reside with their mothers), and that children's relationships with nonresidential fathers decline over time following divorce. The effects of maternal employment on children should also be negative following the "family decline" hypothesis, because employment involves mothers' reallocation of time away from childrearing, and mothers' time investments in children have been shown to be central for many aspects of children's development.

Below we offer three propositions about why families still matter, why Generation X children have done well, and why divorce and maternal employment have not had (at least in our sample) the severe detrimental effects on children predicted by some commentators and researchers. We set forth these propositions as important issues to be tested in future research.

> **Proposition 1:** Families are adapting by expanding support across generations. There is increasing interdependence and exchange across several generations of family members; this expansion has protected and enhanced the well-being of new generations of children.
>
> **Proposition 2:** Nondivorced, two-parent families are more successful than their counterparts a generation ago. Relational processes within two-parent families are changing over time in ways that have enhanced the well-being of new generations of children.
>
> **Proposition 3:** Maternal investment in children has not declined over generations. Despite growth in the rate of labor force participation among mothers, maternal investment in children has remained high and constant over time, and this has assured a generally positive level of well-being among new generations of children.

In a sense, these propositions summarize our major findings. But our data are limited and the story they tell is incomplete. We present the propositions as issues to be tested in further research, using larger and nationally representative samples.

Proposition 1: Families Are Adapting by Expanding Support across Generations

The apparent resiliency of Generation X children who have experienced recent changes in family structure and roles may be accounted for by the adaptive and compensatory processes that their families have drawn on, particularly in times of need. These processes may often involve expanding the family to bring additional parent-like figures and family members into the lives of children. African American families, for example, have had a long history of adaptation to family disruption induced (in fact, often forced) by slavery, segregation, employment discrimination, and other manifestations of racism. Research like Hill's (1999) *The Strengths of African American Families* (also Johnson 1999;

Oates 1999) has emphasized the resilient capacities of African American families to care and provide for children under difficult conditions (such as fatherlessness) by forming extended and fictive kin relations. In father-absent African American families historically, the "fatherly" role was often played by someone other than a biological father, and aunts, uncles, and grandparents (biologically or socially related) have been instrumental in the rearing of children.

An important direction for further family research and theory involves the application of this "families adapt by extending kin" concept to other kinds of families, particularly those who have experienced disruptive events such as divorce. The relationships that children and parents have with their grandparents following divorce, in particular, should be carefully explored (Bengtson 2001). Emotional closeness and support from grandparents have been shown to compensate for or mitigate divorce-related family processes and custodial-parent role overload that can have a negative impact on the well-being of both adult children and grandchildren (Johnson and Barer 1987; Silverstein, Giarrusso, and Bengtson 1998). For example, greater grandparental involvement with children could compensate for the temporary declines in mothers' attention and time with her children immediately following divorce. In this situation, children would continue to receive the adult-family-member time investment that is so essential to their development. This type of compensation may ameliorate the risk of negative outcomes for today's children in divorced families.

Grandparental involvement in postdivorce families is an especially important potential source of social support (Johnson 2000; Johnson and Barer 1987) because—unlike day-care centers, after-school programs, babysitters, or nannies—grandparents typically have a high level of concern for the interests of their children and grandchildren. Grandparents today bring other strengths to their family roles. Grandparents are considerably more financially secure than they were just twenty-five years ago; they have a higher standard of living (Treas 1995). At the same time, grandparents today are healthier and much more active, with many more years ahead of them after retirement. Grandparents today, as they age, can expect fewer years with chronic illnesses and limiting disabilities than previous generations (Hayward and Heron 1999). These positive trends may make grandparent/grandchildren relationships far more important and rewarding than ever before.

In the context of the diversity of family conditions that exist today, there are pressures and opportunities to shift more familial responsibility to members of the extended family (Bengtson 2001). Contemporary families may be moving beyond the confines of the shrinking nuclear family to encompass the broader support and emotional resources of multigenerational families, relationships that are both ascribed and created, where (as Robert Frost noted), ". . . when you have to go there . . . they have to take you in." And increasingly they do. This can be seen in the growing incidence of grandparents raising grandchildren, where the middle generations' marriages dissolve, or where there are other difficulties (such as drug addiction) that interfere with the younger adults' ability to parent. To the extent that traditional nuclear families weaken or transform themselves, the strengths and resources of the multigenerational family may take on new importance.

At the same time that exchange, dependence, and support among multiple generations of family members are becoming increasingly important, so, too, are patterns of intergenerational exchange, dependence, and support over the life course. In the new economic reality of postindustrialism, for example, many midlife parents still have their young adult children at home or at school. Generation X young adults will be in college far longer on average than their Baby Boomer parents were, extending the period of economic dependence on the resources of their parents. This extended period of intergenerational exchange and support tends to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between parents and children as well (Bengtson, Rosenthal, and Burton 1995; Elder 1994). In an unexpected way, these examples of "prolonged parenting" by those now at midlife (that is, Baby Boomers) may reflect, in practice, the shift that we found in this study toward more collectivistic values. Especially in light of the ways in which families are diversifying, we believe that multi- and intergenerational exchange and support among family members over the life course of children must become an important object of study in examining consequences for children of recent changes in the family.

Proposition 2: Today's Nondivorced, Two-Parent Families Are More Successful Than Their Counterparts a Generation Ago

A major finding in our study was the discovery of strengths in a family type that is typically used as a reference category but not as often explored in its own right: the two-biological parent family of the 1990s and beyond. The aspirations, self-esteem, and values of the Generation Xers from these families were significantly more positive than those of comparable two-parent families in the previous generation (Baby Boomer youth). In several respects, today's two-parent families seem to be more effective in the socialization of their children than yesterday's two-parent families.

