

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Bringing Up Baby

TOILET TRAINED FOR YALE:

Adventures in 21st-Century Parenting.

By Ralph Schoenstein. Perseus. 161 pp. \$20

RECLAIMING CHILDHOOD:

Letting Children Be Children in Our Achievement-Oriented Society.

By William Crain. Holt. 271 pp. \$25

PARANOID PARENTING:

Why Ignoring the Experts May Be Best for Your Child.

By Frank Furedi. Chicago Review Press. 233 pp. \$14.95 (paper)

RAISING AMERICA:

Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children.

By Ann Hullbert. Knopf. 436 pp. \$27.50

Reviewed by Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn

Throughout history, expert advice on raising children has fluctuated wildly, with each new approach diametrically opposed to what came before. A number of new books suggest that we now find ourselves in an era of parenting overdrive. Thanks in no small part to the preceding cycle of expert advice, we have succumbed to “paranoid parenting,” “hyperparenting,” and “push-parenting.” Today’s parents, it seems, are creating problems for their children simply by trying too hard.

Egged on by recent brain science findings, for instance, many parents go to great lengths to enhance the cognitive development of the zero-to-three crowd. In the light-hearted *Toilet Trained for Yale*, Ralph Schoenstein, the ghostwriter behind Bill Cosby’s best-selling books, exposes “the scary

new world of push-parenting,” from the notion that prenatal exposure to classical music heightens chances of future academic success (the so-called Mozart Effect) to the videotapes and books on how to teach a months-old baby to read. Beneath the humor, Schoenstein is plainly horrified by this frantic mission to create the “American Superkid” who, between violin and gymnastics lessons, tutoring in foreign languages, and car-seat tests with flashcards, is sure to end up at Yale.

In *Reclaiming Childhood*, psychologist William Crain offers a more thoughtful and engaging argument against hard-driving parenting. When he publicly lectures about the “charm of childhood”—having to do with children’s unique abilities and expressions in art, drama, language, poetry, and nature

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appreciation—his audiences often seem restless, he reports. What these parents really want to know “is how to help their children get into a prestigious college and become highly successful adults.”

In Crain’s view, our treatment of children from birth onward is skewed by a focus on their potential achievements as adults. Drawing on scholarly studies as well as children’s drawings and poems, he suggests that the emphasis on future success leaves us unable to appreciate childhood on its own terms. The instrumentalist notion of education as an aid to social mobility and prosperity, Crain argues, obscures the wonders of childhood and fosters styles of teaching that crush children’s spirits and natural abilities. Particularly insightful are his observations about children’s interest in nature and their tendency to see unity between human and nonhuman worlds. Crain’s antidote is the child-centered approach of such reformers as Maria Montessori, who believed that children should learn largely at their own pace and in their own fashion.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t seem to recognize how such an approach can go awry. For instance, he contends that the “standards” movement in elementary and secondary education is an enemy of spontaneity in learning. But one could argue that the sad state of our schools is rooted in misconceived versions of the “learning-by-doing” approach pioneered by Montessori and John Dewey, which slighted classical liberal arts training. While rightly questioning the recent obsession with standardized testing, Crain fails to see the distinction between the stultifying overteaching of young children and the academic rigor necessary in middle school and high school.

When advocating an approach toward children’s verbal expressions based on the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers, Crain similarly loses the thread. He favors the well-known therapeutic formula “active listening,” in which the parent “mirrors the child’s feelings.” If the child calls someone a jerk, the parent might respond, “You’re feeling angry.” Even as he derides parenting by didactic manipulation, Crain seems to endorse parenting by emotional manipulation.

Given his adoption of a therapeutic version of child centeredness, Crain’s dismissal of television and computers—favorite pastimes of many children—comes as something of a surprise. Here, he advocates a firmer approach to keep children from wasting away in “indoor environments dominated by TVs, computers, and video games.” If for no other reason, Crain’s book should be read for this eloquent exposition.

Sociologist Frank Furedi is also concerned with the urge to control children. In his searing indictment, *Paranoid Parenting*, he contends that a “culture of fear” has caused the older “nurturing” style of parenting to be displaced by one revolving around “monitoring” children. He notes that today’s experts commonly promote infant and parent “determinism”—the notions that the first few years of life can make or break a person’s future, and that the parents’ role is all-important. (Like Furedi, Judith Harris raised doubts about the determinist view in her 1998 book *The Nurture Assumption*.) Imbibing the experts’ warnings, many parents panic. Where children once enjoyed long periods of unsupervised play, now their lives are tightly circumscribed by watchful adults. Furedi sees this constant surveillance as a threat not only to children’s spontaneity and creativity but to their courage and willingness to take the risks required for learning.

The experts aren’t the only culprits, according to Furedi. We no longer have close-knit communities in which neighbors help look out for children. Adult authority has lost some measure of legitimacy. And moral clarity, or at least moral consensus, seems to have diminished. As a result, many parents feel uncomfortable with traditional discipline. Surveillance offers the “illusion of retaining control without having to confront the issue of discipline.”

Furedi questions whether all of this focus on children is genuine. In his view, the exaggerated attention to kids results from adults’ misdirected search for self-actualization. In an unstable social world of divorce and separation, the only bond that lasts is the one between parent and child—we may have ex-spouses but not ex-children—which makes



parents even more apprehensive about safeguarding their offspring.

