

RAISING THE AMERICAN CHILD

Once considered the province of mother wit and custom, child rearing at the turn of the 20th century assumed the sober mantle of science. Since then, successive generations of mostly male experts have taken turns lecturing parents, often with conflicting advice, on how best to raise their children. But what, if anything, has really changed in the patterns of “scientific” advice-giving since the earliest years of the enterprise? What has been discovered, and what has been ignored? And how much should we trust the experts’ underlying confidence in the power of parents to shape their offspring? Our authors consider these and other aspects of a peculiarly American obsession.



The Century Of the Child

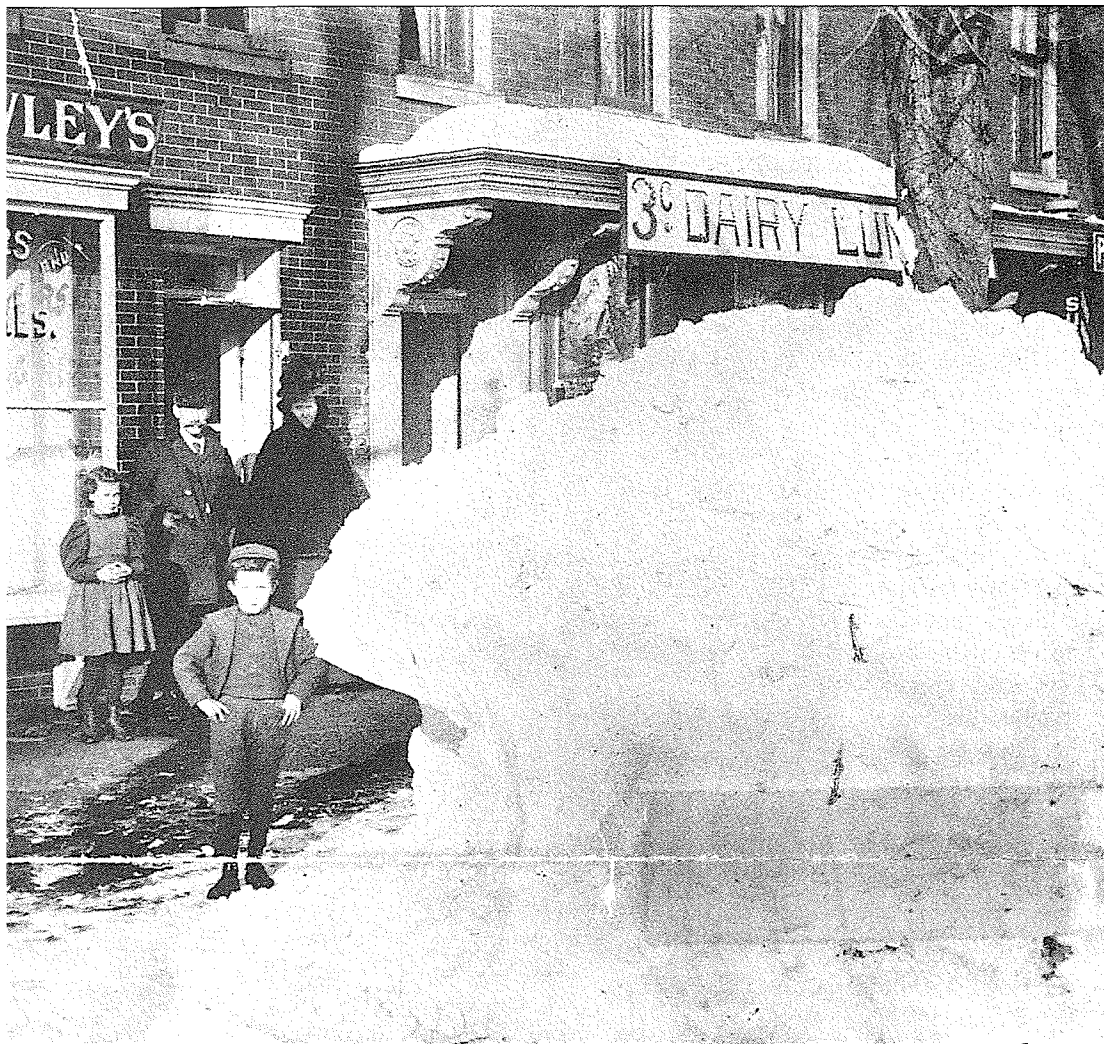
by Ann Hulbert

Blizzards are famously conducive to conceiving babies, and during a huge snowstorm that blanketed the East Coast in mid-February 1899, a particular group of American women and a few men certainly had babies on the brain. But they were not at home feeling snug. The sturdiest among an anticipated audience of 200 or so were fighting their way to the third annual convention of the National Congress of Mothers in Washington D.C. En route to the capital for four days of speeches and discussion about the latest enlightened principles of child nurture, the women delegates and the experts who had signed up for the event found the traveling rough. “Nearly all trolley lines had abandoned their trips . . . and livery men refused to send carriages out,” it was reported later in the proceedings of the Congress. “Hundreds of travelers were compelled to remain from 12 to 24 hours in ordinary passenger coaches without food or sleep.”

The progressive-spirited teachers, mothers, reformers, doctors, and others who finally arrived in Washington, full of “strange and wonderful stories . . . of their adventures,” encountered a virtual state of nature. The city was threatened by a coal famine because trains had not been running. Gas had given out, leaving many parts of the capital in darkness. “Food was also scarce, and the streets impassable,” transformed into mere paths flanked by walls of snow 10 to 12 feet high.