It is likely these two-parent families are to some extent a select group, as less happily married or dysfunctional parents of Generation Xers would have already divorced (unlike similarly predisposed marital partners of earlier generations, who would have found divorce much more difficult to accomplish). Nevertheless, uncovering how today's two-parent families have been successful in navigating the postmodern social structure—balancing work and home, negotiating divisions of labor, and finding individual self-fulfillment while at the same time maintaining a high level of investment in children—may reveal family processes of adaptation that can be of use to all kinds of families. Once uncovered and described, these processes can also be compared—for similarity and difference—with those occurring in the new extended families that have accompanied family diversification.

There are several important questions that research on today's two-parent, long-married families should pursue. For example, are these families characterized by fairly traditional gender-based divisions of labor, or do these parents share a more equitable division of housework, childcare, paid employment, and decision-making? The uniquely high levels of humanistic and collectivistic values among Generation Xers from two-parent families in our study may be related to a greater egalitarianism between still-married mothers and fathers in the Baby Boom generation. Traditionally, women in the United States have married men who were better educated than themselves. Improvement in women's educational attainment over the past thirty years has, for the first time, reversed this trend. In fact, since 1980 marriages in which women were better educated than their husbands have become more likely than marriages in which men were better educated than their wives (Qian 1998). Women's greater education and economic power within marriage may mean that they participate in household decision-making about childrearing, consumption, and other life choices not only in their role as wives and mothers but as educational equals and breadwinners. This change within marriages may have served children well. We found, for example, that among two-biological-parent families, mother/child bonds enhanced the values and self-esteem of Generation X youth more than they did those of the previous generation.

The role of "absentee" fathers in a context of high divorce has been much investigated. We have found, consistent with other research (Amato 1994; Amato and Keith 1991), that divorced fathers have become increasingly disadvantaged in terms of their emotional bonds with their young adult children when compared with mothers. Parental divorce has reduced the ability of Baby Boomer fathers to influence their Generation X children's aspirations, self-esteem, and prosocial values, while mother/child affective bonds and maternal influence have tended to remain high. Perhaps this is a reflection of a broader cultural shift toward the "feminization of kinship" relations that has been observed by other family researchers (Fry 1995; Hagestad 1986; Rossi and Rossi 1990).

While evidence has accumulated showing decline in paternal investment in children among divorced dads, some striking evidence—particularly that assembled and analyzed by Bianchi (2000)—has also shown that today's married fathers are exhibiting an unprecedented, high level of involvement with their children. According to time diary studies between 1965 and 1998, fathers' time spent with children grew from about 25 percent to fully two-thirds the amount of time that mothers spent with children. The greater involvement of today's fathers within two-parent family contexts may be contributing to the high levels of self-esteem and ambition that we observed in the aggregate among Generation X youth. More generally, good parenting on the part of fathers—custodial or noncustodial—has been shown to enhance many dimensions of children's well-being (Lamb 1997).

We have suggested that recent demographic trends (e.g., increased longevity and active life expectancy) may have intersected with other demographic trends (growth in nonmarital fertility, divorce, remarriage, and the labor force participation of mothers) to facilitate the growth of new kinds of extended families in the United States. The numbers and kinds of multigenerational family members available to families and children have certainly increased (Bengtson 2001). The support functions served by multigenerational family members may also have increased, accordingly. This kind of family expansion appears adaptive; that is, under diverse and potentially disruptive conditions, it may be a way that families care for their children. It may also lie behind many of the findings of this study: that families of all kinds still matter for children.

We have also proposed that, over time, processes within two-biological-parent families have shifted in ways that benefit children. We believe that an intriguing and important next step is to explore potential similarities and differences in processes that occur in these new-form two-parent families, on the one hand, and these new-form extended families, on the other. For many families (probably an increasing number), close multigenerational ties are adaptive and very much needed in a fast-changing world. The adaptive strengths evolving from these family arrangements—including, perhaps, shared parenting, authoritative parenting practices (not just necessarily by parents, but also by additional parent-like figures), egalitarian household arrangements, more collectivistic and humanistic value orientations—may parallel to some extent what is occurring in today's two-parent families, including the Baby Boom parents with Generation X children in our study. It may be that through their intergenerational socialization processes and practices, both two-parent families and extended multigenerational families—though distinct in their relationship intensity or the immediacy of their responsibilities for children—engender similar patterns and strengths.

Proposition 3: Maternal Investment in Children Has Not Declined Over Time

Social critics became alarmed at the huge growth in the labor force participation of mothers over the past thirty years, for fear that the well-being of new generations of children would be compromised by a lack of attention given to them by their mothers. However, our study shows nonexistent, small, or ambiguous effects of mothers' labor force participation on children. This is similar to findings of other researchers (Parcel and Menaghan 1994).

The prognostications of negative consequences were not supported empirically, in part because they rested on a shaky foundation: that the stay-at-home moms of yesteryear surely spent more time with their children than working moms do today. Bianchi (2000) has questioned this assumption. She argues that the amount of nonmarket time that mothers invested in children in the past has been overestimated. While employment rates for mothers earlier in this century were much lower than today, mothers in the past also faced more time-consuming family work and domestic chores, relied on older children to spend time with the younger children, and had less education. Education is positively correlated with the amount of direct time mothers spend caring for children. Bianchi also suggests that the extent to which paid work takes mothers' time away from children today has been overestimated. The net result of these often offsetting trends, according to many of the studies Bianchi draws from, is a relatively constant level of maternal investment in children over time, and a conclusion, consistent with the findings of our study, that employment has generally not meant decline in mothers' time with and care for children.

