

Act Natural

*A Cultural History
of Misadventures
in Parenting*

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Infant abandonment was common in both reality and myth, and was such a frequent part of city founders' origin stories that historian James Boswell calls them "founding foundlings." Famous exposed heroes include Oedipus, Poseidon, Paris, Jupiter, Jupiter's twin sons, Cybele, Ion (founder of the Ionians), Cyrus (founder of the Persian empire), and Remus and Romulus (founders of Rome). Seeing how well these guys turned out, it's not surprising that abandoning parents expressed no shame. Exposing your children was perfectly legal (as was selling them or, for that matter, killing them). Plato and Aristotle both recommended disposing of babies who showed any sign of defect, as did the Greek physician Soranus, who titled a chapter of his first-century childbirth and parenting book "How to Recognize the Newborn That Is Worth Rearing."

Children were deemed not worth it for any number of reasons: because their parents were too poor to feed them or too rich to imperil the estate; because the child's paternity was questioned, or because it was female; or even because the parents wanted to register a political statement, as Romans

reportedly did on a number of occasions, as when Caligula died or Nero murdered his mother. That time, a baby was exposed with a sign reading I WILL NOT RAISE YOU, LEST YOU CUT YOUR MOTHER'S THROAT. Girls faced grimmer odds. Hilarion's letter to his wife circa 1 BCE expresses the typical sentiment: "If it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it."

EXPOSURE AND SMOTHERING ARE, of course, unfathomable choices to the modern parent. Losing a child is an unimaginably painful ordeal for any parent, and the fact that it was more common and more deliberate in the ancient world makes it no less horrifying. However, losing a child is not what most of these parents thought they were doing. Their choices make more sense when we view them as really, really late-term abortions. One-fifth of all pregnancies end in abortion today; millions more never even occur, thanks to widely available birth control. But before modern medicine, abortions were much safer for the mother when they were performed in, say, the tenth month than in any of the previous nine. For many cultures, a child so young wasn't considered a human yet. Aban-

doning this not-yet-human child meant more resources for the already quite human children they already had. Even today, when women have access to neither contraceptives nor safe abortions nor the resources to raise another child, as is the case in some hunter-gatherer societies, they quietly and reluctantly resort to the infanticidal methods that were practiced for millennia.

Abandonment and infanticide, then, functioned as a very crude form of family planning, allowing parents to subtract children as was convenient. This was especially true in ancient Rome. It is hard not to notice that ancient Roman families were awfully small for people without access to birth control besides the use of underage prostitutes. Child abandonment kept family size down (while also producing more underage prostitutes). It may in fact have been too effective. Eventually the senate saw fit to pass inducements encouraging bigger families, including permission for a mother of three or more to wear a special dress of honor, the *stola*.—

Nonetheless, child abandonment continued well into Christian times. The first-century saint Justin Martyr was troubled by the implications of this,

weren't great. It was not a good time, what with the Crusades, the Black Death, and general misery. French scholar Philippe Ariès famously argued that parental love, and childhood as we know it—a distinct period of life, with charms all its own—simply didn't exist at the time, and wouldn't even begin to until the sixteenth century. Ariès based much of his findings on artwork that depicted children not as children but as small adults. His views held sway for twenty years or so, until other historians pointed out that this was not a particularly accurate approach to history, it being the same approach that might lead a person to believe, for instance, that prehistoric toddlers wore one-shouldered sundresses made of saber-toothed cat hides.

Ariès and his colleagues may have been wrong about some things, but it's true that the Middle Ages was not a good time to be either parent or child. It was best just to put your head down and get through it with as much outside help as you could muster, or enter a religious order and opt out of reproduction altogether. Fourteenth-century poet Eustache Deschamps put it bluntly: "Happy is he who has no children, for babies mean nothing but crying and stench; they give only trouble and

anxiety; they have to be clothed, shoed, fed; they are always in danger of falling and hurting themselves; they contract some illness and die; when they grow up, they may go to the bad and be cast into prison. Nothing but cares and sorrows; no happiness compensates us for our anxiety, for the trouble and expenses of their education." Maybe it sounds better in late medieval French.

But Deschamps was right about the danger and illness and death. Many of these occurred because parents weren't watching their children, and unfortunately, alloparents weren't either. The medieval parent who wanted to outsource childcare did not have a lot of reliable options, which meant the unreliable options would have to do. Without modern conveniences, parents had their hands pretty full, and would often leave small children in the care of less-than-optimal babysitters. Bad things could happen to a toddler when she was being watched over by, say, a slightly older toddler, or by a blind neighbor who couldn't really keep an eye on her at all.