The primitive gloom made an ironic setting for a self-consciously modern gathering dedicated to ushering in “the century of the child,” a vista of human improvement that a speaker at an earlier convention had described in the grandest of terms: “It is childhood’s teachableness that





A scene from the 1899 blizzard that blanketed Washington, D.C., during the third annual convention of the National Congress of Mothers.

has enabled man to overcome heredity with history, to lift himself out of the shadowy regions of instinct into the bright realms of insight, to merge the struggle for existence into mutual coordination in the control of the environment. . . . The very meaning and mission of childhood is the continuous progress of humanity." The February storm seemed to mock the faith in control of the environment. Rude nature had dramatically assumed the upper hand in Washington as 1899 began.

Yet for that very reason, snowbound Washington also made an ideal backdrop for the conference. Among the participants who filled the pews of the First Baptist Church at 16th and O streets there was an exhilarated sense that the elements had supplied them with an occasion to display their true missionary mettle. "Notwithstanding the difficulties experienced in reaching their destination," the Congress secretary proudly reported, "not a single speaker failed to appear." The two most prominent child-rearing authorities of the day, the stars of the program, were not about to miss the opportunity to address such a stalwart audi-

ence—especially, perhaps, since each knew the other had been invited.

Dr. Luther Emmett Holt, known as one of America's first and finest pediatricians, and Dr. G. Stanley Hall, who had earned the first psychology doctorate in the country and held the first chair in the discipline, represented contrasting approaches in the emerging field of scientific child-rearing expertise. They did not consider themselves competitors. They knew there was plenty of room for both of them as public, highly professional spokesmen for the cause of childhood. Still, each was also well aware that amid the growing clamor or concern about children, it was worth an uncomfortable journey to make sure his presence was registered on such a high-profile occasion as this one.

Dr. Holt, whose manual, *The Care and Feeding of Children*, had been selling unprecedentedly well since its publication five years before, made his way from New York City to deliver a talk on his specialty, "The Physical Care of Children." With the punctiliousness that was his trademark, he informed modern mothers of their duty to become scientific professionals on nutritional matters. They were also to guard their growing children vigilantly against germs and undue stimulation. Holt prescribed systematic study—of children and of expert wisdom—as the necessary antidote to old-fashioned sentimentality.

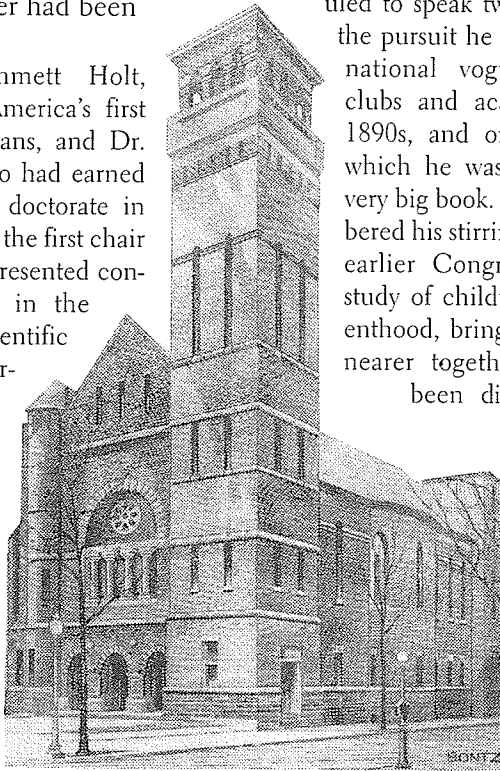
Dr. Hall, the president of Clark University and an early supporter of the Congress (he sat on its Committee on Education), came all the way from

Worcester, Massachusetts. He was scheduled to speak twice, on "child study," the pursuit he had helped to make a national vogue among mothers' clubs and academics alike in the 1890s, and on adolescence, about which he was then busy writing a very big book. If his listeners remembered his stirring proclamations at an earlier Congress about how "the study of children . . . enriches parenthood, brings the adult and child nearer together," they must have

been disappointed when he had time to deliver only "Initiations into Adolescence," which didn't begin to live up to its titillating title. This romantic guru was known for effusions about the age "when temptations are hottest, when the pressure is highest, when young people

must have excitement or be dwarfed." But here he spoke in his encyclopedic vein. As Hall droned on, summarizing mountains of data on puberty rites the world over, even the most attentive in his audience might have been tempted to sleep.

Except that it was a point of pride with the self-consciously modern mothers gathered at the Congress, as it was with the self-consciously "expert" men who addressed them, to expect an exhaustive treatment of the many child-related topics presented to them. The long-running 19th-century fascination with childhood had become a demanding fixation as the 20th century neared. Dr. Holt opened his talk by marveling that "at no previous time has there been such a wide general interest in all that concerns childhood, as shown by the numerous books constantly issuing from the press upon these subjects, the periodicals devoted to the different



The First Baptist Church

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phases of the child problem, and finally, but by no means least, by the organization of such societies as this.”

Holt notably omitted women’s magazines. In fact, wide and general interest in the subject had already been thriving for decades. Pious portraits of tender youth and devoted maternity were a staple of the burgeoning 19th-century popular periodical market, with its mostly female audience. Child-rearing advice books and columns by women and moralizing clergymen had found an eager readership, especially in the Northeast. But it was precisely Holt’s point to mark a new, austere modern beginning. This was no Victorian crusade on behalf of children, led by soft feminine hearts and by gentle ministers from the pulpit. The “child problem” now required studious thought for its solution, and scientists fresh from the labs proposed to train maternal minds.

The “child problem,” to put it differently, had grown up. It was going to school, becoming “professionalized,” like so much else in the era. Men of science applauded the impressive growth spurt in a proprietary spirit, rather like proud parents. Indeed, they were playing a formative role in endowing motherhood with new rigor, and their efforts were welcomed by middle-class women who had been struggling for decades to upgrade the status of child rearing. Where parents had once relied on “uncertain instinct” and religious dogma in guiding the growth of their progeny, now they could aspire to “unhesitating insight”: that was the promise of the turn-of-the-century “ideology of educated motherhood,” as one historian has called it.