This constancy in maternal investment may help explain why the consequences of family change for Generation X youth were not more evident. In terms of their actual time allocation to children, the mothers of our Baby Boomer and Generation X youth, respectively, may not have been that different. Generation X children who experienced divorce felt as close to their mothers as those who did not, suggesting again a kind of safety net provided by a generally high and stable average level of maternal investment. Other research has shown that in the context of divorce, mothers tend to sustain a high level of emotional investment in children amidst spousal conflict and marital disruption, whereas fathers' relations with children diminish as their relationship with spouses diminish (Belsky et al. 1991). This maternal investment (the parameters and variations of which need to be carefully explored) may be linked to the patterns borne out by our data showing how families—divorced or not, dual-employed or not—are bringing up children with high self-esteem on average and aspirations that exceed those of each generation before them.

High levels of paternal investment and involvement (among both residential and nonresidential fathers) also positively affect many aspects of children's lives, but evidence shows that, on average, levels of paternal involvement are relatively low (Simons et al. 1996). However, if upward trends have been occurring in the proportion of highly involved, "good dads" as described by Furstenberg (1988), this too may be linked to some of the findings reported here.

THE PARADOX OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE ACROSS GENERATIONS

In concluding this examination of family functioning and change at the start of the twenty-first century, we return to a question raised by philosophers and playwrights (and more recently by social historians and social scientists) over six millennia of human experience: *How much is changing, and how much remains the same, across generations today?*

Karl Mannheim (1952) called this "the sociological problem of generations": the ongoing tension between continuity and change, affirmation and innovation, as each new generation comes into contact with the existing social order represented by their parents' generation, and how they attempt to adapt to or radically change this heritage.

Mannheim used this generational tension as a means to explain the development of social and political movements in Europe throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from cultural changes in style and art to political revolution and warfare. While Mannheim's sweeping sociopolitical theory has not been supported by subsequent analyses, his central argument has become a central premise of life-course theory today.

The paradox of change and continuity is reflected in our data on family influences on younger generations during the past three decades. We have approached this issue from three analytic levels, each central to the life-course theoretical perspective in family sociology and family psychology.

At the *macrosocial* level of analysis, it is important to recognize the changing configurations of human demography reflected in the age structures of society, the social metabolism of changes in birth and death rates, immigration and emigration, longevity and morbidity. These trends are crucial for twenty-first-century societies, and particularly for cross-generational relationships (Bengtson and Putney 2000).

At the *mesosocial* level, the life-course perspective calls us to inquire about the interactive effects of maturation, historical placement, and emerging sociohistorical events on generational differences and continuities. And at the *microsocial* level, our focus is on the processes by which generations within a family pass on the knowledge and values, and the material and psychological resources that its members need to live successfully in society.

It is within the family—the *microsocial* level—that the paradox of continuity and change, the problem of balancing individuality and allegiance, is most immediate. It is a fluid, unending process and at times contentious. At times we think that surely a break from the past has occurred: Families aren't what they used to be; families are in trouble. Yet if we look closely, we can see threads of continuity and patterns of influence across generations. These patterns within families across historical time have been the focus of our study. How do they emerge? How are they sustained? What do they tell us about the structure and function of families and intergenerational relations in our now postindustrial world?

The family is the fulcrum balancing change and continuity over time in human society. It has been so in the past; we believe it will be so in the twenty-first century. We look to the family as the context for negotiating the problems of continuity and change, of individuality and integration, between and within the generations in ways that allow the continuous re-creation of society. Families still matter.

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READING 25

A Longer Road to Adulthood

Jeffrey J. Arnett

In the past few decades a quiet revolution has taken place for young people in American society, so quiet that it has been noticed only gradually and incompletely. As recently as 1970 the typical 21-year-old was married or about to be married, caring for a newborn child or expecting one soon, done with education or about to be done, and settled into a long-term job or the role of full-time mother. Young people of that time grew up quickly and made serious enduring choices about their lives at a relatively early age. Today, the life of a typical 21-year-old could hardly be more different. Marriage is at least five years off, often more. Ditto parenthood. Education may last several more years, through an extended undergraduate program—the "four-year degree" in five, six, or more—and perhaps graduate or professional school. Job changes are frequent, as young people look for work that will not only pay well but will also be personally fulfilling.

For today's young people, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, and find a long-term job until at least their late twenties. From their late teens to their late twenties they explore the possibilities available to them in love and work, and move gradually toward making enduring choices. Such freedom to explore different options is exciting, and this period is a time of high hopes and big dreams. However, it is also a time of anxiety and uncertainty, because the lives of young people are so unsettled, and many of them have no idea where their explorations will lead. They struggle with uncertainty even as they revel in being freer than they ever were in childhood or ever will be once they take on the full weight of adult responsibilities. To be a young American today is to experience both excitement and uncertainty, wide-open possibility and confusion, new freedoms and new fears.

The rise in the ages of entering marriage and parenthood, the lengthening of higher education, and prolonged job instability during the twenties reflect the development of a new period of life for young people in the United States and other industrialized societies, lasting from the late teens through the mid- to late twenties. This period is not simply an "extended adolescence," because it is much different from adolescence, much freer from parental control, much more a period of independent exploration. Nor is it really "young adulthood," since this term implies that an early stage of adulthood has been reached, whereas most young people in their twenties have not made the transitions historically associated with adult status—especially marriage and parenthood—and many of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. It is a new and historically unprecedented period of the life course, so it requires a new term and a new way of thinking; I call it *emerging adulthood.*

Many Americans have noticed the change in how young people experience their late teens and their twenties. In the 1990s "Generation X" became a widely used term for people in this age period, inspired by Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel of that title. However, the characteristics of today's young people are not merely generational. The changes that have created emerging adulthood are here to stay—Generations X, Y, Z, and beyond will experience an extended period of exploration and instability in their late teens and twenties. For this reason I believe emerging adulthood should be recognized as a distinct new period of life that will be around for many generations to come.

