

How Americans Raise Their Children: Generational Relations from the Revolution to the Global World¹

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As children became important subjects of historical inquiry, some scholars began studying childhood as a Western phenomenon broadly understood. My own work has strongly encouraged this perspective, and two books I recently edited, which examine childhood in the Western world since antiquity and the changes in children's experiences since World War II, embody it.¹ In this view, the history of childhood in the West is part of a single evolving cultural system. At the same time, I have been engaged in a very different sort of investigation, one that emphasizes the subtle historical and cultural differences among Western societies and takes as its subject the unusual way in which parents and children in the United States have related to each other over the past 200 years. The following is based on this project.

In the United States, much earlier and more emphatically than elsewhere in the West, authoritarian controls over children gave way to a more relaxed relationship between the generations. This pattern and its consequences had already drawn the attention of European and American observers by the early 19th century. Europeans often described American children as rude, unmannerly, and bold; even very young children were described as unnervingly confident. Some commentators were delighted, calling such display a refreshing sign of American vigor, but others were less charmed. One English woman defined it in a vivid contrast:

English children in the presence of strangers are reserved and shy . . .
They feel that the nursery and school room are their proper sphere of

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action Most unlike to these is the sentiment of the American, both parent and child. The little citizen seems to feel at a surprisingly early age, that he has a part on the stage of the world, and is willing enough to act a little before his time.²

American children, it seems, already had attitude. And their parents apparently stood by and approved.

Alexis de Tocqueville famously described parents in the United States as treating their children more equally than parents did elsewhere, with the result that fathers and sons behaved toward each other with far less formality. He was hardly alone in his opinion; in the 1850s, two decades after de Tocqueville offered his observation after traveling through the United States, American children were described by Polish Count Adam de Gurowski as being early “emancipated . . . from parental authority and domestic discipline.” Accustomed to familiarity with their parents, they behaved in the same manner with other older persons, thus, in his words, depriving “the social intercourse of Americans of the tint of politeness, which is more habitual in Europe.”³ This attitude led American children to adopt a different vision of themselves, one in which, according to de Tocqueville, independence was “an incontestable right.”⁴ One English woman thought this youthful independence affected even very young children, not just in their manners, but also in their habits of learning and inquiry. Entrusted with physical objects such as porcelain cups, they handled them with care, and even 1-year-olds probed the mechanisms of objects with a kind of focused curiosity that evokes the image of the philosopher or scientist in the crib, which psychologists talk about today. Commentators considered these changes to be the results of various factors and occurrences, such as a successful revolution, the availability of land, the shortage of labor, the absence of an aristocratic class, or the equality of laws.

These visitors, you may object, came to America expecting to see “the new world difference”—a nontraditional society freed of restraint—and they found what they were looking for, exaggerating small differences in demeanor and mistaking these for more fundamental changes. To some degree, this was true, of course, but it hardly undermines either the observations or the facts behind them. Americans did have land, needed labor, put their children to work early, took seriously a political revolution that emphasized equality, and disdained artificial deference. They also lacked the kind of aristocratic class system in which children were an expression of lineage and descent.

Americans also wanted to see themselves as different—fresher, newer, younger—bringing the breezes of new world freedom as

Benjamin Franklin brought his coonskin cap to Versailles. From at least the time of the Revolution, some Americans believed that child-rearing had to adapt to the changed possibilities of their new-world environment. After the Revolution, many hoped that their households would conform to revolutionary principles. Americans were more open to endowing their children with greater independence and flexibility because, in the words of Nathaniel Willis, the editor of *Youth's Companion* magazine (1827), they believed that in the United States, children were "born to higher destinies than their fathers."⁵

This view, often voiced after the Revolution, together with the availability of land (on a breathtaking scale) and an absence of laws that specifically regulated generational relations and obligations (as was common in Europe), did, I believe, give the relationships between American parents and their children a different cast, while it lowered the degree of control that parents exercised over their children's future. Two things need to be said at the outset of our discussion.

First, these changes did not necessarily make American parents indulgent toward their children, and children did not have a longer or more leisured or more playful childhood. The contrary was often the case. American children went to work early because land and labor ratios made their work desirable and necessary. That work was not, however, just a form of subordination as it usually was elsewhere. Instead, it could provide the young, in the words I quoted earlier, with a sense that they had "a part on the stage of the world." And their parents, recognizing how this limited their control, allowed for a much easier transition to adulthood with, in de Tocqueville's words, "none of that bitter and angry regret which is apt to survive a bygone power."⁶

Second, it would be folly to imagine that what I am describing was true for the entire population in a society not only expanding with many kinds of immigrants, but also, most strikingly, where, at the time of the American Revolution, one-tenth of all children were slaves.

