



Les Enfants Terribles

Once upon a time, children were seen but not heard. Now they're at the center of the universe. What changed? Daphne Merkin goes back to the nursery.

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE, given our current childcentric moment, when kids occupy an all-important place in family life and in our cultural awareness, that it was ever different. Yet for long stretches in Western history, children were treated badly—regarded as miniature adults or viewed as uncouth beings in need of rigorous, even cruel, treatment. As recently as in the Victorian era, “Spare the rod and spoil the child” was the maxim of child rearing, and child labor was a staple of the economy. Indeed, as Philippe Ariès demonstrated in his groundbreaking 1960 book, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, the whole notion of childhood as we conceive of it today—as a separate and extended period of development—is a relatively recent phenomenon, one that did not become widespread until the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Cut to the present, when children can be seen and heard all over town, everywhere from restaurants to movie theaters, accompanied by laissez-faire caretakers or doting parents who see nothing wrong with letting their kids bang spoons on a table or talk loudly during a film. The pendulum has swung from viewing children as secondary to adults; their needs and rights are carefully taken into account, and anyone who is less than embracing of this trend—who believes, for instance, that children should give up their seat on a crowded bus to an elder or should say “thank you” to the doorman—is viewed as a fusty grouch. This cosseting attitude is no doubt producing a nation of better-loved and more confident children, but it also suggests a society knee-deep in projective narcissism, whereby tots become signifiers of parental wealth and status, blue-chip investments whose value increases the more care and cashmere bunting are lavished upon them.

I grew up in the fifties and sixties, when fathers were remote and play dates weren't yet de rigueur. My childhood was hardly a model one—I was one of six tightly spaced kids who spent a lot of time in a playpen under the eye of a stern caretaker whose attention was divided among us—but it was probably more characteristic of its time than not in its lack of micromanagement and parental hovering. No one worried much how we passed the long summers at the beach; I remember making lots of sand cakes and gobbling up library books. Truth be told, no one worried much how we made out at school, either, or whether the food we ate was

nutritionally valid. (Lunch consisted of white bread with butter and chocolate sprinkles.) I'm not for a moment arguing that the lack of personalized attention was a positive thing; I have spent much time and money on shrinks, trying to undo the damage. But I sometimes wonder whether the other extreme, in which kids are cultivated like hothouse plants, doesn't have its own problems. I watch the children in my Upper East Side building come and go, largely oblivious to the presence of other people, contented inhabitants of their own little imperial worlds, and wonder whether they will grow up with sufficient psychological flexibility to relate empathetically to others.

Of course, the process of socialization—beginning with going to preschool and having to share your favorite classroom toy with others—eventually serves to cut down outside egos. But what happens when every child is raised to be the leader of the pack and a source of limitless pride to his or her parents? As boomer parents have learned the hard way, not every student, however gifted, can get into Harvard, even with the best tutoring money can buy. Are their children doomed to think of themselves as failures if they don't come in first? A friend of mine, the mother of a 23-year-old, says that for her son's generation everything was all “hip-hip hooray!” Everyone was so afraid of inflicting psychological damage—forget the physical—that we overcompensated by praising our children's every effort. Everything your child did had to be extraordinary.”

On the face of it, children have clearly become more precious, their individuality and self-esteem promoted as never before. They're stimulated from the womb on with *Baby Mozart* CDs, bombarded with cleverly educational toys while still in the cradle, and dressed in designer togs even at spit-up age. Once the wee ones start talking, piano lessons and art classes no longer suffice in the

way of enrichment; these days, kids work out with personal trainers and are taught Mandarin.

Then again, one might argue that the very meaning of having a child—once seen as an expected outcome of marriage—has changed now that in vitro fertilization, sperm donors, and surrogate mothers are enabling previously unlikely candidates for parenthood (gay, older, or infertile couples) to produce offspring. Children who are brought into the world with greater difficulty are not necessarily going to be valued more, but the chances are good that they will be less taken for granted and that their every step will be watched with high anxiety or anticipation. Parents of such children tend to assume that other people are as fascinated with their progeny as they are and see nothing strange in e-mailing daily photo updates of their child's progress to one and all.

Not everyone views the blinding focus on children and their budding selves as a positive development. One busy Upper East Side child analyst, who humorously refers to her patients as “pampered poodles,” notes that “children who are overindulged are left unprepared and unprotected in the real world. Parents who baby their children want to make them dependent on them and thereby maintain their own power and authority as parents.”

Sheilagh Roth, who runs the English Nanny & Governess School in tiny, picturesque Chagrin Falls, Ohio—one of only three such schools in the country—believes, paradoxically, that parents “have abdicated responsibility.” She adds that “the wealthier they are, the worse they are.” I went out to the school on a crisp day in early December to see if I could get a sense of the latest thinking about “proper” child rearing. Who would know better than someone who specializes in training women and even a few men to become certified caretakers for other people's children? Roth grew up in Yorkshire, England, with a beloved nanny of her own (in stark contrast to my experience, which led me to write a piece called “Nanny Dearest”), and has been running the school for 28 years. Her clients include the royal family in Abu Dhabi, which hires one nanny per child, and well-off families in Nigeria and Singapore, as well as more ordinary American couples (a doctor couple, for instance) who are willing to fork out between \$600 and \$1,500 a week for one of Roth's graduates.

On the day I visited the school, there were 17 students dressed in khaki pants and pink shirts bearing the school's logo. They were preparing a meal for a diabetic child, making use of marked containers specifying how many grams of carbs each item contained, before hosting a birthday party for which they had created papier-maché games and an animal-theme menu. These young nannies-in-training—the majority were in their early 20s (though there have been 18-year-olds as well as a 60-year-old who've signed up) attend weekday classes from 9 a.m. to



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4 p.m. for three months and study everything from newborn care and boating safety to table etiquette and how to use an EpiPen. Roth prides herself on the school's high standards—“There's nothing Mickey Mouse about this”—and on her students' “good Midwestern values.” One of the school's most impressive aspects, from what I can make out, is its emphasis on creative play, on coaxing children to use their imagination rather than look to be entertained. “You can be creative lying in a crib at 2 months,” says one of the instructors. The notion of micromanagement, however, is as much anathema to Roth as is the notion of putting a child in front of a television and ignoring him or her. She also thinks it's crucial to teach children how to be self-reliant—not to follow around after them picking up their laundry. One of her pet peeves is the lack of boundaries between parents and their kids. “American children have become the center of attention—all the time. It creates a sense of entitlement, of being owed.”

Is our obsessive romance with our children here to stay? Has it peaked, or does it have still further to go, hard as that is to imagine? There are portents that a change is in the air, beginning with the unexpected runaway success of Adam Mansbach's book *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, which mimics the wondrous tone of books like *Goodnight Moon* and gives it a what-for. Rousing sales of *Go the Fuck to Sleep* suggest that the yuppie absorption in every breath and grunt of their little darlings has finally allowed in a note of ambivalence—as well as self-parody—about the whole sacrosanct child-raising endeavor. In another book, *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*, the author Bryan Caplan argues for a lighter-hearted, more relaxed approach to being a parent. Caplan quotes from adoption and twins research to back up his belief that nature has more effect than nurture on how kids turn out and that all the tweaking and molding and prodding in the world aren't going to change that. “Modern parenting has turned kids into a heavy burden,” Caplan writes. “But it's not kids that changed; it's us.”

The possibility that young parents are taking a more moderate and less hyperventilating view of their jobs is surely a welcome one—but I wouldn't yet count on getting a seat on a crowded bus. ♦