According to the emerging scientific wisdom, children were to be viewed for the first time as children, rather than as little adults. It seemed even possible, to judge by the calls to rigor and the warnings against mere “affection,” that mothers were being invited to become more like men—or at any rate less infantilely feminine. At least powerful male scientists, not just genteel ministers, were now paying serious attention to them and their charges. To be a “disciple” of the eminent clergyman Horace Bushnell, author of

Christian Nurture (1847), or even of such European pedagogic prophets as Friedrich Froebel and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, was no longer the acme of advanced middle-class motherhood, as it had been at the height of the Victorian cult of domesticity. The new and secular maternal ideal, modeled by the pediatric and psychological experts themselves, was to master what was now proclaimed to be a modern, systematic discipline.

I

The turn-of-the-century “discovery” of childhood was hardly the first time that adults in the Western world had subjected the family, especially the treatment of its younger members, to self-conscious scrutiny. Pick the end of any post-medieval century and you can find historians discerning a dramatic shift in, and rising concern about, parent-child relations. In his classic work on the subject, *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), the French historian Philippe Ariès locates the dawn of a new “child-centered” conception of family life in the Renaissance and Reformation worlds, as education acquired new social and moral importance. The “affectionate” family was in the process of being born (the first of many times). “The care expended on children inspired new feelings, a new emotional attitude, to which the iconography of the 17th century gave brilliant and insistent expression,” Ariès observes. “The child became an indispensable element of everyday life, and his parents worried about his education, his career, his future.”

Another wave of anxious interest broke at the turn of the 18th century, when John Locke published his hugely influential *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). Noncoercive, rational instruction became the parent’s responsible, rewarding duty. Nurturing “filial reason” rather than breaking fierce infant wills became the goal. By the late 18th century, in the equally influential *Émile* (1762), Jean Jacques Rousseau had issued the call for more freedom for children’s “natural inclinations.” The trick was subtly to tailor the

The learning and training of a child is woman's wisdom.

—Alfred Lord Tennyson (all set-off quotations and advertisements come from the souvenir program of the National Congress of Mothers, 1899)

guidance of children to their growth, which entailed yet more intensive (but unobtrusive) tutorial efforts. Worshipful attentiveness on the part of adults, the Romantic poets concurred, was the least the imaginative child of nature deserved.

The solicitous nurturing doctrines found an especially fertile seedbed—to use the gardening imagery the pedagogues loved—in colonial America, where an upstart generation was settling down far from home. The “American revolution against patriarchal authority,” as the literary historian Jay Fliegelman calls it in *Prodigals and Pilgrims* (1982), was about freeing sons as well as about deposing kings—about preparing children for independence rather than exacting slavish obedience from them. Child-rearing advice began to appear, the bulk of it aimed at fathers during the 18th century, warning against parental tyranny and worrying about self-control. The message also pervaded the bestsellers of that newborn genre, the novel (in books by Daniel Defoe, Lawrence Sterne, and Samuel Richardson, and their American imitators). The family dramas most popular in America often turned on children's new claims to self-determination, and parents' new obligations to educate without dominating.

The turn of the 19th century brought yet another crisis of the family and a surge of concern about child rearing. The demographic, economic, social, moral, spiritual, literary, and intellectual influences at work creating an increasingly child-preoccupied culture in industrializing America defy neat summary. But a familiar refrain brackets the cen-

tury's beginning and its Victorian close: the “affectionate” (suffocating, according to many) family had arrived, again, this time in newly feminized form.

Liberal theologians revised harsh Calvinist tenets, granting children redeemable, docile wills and their parents more power over the shaping of them. Philosophers had reasoned carefully with fathers a century before, urging the wisdom of careful reasoning with children. Now ministers, relying less on the “theology of the intellect” and more on the “theology of the feelings,” appealed to mothers to rely on their “feminine instinct and sensitivity” in the shaping of innocent souls. With the decline of a subsistence agrarian economy, especially in the minister-saturated Northeast, more and more men left the hearthside and the company of their children to compete in the new world of the market. Home became the special, “separate sphere” of women, who were no longer partners with men in productive household labor. Instead wives and mothers were expected to serve as ministering presences in what was heralded as an emotional, spiritual “haven” from the rapacious realm of money and the machine.

Tributes to gentle maternal molding power, and tracts on how best to apply it to sweetly malleable youth, were the core of the Victorian “cult of true womanhood.” While patriarchal power retreated behind an impressive beard, paeans to feminine “influence” abounded, glorifying its uncoercive yet pervasive sway. “Like the power of gravitation,” Sarah Hale, an editor of a prominent woman's magazine, exclaimed, it “works unseen but irresistibly over the hearts and consciences of men.”

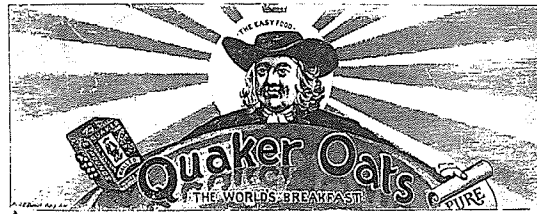


“A little child shall lead them.” Even if one allows for

the conventionally breathless rhetoric in which it was couched, this exaltation of feminine suasion often sounded strained. Certainly the work entrusted to America's delicate hearts was daunting. From within their serene temples, angelic mothers were single-handedly supposed to solve what had long been, and has remained, the essential child-rearing dilemma: how to secure obedience yet foster independence, all without rousing undue resistance. The challenge, in other words, was to reconcile authority and liberty—a challenge that, of course, faces adults, not simply children, and that confronted Victorian women in particular more starkly than ever before.