Instead of thinking of this pattern as applicable to all children or true for all parents, it would be best for us to imagine that the period of the early American Republic established a kind of formula or recipe, one that shifted the standard of what might be expected in the relations between parents and children and established a base line to be remembered and invoked as desirable and legitimate, even as the initial circumstances that created it receded and then disappeared.

Let me illustrate the pattern I am describing in the life of an individual. Ulysses S. Grant became a great Civil War general and then the 18th president of the United States. As a child, he grew up in the kind of household de Tocqueville or de Gurowski may have observed as they traveled through rural Ohio. Grant's father, Jessie, was a leather

tanner in “comfortable circumstances,” but young Ulysses was expected to do much of the work on the land his father owned. Jessie did not force him to labor in his own trade, which his son “detested,” but from the time he was 7 or 8, Ulysses:

...haul[ed] all the wood used in the house and shops When about eleven years old I was strong enough to hold a plow. From that age until seventeen I did *all* the work done with horses, such as breaking up the land, furrowing, plowing corn and potatoes, bringing in the crops when harvested, hauling all the wood, besides tending two or three horses, a cow or two, and sawing wood for stoves, etc., while still attending school.⁷

As he performed almost all of the tasks of farming, young Ulysses was playing a significant part in the affairs of the Grant household, and he knew it to be important and valuable. He was assuming a part on the world's stage.

Grant's early life reflected the kind of special American circumstances that de Gurowski had in mind when he said that in the United States, “the modes to win a position by labor were unlimited, and thus children . . . became self-relying and independent, and this independence continues to prevail in filial relations.”⁸ What in our eyes may seem to be young Grant's hard childhood, burdened by early responsibilities and physical labor, gave the work of children value in their own eyes and in those of their families. It gave the young a sense of manifest accomplishment and made this work, as de Gurowski understood, unusually liberating.

Grant also understood this about his work. He explained that because he did everything expected of him, he was never scolded or punished but was given the right to “rational enjoyments” and a large degree of independence.⁹ Before he was a teenager, he was allowed to roam freely and travel widely, often for many miles beyond the family home and frequently overnight. He was even allowed to trade horses on his own account. Although he made his share of mistakes, by the time he went off to West Point, Grant had long been making an important contribution to his household, all the while proving and expanding his abilities.

Grant's experience of a Midwestern childhood was not unique. Other boys also worked hard at many tasks, enjoyed leisure, and were early invested with the ability to operate independently and succeed as adults. So were many girls. And although frontier children are often remembered as sturdy and independent, children everywhere in the young Republic had experiences whose consequences were similar, making them early aware of their capacities for autonomous action

and their significant role in their households. However, this period did not last long.

After the Civil War, to which Grant made a huge contribution as the general who commanded the Army of the West, the circumstances of growing up and the locale for opportunities were drastically altered. Industries and cities replaced farming and rural life, and young immigrants, including young girls, were kept indoors for long hours working in sweatshops or factories. Many were caught on the streets in mischief that seemed to portend a life of crime. Youthful energy and purposive development was obscured in these contexts and detached from each other. More and more, children were kept in schools where neither independence nor a sense of meaningful achievement was much in evidence. Alarmed by these changes, Americans began to propose solutions based on the old recipe. As they did so, they encoded an American way of child-rearing that remains alive to this day. What had once been a natural expression of environment, laws, and family conditions became a self-conscious American approach to raising children, one that reformers, educators, and child-rearing experts used as a touchstone as they sought to maintain or renew such American characteristics as independence and a commitment to future opportunity. Let me briefly provide you with four examples.

Even before the Civil War, immigration and city life began to transform the American landscape and erode Americans' confidence in the future. Some, like Charles Loring Brace, set out to save the children they believed were lost in this transformation—a growing army of street children, some of whom were trying to earn a living, some of whom were out for a good time, some of whom were engaged in illegal activities as pickpockets and other criminals. Through the Children's Aid Society, Brace hoped to provide street children with both the wholesome family life he believed was still available to the more fortunate boys of the countryside and the kind of labor that would turn them into independent and valuable citizens. Brace is usually remembered for originating the modern idea of foster care, placing city orphans among rural families in the West. In this endeavor, Brace hoped to counteract the corrosive effects of urban poverty and family neglect and preserve the initiative that he found in abundance among street boys, while directing their energies to socially benign goals.