Medieval records are full of accounts of the terrible things that happened to youngsters while their caretakers were busy elsewhere. Medieval homes

To compensate for the low levels of supervision, infants were essentially bubble-wrapped, bundled into swaddling so tight and thorough they could be (and sometimes were) thrown like a football from room to room. They were also occasionally hung from hooks, like purses in a bathroom stall. More often the swaddled bundle was strapped into a cradle as though readying for a space shuttle launch. But even this didn't guarantee safety, due to the ill-advised practice of placing the cradle near the open fire. Nearly a third of the infant deaths in medieval England were caused when the baby was burned in its cradle. Sometimes it was ignited by sparks, and sometimes it was nosed in by the aforementioned pigs. Even if the baby stayed out of the hearth, he might be strangled by his restraints.



*Portrait of
Swaddled
Twins:
The Early-
Deceased
Children
of Jacob de
Graeff and
Aeltge Boe-
lens, artist
unknown,
1617*

When the child became upright, a host of new dangers opened up. As soon as he was old enough to stand, he was parked in a standing stool or walking stool. These were seatless contraptions that forced the child to stand and functioned as stocks, or babysitters, or in some cases, as when they rolled down stairs, death machines.

seven, and not much of them after that, leaving you free to, well, play cards.

The shunting-off began immediately at birth thanks to an elaborate, far-flung wet-nursing network that thrived across Europe for hundreds of years. Many historical phenomena puzzle me (powdered wigs, eunuchry, the enthusiasm for public executions), but nothing leaves me quite as slack-jawed as this one. The wet-nursing industry was a complex racket whose closest modern analogue is probably eBay, a multifaceted regional distribution system with a lot of middlemen between baby and breast and very little oversight.

It seems strange that anyone would consent to this frankly dangerous and bizarre system, but in France especially, most parents did. Out of the 21,000 infants born in Paris in 1780, a full 17,000 were put out to country wet nurses (only 700 would be nursed by their own mothers, with the remaining 3,000 or so placed in nursery homes or with in-home nurses). It was simply the natural order of things: the farmer takes a wife, the wife takes a child, the child takes a nurse. Hi-ho, the derry-o, let's go play whist.

The process began with a *recomendaresse*, an

The wet-nursing system didn't bode so well in general, with mortality rates doubling for in-

With the Enlightenment, however, the parental guilt trip finally arrived, thanks to John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These two will be discussed at length in a later chapter, but for now I'll just mention that they're the ones who introduced the West to the revolutionary idea that parents should raise their own children. I'll also mention that Locke didn't have any kids, and that Rousseau had five, all of whom were abandoned to foundling homes, where, it's presumed, they died.

Locke, true to his name, was the more rule-bound of the two. In his 1693 treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* Locke argued that parents hold "regal authority" over their children, and they're not to delegate too much of it. Writing a few decades later, Rousseau was a little more relaxed. In his view, children are like plants, and the parents' role is simply to nurture their natural growth. But like Locke, he thought the parents—and not the gardener—ought to do it. Apparently this did not apply to Rousseau himself.

That said, both he and Locke had a point. Parents and children were missing out on a lot by more or less ignoring each other. And the technologies that let them do this—off-site wet-nursing, rigid swad-

dling, stocks-like standing stools, and widespread neglect—weren't doing anyone much good.

We also need to consider what they meant when they encouraged parents to raise their children themselves. The presence of tutors, governesses, and servants—even if Locke distrusted them, and he did—was assumed. (Locke was particularly uptight about letting kids hit the sauce with the help, “[t]here being nothing that lays a surer foundation of mischief, both to body and mind, than children’s being used to *strong drink*; especially, to drink in private, *with the servants*.”) And though Rousseau’s *Émile* opens with a fiery rebuke of parents who neglect their duties, the book itself depicts Émile’s interactions with his tutor, not his parents, who don’t appear in the text at all. Locke and Rousseau were simply urging parents to become more interested and involved. They should *direct* the child-rearing, but they don’t actually have to *do* it.

LOCKE AND ROUSSEAU’S IDEAS would prove wildly influential, and over the next couple of centuries more and more European parents would begin expressing interest in the little souls they’d brought into the world, even if they didn’t do much of the day-to-day work. In the up-and-coming territory of

America, however, parents were doing the day-to-day, day after day after day. Due to a combination of circumstances, religious beliefs, and a general propensity toward masochism, Puritan parents spent far more time with their children than anyone else had for most of Western history.