So what was left to discover at the turn of the 20th century? That the child had not really been discovered after all, and that neither the fathers' nor the mothers' answers to the dilemma seemed to work satisfactorily—for fathers and mothers, that is. It was difficult to say whether they worked for the child, since she was yet to be discovered, as was the shape of the unknown future she would inhabit. Only a new quest for the child, the creature of the future, could begin to answer the question. It was time for scientists and children to pick up where philosophers and fathers, and then ministers and mothers, had left off. By the end of the deeply polarized Victorian era, even (or especially) revered mothers and industrious fathers welcomed wisdom from such enlightening, unthreatening sources. And what child complains about being made the center of attention? You might say “the century of the child” was born to save a marriage.

The Victorian science of differentiating men and women (the former “great brained,” the latter equipped with, among other things, an expanded “abdominal zone . . . [which] is the physical basis of the altruistic sentiments”) was still popular, but under increasing pressure from feminists and lack of evidence. The sci-



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ence of the child offered an opportunity to rise above the dichotomies of abstract “masculine” reason and abundant “feminine” emotion. Instead, scientists heralded imaginative observation—a specialty of youth—as the key that would unlock the secrets of growth and guidance. Children should be seen but not heard: that old adage cried out for revision in the century of the child, Americans in the Progressive era agreed, but their first impulse was not to encourage, or expect, a dramatic rise in the infant noise level. The new imperative was, above all, for adults to use their eyes in ways they had never before bothered to—to cultivate a childlike curiosity about children. They had “seen” them, but they had never really looked at them, much less considered making an effort to imagine how the world might look to them. It was time to focus steadily on children and watch them change, rather than merely gaze down upon them fondly and dream about (or dread) their future.

Darwinism gave empirical scrutiny of the human species a new impetus, if not a

completely respectable imprimatur in all eyes. But tracing mankind's origins in children rather than to monkeys was an appealing enterprise. The child provided what Darwin's theory needed, an example of evolution in action: one didn't have to subscribe to the doctrine that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (though many did) to find the spectacle of adaptive development inspiring. At the same time, Darwin's theory offered what the new devotees of childhood needed: an example of systematic observation in action. In fact, Darwin, as his American followers eagerly emphasized, paved the way. He kept notebooks about his own offspring, whose first tears, fears, reflexes, rages, noises, and subsequent social and verbal antics he tracked

rhea, which was commonly blamed on teething. But by the 1890s, most medical men were ready to agree with Dr. Thomas Morgan Rotch of Harvard Medical School that the culprit was "an infectious disease caused by a specific organism not yet discovered." Dr. Holt's drily descriptive *Diseases of Infancy and Childhood* (1897) served as a landmark for his academic colleagues: an unprecedentedly methodical map to aid in the search to identify not one specific organism, it turned out, but many.

At exactly the same time, psychology took an experimental, genetic turn, spurred by a conviction that the intricate secrets of human consciousness were to be found in its unfolding, which could be watched in the growing infant. "The opening germ of intelligence [considered] from the colder point of view of science": that was the guiding interest of a new school of psychologists, as James Sully, a British professor of philosophy of mind and logic, put it in his influential *Studies of Childhood* (1896). "Genetic psychology is the psychology of the future," Dr. Hall proclaimed from his post at Clark, where he arrived in 1881, determined to establish the discipline on newly scientific footing, complete with laboratory resources. The old introspective approach was passé. "We must carry the work of Darwin into the field of the human soul," Hall announced—which meant carrying it also into the nurseries of America.

The psychologists stressed the rigorous, unfeminine spirit required for this babygazing, but they also acknowledged that mothers, logging long hours with the small specimens, might be useful accomplices—given some training. The pediatricians, too, emphasized that the new hygienic regimens called for an exactitude and discipline heretofore lacking in the female precincts of the nursery. But Dr. Holt's *Care and Feeding of Children* promised to equip nurses and mothers, through exacting dietary prescriptions, to

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As the century ended, biology promised to bring order and light to the fields of American medicine and psychology, which had long been dominated by, respectively, quackery and philosophy. The alluring new specimen for study was the child. Pediatrics was officially ranked a specialty, and a cutting-edge one, at a meeting of the American Medical Association in 1880. The quest was on to discover and control the infecting germ, and there was no place like childhood for grim clues to work with. In America, as in most of the Western world, more than a quarter of all children born between 1850 and 1900 died before they turned five. Half of them were killed by summer diar-

It seems crystal clear at the outset, that you cannot govern a child, if you have never learned to govern yourself.

—K. D. Wiggin

keep germs at bay. The rather grudging, condescending tone did not deter eager mothers. If anything, it seemed to serve as a goad. The scientific perspective on child rearing presented a welcome challenge to increasingly urban and educated American women. In 1888, a group of upper-middle-class New York City mothers formed the Society for the Study of Child Nature, and within a few years mothers' clubs and child study groups were meeting all over the country.

II

In the convening of the National Congress of Mothers, the widespread mood of a closing century coalesced into a self-conscious, institutionalized movement for a new era. As Alice Birney, the Congress's president, observed to the assembled company at the first meeting in 1897, they were joining what "is, as every one knows, an age of 'movements' . . . a time of specialized work and of organized effort." At the podium, specialists confirmed their status as popular experts, translating new and arcane science for everyday use by parents, whose more organized efforts as child rearers could spare the nation so much social woe. "Given one generation of children properly born and wisely trained," exclaimed an editorial in the *New York Times* hailing the advent of the Congress, "and what a vast proportion of human ills would disappear from the face of the earth!"