Brace's mid-19th-century observations about social upheaval led, by the end of the 19th century, to far greater fears, as industrial dreariness and fetid cities seemed to overwhelm the familiar American past and, with it, America's most treasured and unique characteristics. In trying to direct the torrent of change, America's most famous philosopher and educational theorist, John Dewey, looked to the

education of children who were now, by law, gathered in classrooms across the country as schooling became a regular fact of life. Dewey understood that an increasingly complex society made schooling necessary, but that it was also problematic. Schools had taken over some of the functions parents had once exercised, with effects that could stultify rather than encourage the very initiative that had once flourished. His reforms sought to turn classrooms into proxies for the more natural and democratic experiences that children like Ulysses Grant had growing up in the early 19th century. The schools to which Dewey looked for renewal would be places where children could learn to become competent in their practical knowledge and capable of taking that knowledge into higher forms of learning, as well as out into the real world. For this to happen, the classroom needed to become a place of authentic experience and the basis for continuing growth. Dewey was well aware that traditional schools were hardly like that. Instead of places of active learning that encouraged growth and development, schools were making the young, in his words, “ductile and docile.” In “The Child and the Curriculum,” one of his most important essays on school reform, Dewey proposed to restore to the branches of learning “the experience from which it had been abstracted.”¹⁰

Dewey’s reforms aimed to create a classroom in which the student’s “present powers . . . are to assert themselves; his present capacities . . . are to be exercised; his present attitudes . . . are to be realized.”¹¹ Dewey imagined that such reformed classrooms would become environments that stimulated an active understanding of work and reprise the experiences Grant had one century earlier within the household setting. In revitalizing schooling, Dewey’s reformed education would offer the sense of real accomplishment and a connection with the real world of work at a time when these were changing beyond recognition.

Half a century later, Dr. Benjamin Spock brought these issues into the nursery. Just as schooling had delayed social experience for children by the end of the 19th century and took the preparation for work out of the family setting, child-rearing advice was redefining parenting in the 20th century. By mid-century, debates about how best to raise children occupied a considerable space in public life, as new theories of learning and new psychological perspectives emerged from university laboratories, discussions in newspapers and magazines, and the conversations of American parents. Starting in the second decade of the 20th century, the U.S. Children’s Bureau distributed millions of pamphlets to mothers across the country urging them to follow special routines to ensure their children’s proper nurture. By World War II, several visions

competed for parents' attention, including the urgent warnings of John Watson ("Parents today are incompetent. Most of them should be indicted for psychological murder."¹²); the psychoanalytically inclined discussions in *Parents' Magazine*; and the developmental observation of Arnold Gesell. All of them shared a vision of child management and emphasized parental guidance; all of them insisted that mothers closely supervise a child's emotions and behavior.

Taking over the field after World War II, Dr. Spock tried to encourage young mothers to adopt a more relaxed attitude. By urging mothers to recognize, in his words, that children want to do "grown up things,"¹³ he offered a renewed vision of children's right to autonomy and coaxed parents toward confidence in their children's competence. Many believe, inaccurately, that he promoted permissiveness in child-rearing. In fact, Spock hoped that by showing mothers what they could expect as their children grew, they would loosen their grip and give their children room to mature.

The context had changed radically, and children's competence meant something quite different than when Ulysses S. Grant's father had supervised his son's development, but the idea was the same: in neither case was the parent to be permissive, and in neither case was the parent to overwhelm the child's own purposes and inclinations. Spock invoked Freudian principles, but it was not the Vienna of the late 19th century *haute bourgeoisie* that Spock had in mind when he told, what would eventually amount to, tens of millions of American mothers to "trust yourself. You know more than you think you do," and urged them to enjoy their children.¹⁴ It was, instead, an American household in which the child's strengths would develop in a family organized along democratic, non-authoritarian lines. The kind of formality between the generations to which Freud directed his analysis was never the issue for Spock. American mothers were hardly the austere parental authorities of high Victorian central Europe. Spock nodded toward the Oedipus complex, but his eyes were set on the complex of behaviors that, in the 20th century under the guidance of the new child-rearing advice, led to over-mothering.