In [the] book [this reading is from] I describe the characteristics of emerging adults, based mainly on my research over the past decade, plus a synthesis of other research and theories on the age period. In this [reading] I provide some historical background on the rise of emerging adulthood and describe the period's distinctive features. I also explain why the term *emerging adulthood* is preferable to other possible terms.

THE RISE OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Emerging adulthood has been created in part by the steep rise in the typical ages of marriage and parenthood that has taken place in the past half century.[1] As you can see in Figure 25.1, in 1950 the median age of marriage in the United States was just 20 for women and 22 for men. Even as recently as 1970, these ages had risen only slightly, to about 21 for women and 23 for men. However, since 1970 there has been a dramatic shift

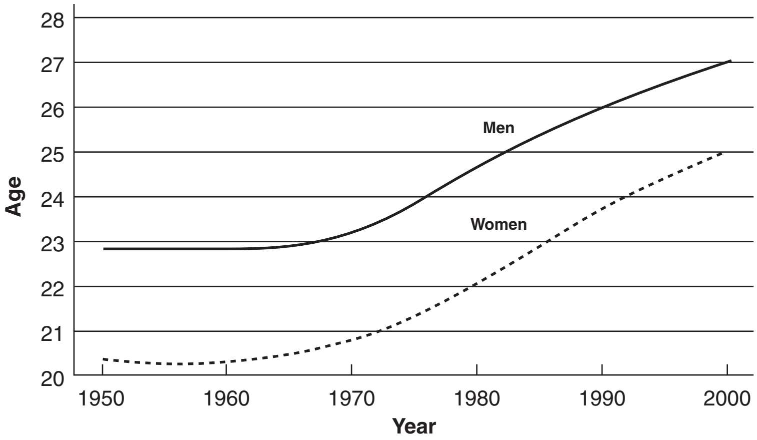

FIGURE 25.1 ***Median U.S. Marriage Age, 1950–2000***

in the ages when Americans typically get married. By the year 2000 the typical age of marriage was 25 for women and 27 for men, a four-year rise for both sexes in the space of just three decades. Age at entering parenthood has followed a similar pattern. Then as now, couples tend to have their first child about one year after marriage, on average.[2] So, from 1950 to 1970 most couples had their first child in their very early twenties, whereas today most wait until at least their late twenties before becoming parents.

Why this dramatic rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood? One reason is that the invention of the birth control pill, in combination with less stringent standards of sexual morality after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s, meant that young people no longer had to enter marriage in order to have a regular sexual relationship. Now most young people have a series of sexual relationships before entering marriage,[3] and most Americans do not object to this, as long as sex does not begin at an age that is "too early" (whatever that is) and as long as the number of partners does not become "too many" (whatever that is). Although Americans may not be clear, in their own minds, about what the precise rules ought to be for young people's sexual relationships, there is widespread tolerance now for sexual relations between young people in their late teens and twenties in the context of a committed, loving relationship.

Another important reason for the rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood is the increase in the years devoted to pursuing higher education. An exceptionally high proportion of young people, about two thirds, now enter college after graduating from high school.[4] This is a higher proportion than ever before in American history. Among those who graduate from college, about one third go on to graduate school the following year.[5] Most young people wait until they have finished school before they start thinking seriously about marriage and parenthood, and for many of them this means postponing these commitments until at least their mid-twenties.

But it may be that the most important reason of all for the rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood is less tangible than changes in sexual behavior or more years spent in college and graduate school. There has been a profound change in how young people view the meaning and value of becoming an adult and entering the adult roles of spouse and parent. Young people of the 1950s were eager to enter adulthood and "settle down."[6] Perhaps because they grew up during the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, achieving the stability of marriage, home, and children seemed like a great accomplishment to them. Also, because many of them planned to have three, four, or even five or more children, they had good reason to get started early in order to have all the children they wanted and space them out at reasonable intervals.

The young people of today, in contrast, see adulthood and its obligations in quite a different light. In their late teens and early twenties, marriage, home, and children are seen by most of them not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided. It is not that they do not want marriage, a home, and (one or two) children—eventually. Most of them do want to take on all of these adult obligations, and most of them will have done so by the time they reach age 30. It is just that, in their late teens and early twenties, they ponder these obligations and think, "Yes, but *not yet*." Adulthood and its obligations offer security and stability, but they also represent a closing of doors—the end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibilities.

Women's roles have also changed in ways that make an early entry into adult obligations less desirable for them now compared to 50 years ago. The young women of 1950 were under a great deal of social pressure to catch a man.[7] Being a single woman was simply not a viable social status for a woman after her early twenties. Relatively few women attended college, and those who did were often there for the purpose of obtaining their "m-r-s" degree (in the joke of the day)—that is, for the purpose of finding a husband. The range of occupations open to young women was severely restricted, as it had been traditionally—secretary, waitress, teacher, nurse, perhaps a few others. Even these occupations were supposed to be temporary for young women. What they were really supposed to be focusing on was finding a husband and having children. Having no other real options, and facing social limbo if they remained unmarried for long, their yearning for marriage and children—the sooner the better—was sharpened.

For the young women of the 21st century, all this has changed. At every level of education from grade school through graduate school girls now excel over boys.[8] Fifty-six percent of the undergraduates in America's colleges and universities are women, according to the most recent figures.[9] Young women's occupational possibilities are now virtually unlimited, and although men still dominate in engineering and some sciences, women are equal to men in obtaining law and business degrees and nearly equal in obtaining medical degrees.[10] With so many options open to them, and with so little pressure on them to marry by their early twenties, the lives of young American women today have changed almost beyond recognition from what they were 50 years ago. And most of them take on their new freedoms with alacrity, making the most of their emerging adult years before they enter marriage and parenthood.

