Children

Americans have always been "child-oriented." The Puritan colonists assigned a "tithing man" to every 10 families to monitor children's behavior. Many years later, Mark Twain celebrated a different notion of childhood in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer.* Our treatment of children has always reflected not only what U.S. society is but what adults hope it can become. Today, parents and politicians alike keep watch on the statistics—juvenile crime, illiteracy, teen-age pregnancy, drug abuse, alcoholism—and increasingly dislike what they see. Are the kids really in bad shape? Were they better off in the past? Here, historian Philippe Ariès reflects on the origins of our idea of "childhood"; psychologist Valerie Polakow Suransky analyzes the influence, sometimes malign, of scholarly theories about child development; and editor Cullen Murphy summarizes the latest research on the lives children now lead and the America they live in.

THE SENTIMENTAL REVOLUTION

by Philippe Ariès

In the freshness of discovery, the historian invariably (and fortunately) has difficulty detaching himself from the jumble of impressions that drew him into his adventurous quest in the first place. The passage of time diminishes the excitement but brings in return a compensation: a better view of the forest. Today, in the wake of contemporary debates about children, the family, youth—and about my own book, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962)—I see more clearly the broad ideas underlying my work.

I maintained in my book that traditional Western society before the year 1700 concerned itself little with the child, even less with the adolescent. "Childhood" was that period when the child could not yet provide for himself. Once the child reached the age of seven to nine years, he found himself among adults, participating in their work and in their games. Education, the transmission of values and of knowledge, was supplied and

supervised not by the family but rather by the system of apprenticeship. The child quickly withdrew from his parents into a larger group and learned by helping adults do what had to be done—even if it meant going to war, as the paintings of Titian and Caravaggio attest.

A superficial sentimentalization of infancy was reserved for the first few years when the child was a curious, monkey-like creature capable of providing amusement. But if it died, as often happened, only a few might mourn it; the general rule was that one paid the matter little attention. Another infant would soon come along. "I have lost two or three children in their infancy," writes Michel de Montaigne in his 16th-century *Essays,* "not without regret but without great sorrow."

Obligatory Affection

The manifest duties of the traditional family were the conservation of holdings, the communal practice of a trade, mutual aid in a world where an isolated man (and even more an isolated woman) could not survive, and, in crises, the protection of honor and of lives. The family had no emotional role, yet love was not always absent. On the contrary, it was often recognizable, created, and supported by the communal life. But (and this is what is important) the feeling between the married couple, and between parents and children, was not a necessary part of family life. The sharing of emotions and social communication were provided outside the family by a close communal environment composed of neighbors, friends, masters and servants, children and old people, and men and women, a large social medium in which individual families were diluted.

Toward the end of the 17th century, things began to change. Formal education was substituted for apprenticeship. Children no longer mixed with adults to learn about life but were separated and kept apart in a kind of quarantine—the school. Thus began a long process of shutting up children (like the insane or the poor or prostitutes) that continues into our own time.

This sequestering of children, for the best of reasons, of course, is one face of the great moral changes wrought by

Philippe Ariès, 68, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is a director of studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Born in Blois, France, he was trained at the Sorbonne, where he studied history and geography. He is the author of Centuries of Childhood *(1962),* Western Attitudes toward Death *(1974), and* The Hour of Our Death *(1981). The essay here, translated for the first time, is drawn from a longer French original, copyright © 1973 by Éitions du Seuil.*

"Father with Four Sons" (1540), by Bartel Bruyn. Society, Ariès believes, once had no "awareness of the particular nature of children . . . which distinguishes the child from the adult."

München, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

Catholic and Protestant reformers of the Church, the law, and the state. But it would not have been possible without the sentimental complicity of parents. Families became places of *obligatory* affection between married couples, and between couples and their children. The family's concern was no longer simply training children in terms of proper behavior and honor. Parents began to interest themselves generally in the schoolwork of their children and to follow them with a solicitude unheard of earlier. In the last decade of the 17th century, playwright Jean Racine wrote to his son, Louis, about his teachers as would a father of today. Masters of boarding schools, beleaguered by too frequent family visits, had to devise ways to temper parents', especially mothers', eagerness to see their children.