What distinguished the Congress, which was suffused with familiar Victorian tributes to "the highest and holiest of missions—motherhood," was the welcome it extended, and the perfect platform it provided, to experts as high and nearly holy allies in the cause. This was a *modern* children's crusade designed for a newly scientific age and for a newly mixed company of

missionaries. The National Congress of Mothers provided a much publicized occasion to celebrate and promote an unprecedented relationship in American family life, between parent—mother—and professional expert. In the contemporaneous domestic science movement (the Home Economics Association was founded in 1899), a similar partnership had formed, but with a notable difference: the experts on household management, like their audience, were themselves women. The Congress was a meeting ground for a growing class of enlightened women, who were better educated than ever before and restless at home, and a new variety of enlightened, ambitious men. They were pioneering professors of psychology and medicine, fresh from studying with the revered scientific eminences of Europe. They aimed not just to put their fields at the forefront of the American academy, but to wield influence outside its walls as well.

The bridge between experts and mothers was the concept of "vocation," which conveniently blended spiritual zeal with practical goals and, above all, with arduous educational demands. In *The Century of the Child*, a bestseller in 1909, Ellen Key invoked "an entirely new conception of the vocation of mother, a tremendous effort of will, continuous inspiration." To appreciate the novelty of the conception, it helps to look back to a similarly challenging vision of motherhood that had surfaced half a century before in one of the early homegrown examples of secular advice literature for American parents, Lydia Sigourney's *Letters to Mothers*, published in 1838. Sigourney, too, heaped on the impressive pedagogical credentials in her counsel to mothers:

Wise men have said, and the world begins to believe, that it is the province of women to teach. You then, as a mother,

are advanced to the head of that profession. I congratulate you. You hold that license which authorizes you to teach always. You have attained that degree in the College of Instruction, by which your pupils are continually in your presence, receiving lessons whether you intend or not, and if the voice of precept be silent, fashioning themselves on the model of your example.

Since then, however, a decisive shift had taken place in the educational requirements of motherhood. Teaching was no longer the essence of the mission; invisible and unconscious "influence" was no longer the method. At the dawning of the modern era, scientific men were saying, and women were evidently avid to believe, that it was the duty of mothers to embark on the even more exacting (and exciting) task of learning—from their children, and from the experts who would show them how to study that subject right under their nose. It was not a demotion, for now self-development was part of what had previously been billed solely as selfless devotion. "What, then, would we have?" asked a speaker at the first Congress of Mothers. She had her answer at the ready: "that women, mothers especially, who are becoming students of everything else under the sun become students of childhood and students of every system, scheme, plan, and practice for the development of the body, mind, and character of the child; not that the students of to-day shall make good mothers, but that the mothers of to-day shall make good students."

The notion of parenthood as a postgraduate calling offered a way to deal with important dilemmas facing mothers and experts. It supplied an answer to the question of what all those college-bound women would do when they finished their studies, which would prepare them for so much more than merely following in their mothers' old-fashioned domestic footsteps. They would keep on studying, without having to leave home to do it (except perhaps to attend a conference or two or three).

Alice Birney and her followers were not about to oppose educational opportunities for women. They were too "advanced" for

such reactionary sentiments. But they were hardly radical feminists either, as Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English emphasize in *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Expert Advice to Women* (1978). Uneasy that "all the caps and gowns" might stir undomestic ambitions, the Congress leaders made a point of extolling college (where 85,000 women were enrolled by 1900) as the crucial prerequisite for enlightened motherhood. "No boy of hers will get to that sorrowful age when he feels that he knows a great deal more than his mother," the Congress's magazine emphasized. "She can be his friend and companion for all time." And with "knowledge and training," no mother would find the domestic sphere "narrow and monotonous," or merely soft and sentimental. To "turn back into the home the tide of femininity, which is now streaming outward in search of a career," and to harness women's new powers and ambitions to ever more challenging domestic purposes, was one important aim of the organization.

The experts' role as prophets of health, both physical and psychological, fulfilled their ambivalent ambitions as well. Dr. Holt and Dr. Hall had entered academia in the 1880s as it was acquiring professionalized prestige in America, eclipsing the clergy in status. The two of them, like their growing cohort of colleagues, were excitedly committed to pushing back the frontiers in the most promising and fastest growing domain, science. Their success represented dramatic upward mobility. Their fathers had been northeastern farmers, and none too prosperous ones at that.

Yet the big-city bustle and godless lab work also needed a higher justification for these earnest sons of the soil, whose mothers had been pillars of piety. Like so many men during the fin-de-siècle period of rapid urbanization, Hall and Holt had left their fathers in the dust, and their supremely capable mothers as well. Once arrived in the metropolis, they could afford to feel qualms about their escape. Their fathers' rugged sacrifices, too little appreciated then, now merited gratitude. Their

devout mothers' insistent admonitions against selfish materialism and vain ambition had left deep marks, too. Hall, an earnest Baptist, and Holt, a more conflicted Congregationalist, had the preacher impulse in their blood, and were determined to prove themselves upstanding guides to the future, not impious rebels against the past.

In the closing decades of the century, a new pulpit beckoned. Science was proving itself a morally high and socially helpful pursuit, and a well-funded one, thanks to the support of plutocrats eager to burnish their reputations for posterity—and in need of donnish advisers in the cause. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was consulting Holt on the creation of what was to become the Rockefeller Institute in New York. The businessman and speculator Jonas Clark, founder and funder of America's first graduate faculty devoted to scientific research, had turned to Hall to guide it more than a decade earlier.

The academics certainly did not consider themselves hired help. The rich men were in a sense their patrons. It mattered to the robber-barons-turned-philanthropists that the specialists brought with them not merely professional standing but public repute as well. In turn, the experts obviously benefited: thanks to the prominent backing, their popular profile rose. No plutocrat could quite hope to become an icon of selfless authority, but his attending doctor—his presiding professor—could. Emissaries between the lab and the mother's lap, the experts on children could help sanctify both realms, bringing rigor into the home and vigor into the halls of knowledge.