Although the rise of emerging adulthood is partly a consequence of the rising ages of marriage and parenthood, marriage ages were also relatively high early in the 20th century and throughout the 19th century.[11] What is different now is that young people are freer than they were in the past to use the intervening years, between the end of secondary school and entry into marriage and parenthood, to explore a wide range of different possible future paths. Young people of the past were constricted in a variety of ways, from gender roles to economics, which prevented them from using their late teens and twenties for exploration. In contrast, today's emerging adults have unprecedented freedom.

Not all of them have an equal portion of it, to be certain. Some live in conditions of deprivation that make any chance of exploring life options severely limited, at best. However, as a group, they have more freedom for exploration than young people in times past. Their society grants them a long moratorium in their late teens and twenties without expecting them to take on adult responsibilities as soon as they are able to do so. Instead, they are allowed to move into adult responsibilities gradually, at their own pace.

WHAT IS EMERGING ADULTHOOD?

What are the distinguishing features of emerging adulthood? What makes it distinct from the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood that follows it? . . . [I]n this [reading] I want to present an outline of what emerging adulthood is, in its essential qualities. There are five main features:[12]

1. It is the age of *identity explorations*, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work.
2. It is the age of *instability.*
3. It is the most *self-focused* age of life.
4. It is the age of *feeling in-between*, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult.
5. It is the age of *possibilities*, when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.

Let's look at each of these features in turn.

The Age of Identity Explorations

Perhaps the most central feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the time when young people explore possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work. In the course of exploring possibilities in love and work, emerging adults clarify their identities, that is, they learn more about who they are and what they want out of life. Emerging adulthood offers the best opportunity for such self exploration. Emerging adults have become more independent of their parents than they were as adolescents and most of them have left home, but they have not yet entered the stable, enduring commitments typical of adult life, such as a long-term job, marriage, and parenthood. During this interval of years, when they are neither beholden to their parents nor committed to a web of adult roles, they have an exceptional opportunity to try out different ways of living and different options for love and work.

Of course, it is adolescence rather than emerging adulthood that has typically been associated with identity formation. A half century ago Erik Erikson[13] designated identity versus role confusion as the central crisis of the adolescent stage of life, and in the decades since he articulated this idea, the focus of research on identity has been on adolescence. However, Erikson also commented on the "prolonged adolescence" typical of industrialized societies and the *psychosocial moratorium* granted to young people in such societies, "during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society."[14] Decades later, this applies to many more young people than when he wrote it.[15] If adolescence is the period from age 10 to 18 and emerging adulthood is the period from (roughly) age 18 to the mid-twenties, most identity exploration takes place in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence. Although research on identity formation has focused mainly on adolescence, this research has shown that identity achievement has rarely been reached by the end of high school and that identity development continues through the late teens and the twenties.[16]

In both love and work, the process of identity formation begins in adolescence but intensifies in emerging adulthood. With regard to love, adolescent love tends to be tentative and transient.[17] The implicit question is "Who would I enjoy being with, here and now?" In contrast, explorations in love in emerging adulthood tend to involve a deeper level of intimacy, and the implicit question is more identity-focused: "What kind of person am I, and what kind of person would suit me best as a partner through life?" By becoming involved with different people, emerging adults learn about the qualities that are most important to them in another person, both the qualities that attract them and the qualities they find distasteful and annoying. They also see how they are evaluated by others who come to know them well. They learn what others find attractive in them—and perhaps what others find distasteful and annoying!

In work, too, there is a similar contrast between the transient and tentative explorations of adolescence and the more serious and identity-focused explorations of emerging adulthood. Most American adolescents have a part-time job at some point during high school,[18] but most of their jobs last for only a few months at most. They tend to work in service jobs—restaurants, retail stores, and so on—unrelated to the work they expect to be doing in adulthood, and they tend to view their jobs not as occupational preparation but as a way to obtain the money that will support an active leisure life—CDs, concert tickets, restaurant meals, clothes, cars, travel, and so on.[19]

In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on laying the groundwork for an adult occupation. In exploring various work possibilities and in exploring the educational possibilities that will prepare them for work, emerging adults explore identity issues as well: "What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best?" As they try out different jobs or college majors, emerging adults learn more about themselves. They learn more about their abilities and interests. Just as important, they learn what kinds of work they are *not* good at or *do not* want to do. In work as in love, explorations in emerging adulthood commonly include the experience of failure or disappointment. But as in love, the failures and disappointments in work can be illuminating for self-understanding.

Although emerging adults become more focused and serious about their directions in love and work than they were as adolescents, this change takes place gradually. Many of the identity explorations of the emerging adult years are simply for fun, a kind of play, part of gaining a broad range of life experiences before "settling down" and taking on the responsibilities of adult life. Emerging adults realize they are free in ways they will not be during their thirties and beyond. For people who wish to have a variety of romantic and sexual experiences, emerging adulthood is the time for it, when parental surveillance has diminished and there is as yet little normative pressure to enter marriage. Similarly, emerging adulthood is the time for trying out unusual educational and work possibilities. Programs such as AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps find most of their volunteers among emerging adults,[20] because emerging adults have both the freedom to pull up stakes quickly in order to go somewhere new and the inclination to do something unusual. Other emerging adults travel on their own to a different part of the country or the world to work or study for a while. This, too, can be part of their identity explorations, part of expanding the range of their personal experiences prior to making the more enduring choices of adulthood. . . .