The family thus began to organize itself around the child, who emerged from his former anonymity. Absent from his family, General Marie-Antoine Bouët de Martange, in the twilight of the *ancien régime,* wrote anxiously to his wife inquiring about his children's health. One could no longer lose a child without great pain. Now it became advisable to limit the number of children in order better to care for them. Not surprisingly, one result of this scholarly and sentimental revolution was a voluntary reduction of births, observable since the 18th century. And

revolution it was: From regarding young children as so trivial that a father in Moliere's *Hypochondriac* is said to have only one child because a second is too young to count, society has come to see children as the center of a family's life. This was the cycle my book traced.

A book has its own life; it quickly escapes its author to belong to an independent public. *Centuries of Childhood* soon found itself in the hands of psychologists and sociologists, especially in the United States, who applied it to their studies of the difficulties encountered by contemporary maturing children, and in the hands of historians, who accepted its broad outlines while noting signs of change earlier than the end of the 17th century, where I had placed it. Debate about my book was surprising—at one point I found myself identified as an American sociologist — and absorbing, and it pushed both myself and others into new ideas.

Some Fresh Thinking

If I were to conceive my book anew today, I would hold to the general lines of my argument. But I would also take account of new data, particularly in four areas. First, I would draw attention to the persistence into the 17th century of tolerated infanticide. It was not an openly accepted practice, as it had been in ancient Rome; technically, indeed, it was a severely punishable crime. Infanticide was nevertheless practiced in secret, perhaps fairly frequently, often disguised as an accident: Children would die of suffocation, as a matter of course, in the beds of their parents when they slept. The life of a child was considered with the same degree of ambiguity as is the fetus today, with the difference that infanticide was buried in silence while abortion is openly avowed.

By the end of the 17th century, though, attitudes toward infanticide were beginning to change. Pressure was placed on parents by bishops who prohibited—with a vehemence that gives one pause—the practice of having children sleep in the beds of their parents. The pressure seems to have worked: Historian Jean Louis Flandrin has shown that the decline in infant mortality during the 19th century cannot be explained by medical or hygienic reasons; people had simply stopped letting or helping their children die.

A similar revolution occurs in a second area I would propose for further exploration—the history of baptism. Toward the middle of the Middle Ages, adults appear to have been in no great hurry to have their children baptized, often forgetting to

CHILDREN AND THE LAW

Are children children or are they adults?

In the Supreme Court's opinion, children "are possessed of fundamental rights which the state must respect." But which rights are fundamental? And is discrimination on the basis of age necessarily unfair?

Americans have not made up their minds on the matter of children's rights. In 1967, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court *(In re Gault)* ruled that juveniles charged with delinquency were entitled to adult rights of due process—right to counsel, right to appeal, and so on. Yet juvenile offenders are still considered special. Thus, in Arizona, upon reaching 18 a person may have his juvenile court and police records destroyed (even if the crime involved was murder). Other states have such "wipe the slate clean" provisions.

The Supreme Court has ruled that children in school have the same First Amendment rights as adults. They can also undergo an abortion without their parents' consent. Children as young as 12 can even "divorce" their parents altogether—becoming formally "emancipated" by a court if they are able to support themselves.

And youngsters can take their elders to court. In 1972, a 15-year-old Minnesota girl unwilling to accompany her parents on a two-year around-the-world cruise won a judge's permission to spend the time with an aunt instead. Lawyers representing deformed or retarded infants have sued physicians for "wrongful life"—with mixed success—arguing that death would have been preferable. Most of the legal changes affecting children have not, of course, been sought by children themselves, but by adult Americans with certain ideas of what is in a child's best interest.