What the mission of enlightened child rearing required, and had created, was a new authority figure for an age in which parental authority had once again become a question. In the speeded-up world that was dawning, parents could no longer simply be active, unreflective models for their

children. Nor, for the same reason, did it seem possible any longer for parents themselves to rely on mere apprenticeship to their parents as a guide to the new child-rearing challenge. Their own upbringings, it was easy to feel, had not equipped them for the difficult task of preparing their own children for a future that would be unimaginably different. The recognition of parents' duty to prepare children more assiduously to exercise their full right to independence dated back to Locke and before. What stands out at the turn of the 20th century is the explicit emphasis by parents on their own right to disobey their parents, or at least to do things differently—and scientifically.

An antidote to sentimentalism had an appeal for everybody. Middle-class women were not only more educated, they were also less occupied with productive household labors and burdened with fewer children. (The fertility rate among white women dropped from seven in 1800 to 3.9 in 1890 to 3.2 by 1920.) They wanted serious work and status. They still spent plenty of time on domestic chores—servants were scarcer, and the rest of the family pitched in less—but child rearing was obviously the duty that could be most rewardingly upgraded. Middle-class men were eager to feel that their wives were working, and that their children had value—and would have future value because they were being raised to thrive in the competitive, complicated world of the future. Socializing children for a century marked by change and by ever more complex organization no longer presented itself as a straightforward matter of turning out hardy sons, or of rearing entrepreneurs who, if they relied on their reason, took risks, and were lucky, might surpass their fathers. Nor were daughters simply to be molded softly in their mothers' selfless image. Because children had to be prepared for futures

Adult anarchy is nursery lawlessness come to the full
corn in the ear. —Parkhurst

in a world set up increasingly along managerial and professional lines, it stood to reason that middle-class motherhood should become a vocation of professional management.

The expert emerged as the missing link: the modern parent's modern parent. He would do more than provide a new model of childhood. He would himself serve as a new model of parenthood for mothers who, like the children they were in charge of, were demanding and receiving more serious attention and social status than ever before. The experts would be as intently and self-consciously observant of mothers as mothers were to be of their children; as full of ambition for the ever higher development of mothers as mothers were to be for their children's perfection; as torn between the goals of empowering and controlling mothers as mothers were to be when it came to their children; as insecure about their true status in the eyes of mothers as mothers were in relation to their children.

The experts' attitude toward fathers was much less clear. On the one hand, the experts masculinized a field that had been, at least in memorable lore, the province of women. They made child rearing a systematic vocation, overseen by men. Thus in theory, at least, they opened it to men as it had never been before, serving as role models of male interest and mastery themselves. On the other hand, in making parenthood a vocation, rather than an avocation, they effectively consigned fathers, the wage earners, to the sidelines. It was a paradox, the full implications of which gradually became apparent, that the cure for the "feminization" of the family in fact helped perpetuate the problem in different forms. The dictates of scientific, "professional" nurture scripted an ever more



Dr. G. Stanley Hall

intensive, exclusive relationship between mother and child.

In the meantime, what the expert-guided approach to parenthood promised to dispense with was precisely what the prescientific approach inevitably entailed, and what the entrepreneurial character needed to be ready to face, even embrace: risk taking. A child's health was now considered to be largely under his mother's control (with help from doctors). Equally novel, a child's fate was no longer assumed to be under his father's control, determined by his father's career and station—which meant, somewhat paradoxically, that the child's growth required much more careful supervision. The utmost parental vigilance was now required to prepare children, as Dr. Holt put it, "to grapple successfully with the complex conditions and varied responsibilities which will be their lot."

III

This new authority figure, the child-rearing expert, did not present a single image of enlightened parenthood but, appropriately enough, two basic models—one sterner and more "masculine," the other empathetic and effusive, yet both impressively scientific. At the podium at the National Congress of Mothers, Dr. Holt and Dr. Hall made an emblematic pair. Approximate contemporaries, Hall at 55 and Holt at 45 performed as complementary public promoters of enlightened wisdom about children. Their show had gone on the road during the 1890s, when Holt came out with his best-selling little book and Hall took up a bustling lecture schedule. (During 1893–94, he gave 34 major public speeches.)

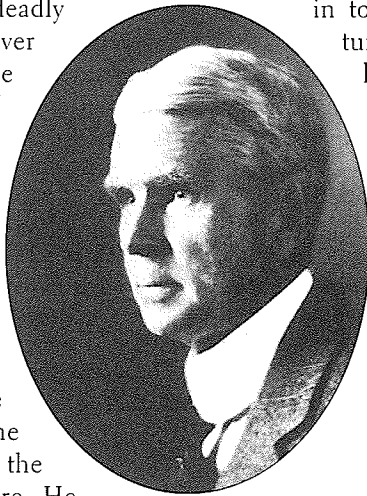
Each looked perfectly cast for the part he played. Holt was the rationalist authority in the physical realm. The pediatrician, who had once described the child as a “delicately constructed piece of machinery,” taught that the key to growth and health lay in a regimented diet. He was a study in buttoned-up propriety, always “immaculately dressed,” his hair “parted exactly in the middle,” as a devoted former student described him, evidently awed. “Not one hair was out of place.” Holt’s speaking style was just as meticulous. “He spoke in short, crisp sentences, in a voice low and clear. His manner was deadly earnest . . . there was never any digression from the steady progression of facts.”

Hall’s completely different appeal, in his biographer’s words, “was his special combination of moralism and romanticism.” His vast domain was the uncharted depths of the child psyche, in which he believed lay the “soul of the race,” the secrets of nature. He had the full beard, the piercing eyes, and the shining pate of a prophet. His former friend William James once said of Hall, when they had become rivals, that he “hates clearness . . . and mystification of some kind seems never far distant from anything he does.” His writing could indeed be Teutonically convoluted, but apparently his rhetorical style at the podium struck his listeners as warm and inspirational. There was nothing crisp about it. Hall cascaded, speaking “with great sincerity and naturalness of manner, gliding easily from simple exposition to lyrical hyperbole.”