The Age of Instability

The explorations of emerging adults and their shifting choices in love and work make emerging adulthood an exceptionally full and intense period of life but also an exceptionally unstable one. Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan with a capital *P*, that is, some kind of idea about the route they will be taking from adolescence to adulthood,[21] and most of them come up with one. However, for almost all of them, their Plan is subject to numerous revisions during the emerging adult years. These revisions are a natural consequence of their explorations. They enter college and choose a major, then discover the major is not as interesting as it seemed—time to revise the Plan. Or they enter college and find themselves unable to focus on their studies, and their grades sink accordingly—time to revise the Plan. Or they go to work after college but discover after a year or two that they need more education if they ever expect to make decent money—time to revise the Plan. Or they move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend and start to think of the Plan as founded on their future together, only to discover that they have no future together—time to revise the Plan.

With each revision in the Plan, they learn something about themselves and hopefully take a step toward clarifying the kind of future they want. But even if they succeed in doing so, that does not mean the instability of emerging adulthood is easy. Sometimes emerging adults look back wistfully on their high school years. Most of them remember those years as filled with anguish in many ways, but in retrospect at least they knew what they were going to be doing from one day, one week, one month to the next. In emerging adulthood the anxieties of adolescence diminish, but instability replaces them as a new source of disruption. . . .

The best illustration of the instability of emerging adulthood is in how often they move from one residence to another. As Figure 25.2 indicates, rates of moving spike upward beginning at age 18, reach their peak in the mid-twenties, then sharply decline.[22] This shows that emerging adults rarely know where they will be living from one year to the next. It is easy to imagine the sources of their many moves. Their first move is to leave home, often to go to college but sometimes just to be independent of their parents.[23] Other moves soon follow. If they drop out of college either temporarily or permanently,

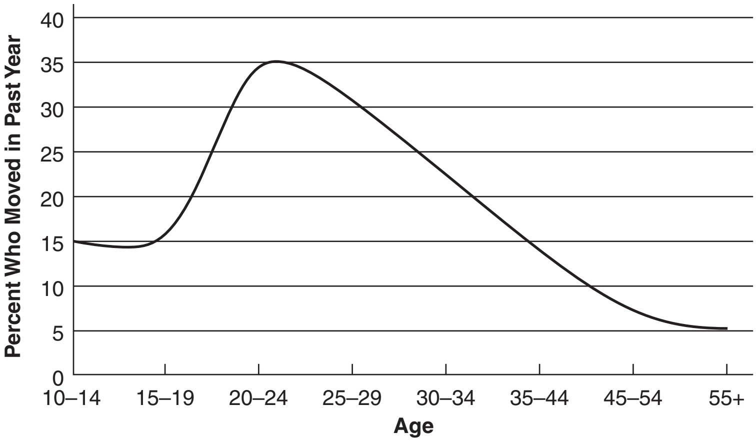

FIGURE 25.2 *Rates of Moving, by Age*

they may move again. They often live with roommates during emerging adulthood, some of whom they get along with, some of whom they do not—and when they do not, they move again. They may move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Sometimes cohabitation leads to marriage, sometimes it does not—and when is does not, they move again. If they graduate from college they move again, perhaps to start a new job to to enter graduate school. For nearly half of emerging adults, at least one of their moves during the years from age 18 to 25 will be back home to live with their parents.[24] . . .

All of this moving around makes emerging adulthood an unstable time, but it also reflects the explorations that take place during the emerging adult years. Many of the moves emerging adults make are for the purpose of some new period of exploration, in love, work, or education. Exploration and instability go hand in hand.

The Self-Focused Age

There is no time of life that is more self-focused than emerging adulthood [Figure 25.3]. Children and adolescents are self-focused in their own way, yes, but they always have parents and teachers to answer to, and usually siblings as well. Nearly all of them live at home with at least one parent. There are household rules and standards to follow, and if they break them they risk the wrath of other family members. Parents keep track, at least to some extent, of where they are and what they are doing. Although adolescents typically grow more independent than they were as children, they remain part of a family system that requires responses from them on a daily basis. In addition, nearly all of them attend school, where teachers set the standards and monitor their behavior and performance.

By age 30, a new web of commitments and obligations is well established, for most people. At that age, 75% of Americans have married and have had at least one child.[25] A new household, then, with new rules and standards. A spouse, instead of parents and siblings, with whom they must coordinate activities and negotiate household duties and

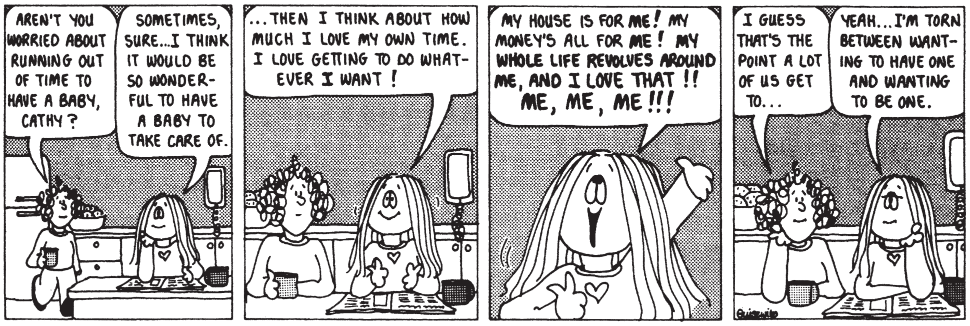
AREN'T YOU WORRIED ABOUT RUNNING OUT OF TIME TO HAVE A BABY, CATHY ?
SOMETIMES, SURE...I THINK IT WOULD BE SO WONDERFUL TO HAVE A BABY TO TAKE CARE OF.
...THEN I THINK ABOUT HOW MUCH I LOVE MY OWN TIME. I LOVE GETTING TO DO WHATEVER I WANT !
MY HOUSE IS FOR ME! MY MONEY'S ALL FOR ME! MY WHOLE LIFE REVOLVES AROUND ME, AND I LOVE THAT !! ME, ME, ME!!!
I GUESS THAT'S THE POINT A LOT OF US GET TO...
YEAH...I'M TORN BETWEEN WANTING TO HAVE ONE AND WANTING TO BE ONE.
Guisewite

FIGURE 25.3 ***Most Emerging Adults Are Not Quite this Self-Focused!***

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requirements. A child, to be loved and provided for, who needs time and attention. An employer, in a job and a field they are committed to and want to succeed in, who holds them to standards of progress and achievement.