In many highly controversial matters, children have not been freed from parental or special legal constraints. Thus, the Supreme Court has refused to grant the right to a jury trial to minors. In 1979, the court affirmed the constitutionality of a Georgia statute allowing parents to commit a child against his will to a mental institution. Last year, the court upheld a Utah law requiring notification of a minor's parents before performing an abortion, while proposed guidelines from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services would require parental notification when minors receive prescription contraceptives from federally-funded clinics. During the past decade, meanwhile, alarmed by highway deaths caused by youthful drunk drivers, 17 state legislatures have voted to raise the local drinking age.

For better or worse, American children enjoy more "adult rights" today than they did 20 years ago—and often more adult responsibilities as well. But until their elders resolve their ambivalence, a peculiar combination of rights and responsibilities can be expected. In most states, a girl of 16, for example, who has a legal right to an abortion must also have her parents' consent for a throat culture.

do so in "serious cases" where the child's life was in danger. The medieval clergy, worried about the condition of the soul, increased the number of churches and parishes—in part to permit priests to reach more quickly the bedside of a woman who had just delivered. Pressure was placed on families to administer baptism as soon as possible after birth. Thus it came about that early baptism of the newly born child became the rule. It was even the (unauthorized) practice of midwives to baptize in the uterus fetuses thought not likely to survive.

Private Spaces

A third area of interest, related to the second, involves the representation on funerary monuments of the blessed soul as an infant, usually idealized and naked, as can be seen in many medieval French portrayals of the Last Judgment, where the souls of the righteous march into Abraham's bosom. The souls of the chosen were believed to enjoy the same enviable innocence as the baptized infant—at a time when, as noted, the infant himself was seldom given serious attention. Interestingly, the soul ceased to be represented as an infant in the 17th century, from which time a child on a funerary monument was simply a child. Funerary portraits of children, until then a rarity, became far more common.

The fourth avenue for further exploration is domestic architecture. I originally located at the end of the 17th century the retreat of the family from the collective life of the village square into the interior of a house more suited to intimacy. Historian Richard A. Goldthwaite has found an analogue in 15th-century Florence, where the 13th- and 14th-century palaces—huge, open, a jumble of family, renters, clients, shopkeepers—gave way to palaces whose appearance makes possible the deduction of an interior designed to provide small patrician families with a private world, a mix of intimacy and vastness. It is natural that in such a private space, a new sentiment should develop among members of the family, and more particularly between mother and child: the feeling for the family. "This culture," says Goldthwaite, "is centered on women and children, with renewed interest in the education of children and a remarkable rise in the status of women."

The case is far from closed. The history of mental habits is, whether one admits it or not, a comparative and regressive history. We depart necessarily from what we know of man's behavior today, as though it were a model with which to compare the facts of the past; we move on then to consider the new

model, constructed with the aid of facts from the past, like a second source, and redescend toward the present, modifying the naive image we had of it at the beginning. The history of the idea of the family has just begun; it is just now beginning to stimulate research. Let us hope that the scholarly energy devoted to the search is expended wisely, opening new areas of inquiry rather than burying itself under an endless sifting of old ideas.

A TYRANNY OF EXPERTS

by Valerie Polakow Suransky

We take it for granted today that childhood is a distinct and even delicate stage of life, though it was not always viewed that way. As Philippe Ariès contends, what we call childhood is largely an invention that has gradually taken shape since the 17th century. Childhood is an *idea* as much as it is a developmental decree of nature. And our treatment of children has varied with our ideas about it.

Today, we view children as having such unique status that we have largely cordoned them off from the rest of life. We now separate children from the world of work, strictly divide work and play, and exclude (or "shelter") children from many aspects of everyday existence. The young have their own institutions: day care centers, nursery schools, elementary schools. They are studied by childhood specialists; no group, indeed, has been so overanalyzed. Theories abound explaining children's psychosexual and cognitive development, their early education, their learning and motivation, their creativity, their capacity for moral reasoning. Anxious parents look to "experts" for guidance on everything from the dos and don'ts of toilet training to encouraging "creative play." "Becoming at home in the world," may be, as educational philosopher Donald Vandenberg be-