In his speech to the Congress, Holt outlined, in Lockean spirit, the all-important power of parental nurture, especially during the formative period of infancy. Hall took a more Rousseauian tack, championing the child’s own natural impulses and rich imagination as the best guide to his growth. If Holt was

the “diet” man, carefully prescribing what should (and, as important, should not) go into the child’s stomach, Hall was the “diary” man, exhaustively transcribing what comes out of the child’s mind. Straitlaced Holt was concerned to turn children into grownups in a grown-up way: step by step. He placed the emphasis on what the young lacked, and what adults could supply, which was rationality and a well-trained will. Hall was a quirkier fellow. He was fascinated by the process of growth and drawn to the notion that adults should “become as

little children,” or at any rate remain in touch with the invigorating tumult of adolescence. For he was struck by what adults lacked, which youth seemed to have in such abundance: spontaneity, deep reservoirs of feeling and imagination, and a phenomenal capacity for growth.



Dr. L. Emmett Holt

The preacherly manner of both men has an inevitably quaint ring, but the turn-of-the-century urgency that animated them sounds remarkably current. In their contrasting approaches to “the child problem,” Holt and Hall established the poles that have oriented debate on this favorite American fixation ever since. And their lectures, like the addresses delivered throughout the Congress of Mothers, joined in pointing up two defining features of the child-rearing advice genre.

First of all, an enterprise officially dedicated to the understanding and the rearing of children has been from the very start as preoccupied, if not more preoccupied, with criticizing and training parents, mothers in particular. Alice Birney’s welcoming address in 1899 mentioned children only in passing, in blandly general terms. It was their

duncelike elders who obsessed her and her fellow Congress members. "The innocent and helpless are daily, hourly, victimized through the ignorance of untrained parents," she scolded. "I claim, without hesitancy, the greatest evil to-day is the incompetency, the ignorance of parents, and it is because of this evil that others exist."

Second, and obviously related, this brand of how-toism has never engaged in the conventional business of dispensing reassurance. On the contrary, among its central purposes has been to conceive, and constantly reconceive, parenthood as an ever more demanding and time-consuming endeavor. At times, the experts seem to have been convinced that all those ignorant parents were a carefree or impulsive lot—in need of a stern talking to and a daunting endeavor

an enterprise could inspire stability in women, and new energy in men. It also held out the promise of selfless self-discovery and liberating self-control for all—including, it sometimes seems as an afterthought, children.

The catchall diagnosis that America is alarmingly full of parents who are heedless, or anxious, or both—and ill equipped to deal with the challenge of modern childhood—is, in short, an old one. So is the nostalgic verdict that children themselves have become anxious, and all too often heedless, to a degree never before seen. "The conditions which kept child life simple and natural 50 years ago have largely changed since that time; on every side there is more to stimulate the nervous system and less opportunity for muscular development,"

Dr. Holt explained. "One of the most important reasons for this is the far greater proportion of children now than formerly who are reared in cities and large towns"—and who spend lots of time in "the modern school," as Dr. Hall worried in his speech to the Congress on child study. The child shut "away from Nature and free movement and play in an unwholesome air, worried and nervous."

Innocent children, they both felt, were becoming "miniature men and women" before their time.

In their talks at the Congress neither expert said much, in any direct way, about his vision of children. (Nor, notably, did any of the speakers at the event: the new focus on the child, so often and widely celebrated, could be fuzzy indeed.) What their remarks do convey is their conception of mothers, as they saw them and as they hoped to see them. Actual mothers, to judge by the tone of their talks, bore an uncanny resemblance to children in their need of training. The ideal parent, perhaps not surprisingly, turns out to be a figure on the order of the expert himself.

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to cure their flighty selfishness. More often, the experts expressed a different, self-contradictory view: their unnervingly arduous counsel was intended to help cure a widespread case of nerves among parents.

As Birney and her colleagues said again and again, the problem as they saw it was a nation in danger of being overrun by self-conscious, neurasthenic adults: men enervated by excessive thinking and working, women worn down by, as Alice James's doctor put it, "the emotions . . . the most exhausting of all mental attributes." The remedy they prescribed was systematic, intensive study and training of children, the fresh hope of humanity and the future. Such

America looks to-day, not to legislative enactments, nor
to public organizations, but to her homes, as
containing the bud and promise of her future glory.

—Anonymous

The era of the amateur mother was over. On that all-important point Hall and Holt completely agreed. They knew that they could count on the audience to concur as well. Still, the experts made sure to emphasize just how all-consuming a challenge such a pathbreaking transformation in status implied: mothers were more important than ever, but the new independence and confidence the advisers promised them would require some studious self-doubts. Mothers now had elevated guides, in the form of scientific experts and sanctified children. There was also a new prerequisite for would-be enlightened parents: a willingness—even better, a passionate eagerness—to question their own instincts.

A tremendous effort of will, continuous inspiration”: The reformer Ellen Key’s characterization of the “entirely new conception of the vocation of mother” conveyed the intensity that was winning adherents, or at least proponents, as the 19th century closed. With her gift for blending rhapsody and rigor, Key captured the spirit of eager bonding among expert, parent, and child that suffused the turn-of-the-century moment. “Our soul is to be filled by the child just as the man of science is possessed by his investigations,” Key wrote in her book, conjuring an image of lab-coated mothers measuring formulas and weighing babies. Then she rephrased the ideal of emulation in a more romantic vein. Mothers are to “be as entirely and simply taken up with the child as the child himself is absorbed by his life.” At the 1898 meeting of the National Congress of Mothers, a speaker had proposed the missing analogy, which cozily closed this circle of avid learners. Mary Lowe Dickinson, president of the National Council of Women in New York City,

had welcomed the scientific experts in attendance as, what else, children—“children [who] have been gathering their pebbles on the shore—new views, profounder convictions, broader theories, more comprehensive plans, deeper truths, more solid facts, daintier dreams, more practical methods—and have brought those pebbles here.”