It is only in between, during emerging adulthood, that there are few ties that entail daily obligations and commitments to others. Most young Americans leave home at age 18 or 19, and moving out means that daily life is much more self-focused. What to have for dinner? You decide. When to do the laundry? You decide. When (or whether) to come home at night? You decide.

So many decisions! And those are the easy ones. They have to decide the hard ones mostly on their own as well. Go to college? Work full time? Try to combine work and college? Stay in college or drop out? Switch majors? Switch colleges? Switch jobs? Switch apartments? Switch roommates? Break up with girlfriend/boyfriend? Move in with girlfriend/boyfriend? Date someone new? Even for emerging adults who remain at home, many of these decisions apply. Counsel may be offered or sought from parents and friends, but many of these decisions mean clarifying in their own minds what they want, and nobody can really tell them what they want but themselves.

To say that emerging adulthood is a self-focused time is not meant pejoratively. There is nothing wrong about being self-focused during emerging adulthood; it is normal, healthy, and temporary. By focusing on them selves, emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives. The goal of their self-focusing is self-sufficiency, learning to stand alone as a self-sufficient person, but they do not see self-sufficiency as a permanent state. Rather, they view it as a necessary step before committing themselves to enduring relationships with others, in love and work.

The Age of Feeling In-Between

The exploration and instability of emerging adulthood give it the quality of an in-between period—between adolescence, when most people live in their parents' home and are required to attend secondary school, and young adulthood, when most people have entered marriage and parenthood and have settled into a stable occupational path. In between the restrictions of adolescence and the responsibilities of adulthood lie the explorations and instability of emerging adulthood.

It feels this way to emerging adults, too—like an age in-between, neither adolescent nor adult, on the way to adulthood but not there yet. When asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood, their responses are often ambiguous, with one foot in *yes* and the other in *no*. For example, Lillian, 25, answered the question this way:

> Sometimes I think I've reached adulthood and then I sit down and eat ice cream directly from the box, and I keep thinking, "I'll know I'm an adult when I don't eat ice cream right out of the box any more!" That seems like such a childish thing to do. But I guess in some ways I feel like I'm an adult. I'm a pretty responsible person. I mean, if I say I'm going to do something, I do it. I'm very responsible with my job. Financially, I'm fairly responsible with my money. But sometimes in social circumstances I feel uncomfortable like I don't know what I'm supposed to do, and I still feel like a little kid. So a lot of times I don't really feel like an adult.

As Figure 25.4 demonstrates, about 60% of emerging adults aged 18–25 report this "yes and no" feeling in response to the question "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?"[26] Once they reach their late twenties and early thirties most Americans feel they have definitely reached adulthood, but even then a substantial proportion, about 30%, still feels in-between. It is only in their later thirties, their forties, and their fifties that this sense of ambiguity has faded for nearly everyone and the feeling of being adult is well established.

The reason that so many emerging adults feel in-between is evident from the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. The criteria most

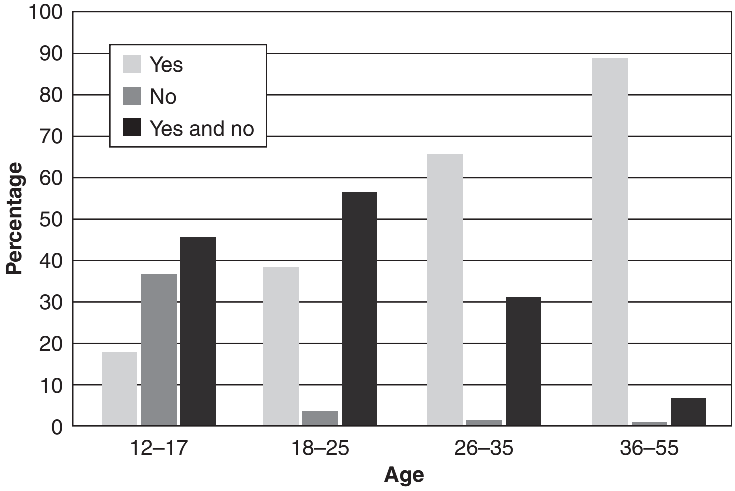

FIGURE 25.4 ***"Do You Feel That You Have Reached Adulthood?"***

important to them are gradual, so their feeling of becoming an adult is gradual, too. In a variety of regions of the United States, in a variety of ethnic groups, in studies using both questionnaires and interviews, people consistently state the following as the top three criteria for adulthood:[27]

1. Accept responsibility for yourself.
2. Make independent decisions.
3. Become financially independent.

All three criteria are gradual, incremental, rather than all at once. Consequently, although emerging adults begin to feel adult by the time they reach age 18 or 19, they do not feel completely adult until years later, some time in their mid- to late twenties. By then they have become confident that they have reached a point where they accept responsibility, make their own decisions, and are financially independent. While they are in the process of developing those qualities, they feel in between adolescence and full adulthood. . . .