The book is filled with examples of parents' disproportionate worries, covering everything from school shootings and kidnappings to the effects of television and the possible risks of the Internet. But there's a problem here: Given a social world that, as Furedi acknowledges, lacks any stable consensus about morality, maybe we *should* worry. His closing advice to parents is all well and good—let go, embrace a “positive vision of humanity” instead of anxiety and fear, cultivate help from other adults, and recognize experts' advice for the mere prejudice that it is—but it conveys a certain complacency about the very real dangers facing children. Until we can make society more conducive to children's freedom and independence, it hardly seems logical to drop our guard.

Furedi generally depicts the trend of invasive parenting as universal. But for many African American families, as sociologist Orlando Patterson and linguist John McWhorter have shown, the problem is hardly an overemphasis on academics. And no doubt many working parents would relish the opportunity to lavish undue supervision on their children instead of packing them off to daycare.

Furedi lumps fretfulness about daycare with the other sources of paranoia, but perhaps it plays a deeper role. Little wonder that

we see a parenting style with more focus on supervising than on nurturing, when society has embraced daycare as a solution to the disjuncture between full-time work, consumerism, and family life. At the same time, anxieties about daycare and the hours spent apart may fuel parents' oversolicitousness once they are reunited with their children. While not ideal, overcompensation is certainly preferable to the outright neglect that sometimes befalls children in truly strapped families.

In her beautifully written and engaging study, *Raising America*, Ann Hulbert displays a sense of balance and proportion often lacking in discussions of child rearing. Hulbert, the author of *The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford* (1992), presents a detailed and masterly history of ideas about parenting from the late 19th century to the present. She finds that child rearing advice nearly always falls into one of two camps, the “hard” or the “soft.” Advocates of a hard, or parent-centered, approach tend toward a “sterner and more masculine” attitude toward child rearing. They believe that nurture counts more than nature, so strict discipline is required. By contrast, advocates of the soft, or child-centered, approach, more “empathetic and effusive,” seek to encourage children's natural development through parental love and bonding.

The struggle between hard and soft par-

enting has been ceaseless. Luther Emmett Holt prescribed a strict-feeding and cry-it-out regimen for infants in *The Care and Feeding of Children* (1894), the same year G. Stanley Hall spoke of children's need for flexibility, freedom, and open discussions of sex in *Adolescence*. After World War I, behaviorist John Broadus Watson promoted rigorous habits established in infancy while developmental psychologist Arnold Gesell encouraged parents to raise children "naturally." After World War II, Benjamin Spock presided first as a soft advocate, seeking to dispel parents' anxieties, and then later as his own hard counterpart, warning against permissiveness, "parental hesitancy," and child centeredness. In our own time, experts such as James Dobson, Gary Ezzo, and John Rosemond face off against the likes of T. Berry Brazelton, Penelope Leach, and Stanley Greenspan.

As Hulbert recounts how child rearing ideas have evolved dialectically over time, with one side losing and the other gaining favor, she illuminates the dubious triumph of the experts. Though their authority has been premised on the value of scientific empiricism, their theories rarely have had scientific or statistical grounding. Spock, Hulbert writes, got his ideas "out of his own head." She also juxtaposes the experts' advice against minibiographies of their own family lives, demonstrating that many of the most successful parenting authorities were dismal failures as parents.

One wishes for more of Hulbert's own ideas and less of the experts', whose inadequacies she shows with such skill. The closest she comes to asserting her own views is when she points out what she sees as a central irony: The hard camp, despite its strictness, often paved the way for a more liberating ethos for both parent and child by encouraging habits of self-control. The soft camp, while urging love and encouragement of children's natural development, prescribed a regimen of constant observation and attentiveness. This created a vast new role for parents (in practice, mainly mothers), who came to feel responsible for their child's every emotional state, however fleeting.

Both camps of experts, Hulbert writes, "seemed to have forgotten the impulsive, intuitive give-and-take between big and small humans, struggling to understand each other and often failing, which is what actually makes a family a moral arena like no other." The experts must forget these things; they remember only at the cost of their own careers. Furedi similarly observes that experts have transformed parenting "from an intimate relationship that depends on emotion and warmth into a skill involving technical expertise," when in fact the parent-child relationship "is a qualitative one that cannot be improved by the application of a technical formula."

In attacking professional expertise in general and the recent vogue of intrusive parenting in particular, these books ask us to reconsider what raising children is all about. But, as has been the trend for the last hundred years, we may fall into the trap of formulating a new approach merely by upending what came before. We should be careful not to replace "paranoid parenting" with an overly laissez-faire approach to children's learning and discovery, such as the modern advice that anybody can be a "good enough" parent if left alone.

The problem is not guidance itself but the sources to which we turn for it. We might look elsewhere for wisdom that could help us more than the putatively scientific experts' counsel. For instance, we might pay more attention to social critics who raise real questions about how children can be properly socialized, given the overbearing influence of the "virtual world" of TV and computers, consumerism and celebrity culture, the erosion of moral authority, and the collapse of families and communities. Whatever we do, it is time to forsake the ministrations of those self-appointed experts who myopically see only one side of the balance that, as good parents have always known, must be struck between love and discipline.

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