She spoke accurately, as well as colorfully. This was the early childhood of the experts’ enterprise, the wonder years. As popular and academic pioneers in the fledgling field of child study, Dr. Holt and Dr. Hall showed youthful energy, optimism, and industry. Their missionary work among mothers invigorated them as they dipped into their own childhoods for more than a few of their pebbles of child-rearing wisdom. They had no idea, of course, where those ideas would lead. Rather, they expected them to be swept aside by waves of change, which would eventually deliver the definitive science of child rearing.

Instead, their basic ideas have been tossed around, in what have turned out to be ebbs and flows in child-rearing fashions. In the 1920s, Dr. John Broadus Watson claimed Holt as his inspiration. Hall’s student Dr. Arnold Gesell emerged as a dispenser of popular advice in the 1930s. As Dr. Benjamin Spock soared to unprecedented prominence in the 1940s, his nemeses were Holt and Dr. Watson. At the same time, a Hallian spirit resurfaced in the “conservative radical,” as one of Spock’s biographers called him. You can still hear faint echoes of these pioneering experts, if you try, in the post-Spock din of advice, where nutrition how-to-ism thrives and titles like *How to Talk so Your Teenager Will Listen/How to Listen so Your Teenager Will Talk* always sell. The child, as they say, is father to the man.

IV

We have been trained, in no small part by the developmental ethos of our child-rearing experts, to seek out that child-father, to look for coherent progression in our own characters and in those of our children. And we are usually good at finding unity and continuity, at least in retrospect. But it is hard to trace clear lines of descent, or ascent, amid the tangles of a century's worth of child-rearing expertise. That no definitive, mature science of child rearing has emerged is hardly a surprise. The hope for one now looks naive, a failure to recognize the gap that inevitably yawns between "is"—the descriptions and explanations provided by science—and "ought," the social choices we make.

The surprise is that the state of child-rearing wisdom still seems so immature. The proliferation of expertise has been phenomenal, but progress has been anything but straightforward. It is striking first, how few uncontested and empirically well-grounded advances have been made in scientific descriptions and explanations of children's "natures"; second, how consistently divided the prescriptions for "proper" nurture have been; and third, what unexpected, self-contradictory implications those prescriptions often have for parent, child, and society.

To be sure, there is a great deal more data about children's physical, psychological, emotional, and cognitive development now than there was in 1900, when Dr. Holt was busy exploring small stomachs and Dr. Hall was distributing questionnaires on every child study topic under the sun, from shyness to doll playing. But much of what has now been proved, or supported with many studies, had been guessed in at least rudimentary form decades earlier. Neuroscientific research in the 1990s, to cite some of the more impressively exact work that has lately been done, has focused on the spectacular growth in neural connections in infants. Stress of different kinds can impede all-important hook-ups; the

holes in the net are visible for the first time, thanks to new imaging technologies. In his speech to the Mothers Congress, Holt emphasized that "the brain grows more in the first two years than it does in all the rest of the life of the individual," and he warned of its vulnerability to pressures of various kinds.

The prescriptions offered by Holt and Hall are a paradigmatic case of the something-for-everyone style of expertise that has prevailed era after era. The experts were rarely in the business of completely overthrowing their predecessors. They reigned more cautiously, by a system of checks and balances. Thus, Dr. Watson's behaviorist strictures shared the stage with Dr. Gesell's hereditarian policies. And Dr. Spock's long-running pre-eminence only proves the point. The secret of his great popularity was his ability to deliver mellifluously mixed messages. The cacophany of counsel in his wake contains just about everything—from cut-and-dried disciplinary techniques to the discursive guidance offered by Drs. T. Berry Brazelton and Penelope Leach, from tips on helping your child get ahead to concern about "the hurried child."

Making neat sense of the shifting prescriptions is not easy. The obvious temptation is to say that child-rearing wisdom, only tenuously based on science, instead keeps time with prevailing social trends—that the experts are transparent social and psychological ideologists of their age. Stand far enough back, and it is possible to discern a shift in child-rearing themes that neatly complements a shift from a production-age to a consumption-age to an information-age culture. Thus expert and parent interest has moved from children's bodies and characters to their emotions and personalities, and then to their brains and temperaments.

But what is more notable is that expertise has not marched in lock step with the times, or at least not predictably so. The dominant experts have been emblematic figures, but not mainstream ones. Dr. Hall sermonizing and talking

about sex, Dr. Watson extolling the lab and then excelling in the ad business, Dr. Spock in his suit on the antiwar barricades: the advisers have been cutting edge and old-fashioned at the same time. Plenty in their wisdom has been self-contradictory, and quite different from what it seems. Thus the stricter rationalists—such as Holt and Watson—sound like advocates of conformity, but their advice often leaves more room for individuality, for both mother and child. It's the romantics, from Hall to Spock and beyond, who espouse freedom and fluidity. Yet they aspire to greater, if subtler, control over the psyches and anxieties of parents and children.

Their audience has been as full of contradictions as they are. Ever since the National Congress of Mothers, mothers have clamored for tips fresh from the child development labs, and

then complained about all the competing, contestable advice on offer. They have yearned to have their burdens lifted, and then avidly absorbed prescriptions that exalted and extended the responsibilities of parenthood. The more taxing and anxiety inducing the advice, often enough, the better. Working mothers gravitate to advice on the crucial importance of bonding. Stay-at-home mothers have proved a ready market for warnings about the importance of youthful autonomy.

Perhaps it is no wonder that the experts suspect mothers of often failing to follow their advice with any consistency. How could they? That may, in fact, be the saving grace of the genre. A century of dizzying advice may well have helped parents keep their heads. After all, when every wave of expert counsel conflicts with another, it is hard to get too carried away.