The Age of Possibilities

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain open, when little about a person's direction in life has been decided for certain. It tends to be an age of high hopes and great expectations, in part because few of their dreams have been tested in the fires of real life. Emerging adults look to the future and envision a well-paying, satisfying job, a loving, lifelong marriage, and happy children who are above average. In one national survey of 18–24-year-olds, nearly all—96%—agreed with the statement "I am very sure that someday I will get to where I want to be in life."[28] The dreary, dead-end jobs, the bitter divorces, the disappointing and disrespectful children that some of them will find themselves experiencing in the years to come—none of them imagine that this is what the future holds for them.

One feature of emerging adulthood that makes it the age of possibilities is that, typically, emerging adults have left their family of origin but are not yet committed to a new network of relationships and obligations. This is especially important for young people who have grown up in difficult conditions. A chaotic or unhappy family is difficult to rise above for children and adolescents, because they return to that family environment every day and the family's problems are often reflected in problems of their own. If the parents fight a lot, they have to listen to them. If the parents live in poverty, the children live in poverty, too, most likely in dangerous neighborhoods with inferior schools. If a parent is alcoholic, the disruptions from the parent's problems rip through the rest of the family as well. However, with emerging adulthood and departure from the family home, an unparalleled opportunity begins for young people to transform their lives. For those who have come from troubled families, this is their chance to try to straighten the parts of themselves that have become twisted. . . .

Even for those who have come from families they regard as relatively happy and healthy, emerging adulthood is an opportunity to transform themselves so that they are not merely made in their parents' images but have made independent decisions about what kind of person they wish to be and how they wish to live. During emerging adulthood they have an exceptionally wide scope for making their own decisions. Eventually, virtually all emerging adults will enter new, long-term obligations in love and work, and once they do their new obligations will set them on paths that resist change and that may continue for the rest of their lives. But for now, while emerging adulthood lasts, they have a chance to change their lives in profound ways.[29]

Regardless of their family background, all emerging adults carry their family influences with them when they leave home, and the extent to which they can change what they have become by the end of adolescence is not unlimited. Still, more than any other period of life, emerging adulthood presents the possibility of change. For this limited window of time—7, perhaps 10, years—the fulfillment of all their hopes seems possible, because for most people the range of their choices for how to live is greater than it has ever been before and greater than it will ever be again.

Notes

1. Arnett (2000); Arnett & Taber (1994).
2. Arnett & Taber (1994). This applies to couples who marry. However, since the early 1970s, the rate of single parenthood has grown dramatically, to a current rate of about 25% of all American births. Consequently, the median age of entering parenthood used to be a year or so after marriage, whereas today the median ages of marriage and parenthood are very similar. Nevertheless, the point here remains valid, that the median ages of both marriage and parenthood have risen steeply over the past half century.
3. Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata (1995).
4. National Center for Education Statistics (2002).
5. Mogelonsky (1996). This is perhaps not as large a proportion as it sounds from this statistic. Because only about one fourth of young Americans obtain a four-year degree (the rest drop out or attend only two-year schools), one third of this one quarter is only about 8%. Nevertheless, this percentage has risen steadily over recent decades. Also, there is an additional percentage who attend graduate or professional school not immediately after graduating with a four-[year] degree but after spending some time out of higher education.
6. Modell (1989). There are no statistical data to confirm this, but this is the conclusion Modell draws on the basis of his insightful historical analysis.
7. Modell (1989).
8. Sommers (2001). The rise in participation in higher education has been especially dramatic for young women. Traditionally men were much more likely than women to obtain higher education—women were, in fact, barred from most colleges and universities—but young women surpassed young men in the 1980s, and in the past decade the gender gap favoring women has been persistent. See National Center for Education Statistics (2002), Table 20-2.
9. National Center for Education Statistics (2002).
10. Bianchi & Spain (1996); Dey & Hurtado (1999).
11. Arnett (1998); Arnett & Taber (1994).
12. Alan Reifman has developed a scale for assessing these five features, and initial results show empirical support for them. See Reifman, Arnett, and Colwell (2003).
13. Erikson (1950).
14. Erikson (1968, p. 150).
15. As Gene Bockneck (1986) notes, numerous developmental theorists in the 20th century have described something like what I am calling emerging adulthood. As far back as 1935, Charlotte Buhler described a “preparatory stage” following adolescence that involved entry into self-chosen and independent activity. More recently, Daniel Levinson and his colleagues (1978) delineated an

"early adult transition," lasting from age 17 to 22, which is characterized by separating physically and psychologically from one's family, followed by a period of "entering the adult world" from age 22 to 28, in which people explore possible roles and relationships and make tentative commitments. But none of these theoretical ideas took root as a distinct area of scholarship on this age period, perhaps because up until recently only a minority of young people (mainly men) were able to use the late teens through the twenties for independent identity explorations.

16. Waterman (1999).
17. Feiring (1996); Furman, Brown, & Feiring (1999); Padgham & Blyth (1991).
18. Batting & Kelloway (1999); Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider (2000).
19. Bachman & Schulenberg (1993); Steinberg & Cauffman (1995).
20. See www.cns.gov/americorps and www.peacecorps.gov.
21. The idea about a Plan with a capital P is based on an essay by Elizabeth Greenspan (2000).
22. U.S. Bureau of the Census (2003).
23. Goldscheider & Goldscheider (1999).
24. Goldscheider & Goldscheider (1999).
25. Arnett (2000).
26. The graph is from Arnett (2000).
27. Arnett (1994, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003); Nelson (2003).
28. Hornblower (1997).
29. A variety of scholars have commented on the increasing "individualization" of the self in "posttraditional" societies, meaning that social timetables for the life course have become less standardized and people now have a greater range of individual choice in when they make transitions such as finishing education, marriage, and retirement (e.g., Heinz, 2002). I agree, but I would add that the range of individual choice is greatest during emerging adulthood.

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