By the mid-20th century, American parents placed fewer explicit demands on their children than their predecessors had a century before, and most American children now went through a long and often fraught adolescence because of extended schooling and its associated dependence, an adolescence that de Tocqueville claimed American youth did not have in the early 19th century. But, in many ways, Spock's advice adhered to that earlier recipe now brought into a new century, and it led to a fundamental question: How in this new world of intensive

parenting, elaborate schooling, and declining children's responsibility would America's young become independent, successful, and confident? What had once been built into an unself-conscious environment and grew out of active work and early maturity had become the fundamental issue guiding the most important child-rearing expert in 20th century America. It is a question that has not gone away.

It also defines the last instance I want to bring to your attention: the recent, vigorous conversations about Chinese Tiger Mothers, French *mamans*, and American mommies.¹⁵ These conversations have emerged in response to the apparent success of the strict, old-world, child-training techniques portrayed by Yale legal scholar Amy Chua in her memoir of her parenting experiences. Critical to the controversy that has accompanied the book is the question of whether American mothers can continue to expect their children to succeed in a highly competitive, global world where none of the earlier rules seem to apply, not those of the Ohio countryside, nor those of the industrial city of Dewey's time, and not even those of the managerial office that defined Spock's. It is a world in which schooling (not experience) seems to go on forever and where even after decades of such training, children often come home.

According to Chua, children need the firm hand of parental directives to lead them to goals set for them by parents, who, in turn, are honoring their own parents. The absence of this deference to family honor and tradition was what had helped to free American children to pursue their goals in their own way 200 years earlier. Can our children still succeed as they once had by choosing their own path and claiming their own future in today's very different world? Is there, in short, anything salvageable from the old recipe? I have heard American mothers agonize about this question after reading Chua's book, worrying about how to secure their children's success and second guessing how they are raising their children, afraid to get it wrong.

Amy Chua's not-so-subtle attack on what she views as permissive American parenting, and related recent conversations that upbraid American parents, take for granted that Americans approach parenting differently. We give children more leeway and allow them to run their own lives (and sometimes those of adults as well). Now that we live in a multicultural society and a global world, it should not surprise us that alternatives to the American way of child-rearing have again become prominent parts of our public life. That comparative perspective had once guided the many visitors to the United States in the first half of the 19th century. Over the course of the last 30 years, many

American parents have, in fact, despite the accusations of leniency taken greater command of their children's lives, patrolling their Internet contacts, strenuously overseeing their school success, and generally tightening the reins as their children battle for a place in a rapidly changing world. Today, the success of our children is on everyone's mind as a globalized world shows us economies that are growing faster, as well as students who test smarter and whose work habits appear stronger. Once, the children Americans raised were innovative and hardworking and appeared to provide the American nation with a special edge. Have we now lost that edge? Does a new global world require that we become manifestly more like everyone else?

In the end, the question circles back to what exactly we think our child-rearing is about. In the 19th century, Americans adapted to their new nation and what seemed to be the many new opportunities it offered, but they also faced large risks. Clearly the opportunities today are different and so are the risks. Can we trust our children to know how to operate in this new world? Or, let me reverse the question: Do we trust ourselves to know how best to operate in this new world? This is, of course, a delicate dilemma. But child-rearing is always delicate, and we have faced such dilemmas before.

It is worth remembering that economic success was only part of the American recipe. American children were bold, they were innovative, they were not afraid to be heard. They expected to play a part on the world's stage. Do we still value these qualities at a time when schools seem, more than ever, to aim to produce children who are ductile and docile, who are able to sit still and take exams, a direction that Dewey, despite his best efforts, could never permanently influence? How we bring up our children reflects many features of our culture: economics and marketplace realities, obviously, but also how we participate in politics, and how we hope to relate to each other ethically and morally. It reflects things that we value, such as creativity, or disdain, such as manners. Finally, it also reflects our history of doing things. After 200 years, this history creates its own constraints, written into our social codes and cultural products. Although predicting the future is something no historian would casually encourage, I think that our conversations about children and parents will almost certainly continue to draw upon an American tradition that I have tried to describe for you here—a vision of how we should raise our children that has often been challenged and continues to be shaken by changes in our own times, but one that remains firmly an American variant of the Western tradition.