Puritans took child-rearing *very* seriously, devoting much of their time and thought to the subject. They cornered the contemporary market on advice manuals and established parenting philosophies that remain influential today. In bumper sticker form, that philosophy was: Life sucks and then you die. It was essential, therefore, that you be spiritually prepared. Unlike Locke, who considered children a blank slate, Puritans believed that children were born inherently evil (in Benjamin Wadsworth's words, "filthy, guilty, odious, abominable . . . both by nature and practice"). Their very souls were at stake, and it was the parents' obligation to save them through education and discipline.⁴ Breaking with tradition, they would do much of it themselves. Raising pious, moral children was far too important to outsource to the help.

It was also too important to outsource to the

WEIRD NAMES and paternal involvement aside, it's hard not to notice that Puritan parenting isn't all that different from the kind we practice today. Historian C. John Sommerville calls the Puritans "the first modern parents"; anthropologist David Lancy, a little more pointedly, describes them as "the first anxious parents." Either way, their legacy is clear. The Puritans simultaneously established two American traditions: (1) making child-rearing an all-consuming DIY activity, and (2) ruining things for everyone. Before, benign neglect was the norm. Now you had to either obsess over your children or feel guilty for failing to.

BY THE EARLY 1900S, the dreamy, druggy Victorian indulgences were being replaced by a sobering dose of twentieth-century scientific parenting. The charge was led by Luther Emmett Holt, whose influential book *The Care and Feeding of Children* aimed to bring scientific practice and objectivity to the business of child-rearing—as well as plenty of outside assistance. Raising children would now be a hands-off affair, and even these hands needn't belong to the parents: Holt assumes you'll be hiring help. The book is explicitly addressed to mothers *and* nurses, and presumes the nurse,

not the mother, is the one who'll be carrying out most of these instructions. The mother is to oversee the nursery as she might a lab, delegating the actual pipetting and centrifuging to the research assistants.

A couple of decades later, the new psychological field of behaviorism would take things even further. Now, child-rearing would be outsourced to science itself. Behaviorism was founded by John B. Watson, a deeply disturbed psychologist who aimed to take parents out of the picture altogether, arguing that parents were the *least* qualified for the job of raising children, as they tended toward oversentimentalization. He wrote that it was a serious question in his mind "whether there should be individual homes for children—or even whether children should know their own parents. There are undoubtedly much more scientific ways of bringing up children which will probably mean finer and happier children." Better the child should be taken away from the mother in the third or fourth week and tended to by nurses, with limited parental contact. If the mother can't afford to hire a nurse, she should pretend she is one herself: "she must look upon herself while performing the functions

It did, including the kids of the behaviorists themselves. Three of Watson's children attempted suicide, and one succeeded. As for the children of Watson's behaviorist successor B. F. Skinner, they turned out fine, despite rumors to the contrary. Skinner did not, as is popularly believed, raise his daughter Deborah in a "Skinner box," a contraption he devised to condition rats to perform certain tasks. He did, however, design for her a large, tem-

perature-controlled crib, enclosed in glass, that was supposed to encourage movement while simplifying cleanup for mothers. When readers expressed interest in acquiring their own, he tried to get a manufacturer to make them. These were eventually produced under the name Heir Conditioner—I'm not making that up—but were shoddily made, without Skinner's input, and sold only a thousand units.

BY THE 1940S, behaviorist principles had segued into a panic about “overmothering.” Books like Edward Strecker’s *Their Mothers’ Sons* argued that overinvolved mothers were creating a generation of psychological cripples, like the 1,825,000 men he claimed were unfit for military duty due to psychiatric conditions. Philip Wylie went even further in *Generation of Vipers*, blaming “the woman who has failed in the elementary mother function of weaning her offspring emotionally as well as physically.”

up. Because if anything went wrong, she would now be to blame.

Of that, there would be plenty. Within a few years the neglected child would plant the seeds of his revenge, in the form of John Bowlby and his attachment theory. Attachment theory holds that primates (including humans) are hardwired from birth to form a strong attachment to their mother or mother substitute. Infants who do not form secure attachments—because the mother isn't reliably present or emotionally available—are prone to a host of problems, including mental illness, delinquency, and a lifelong feeling of resentment. Worst of all, Bowlby argued, this damage is irreversible.

It's hard not to read attachment theory as a direct reaction to Bowlby's own upbringing at the hired hands of nurses, nannies, and boarding schools. (Indeed, his son, Sir Richard Bowlby, characterized aspects of the theory as "straight autobiography.") As was typical of the time, Bowlby spent very little time with his parents: an hour a day with his mother, an hour a week with his father. Any more, it was felt, would spoil a child (and would certainly spoil a parent's social life). But Bowlby's

Parents who needed a little chemical help to develop that favorable attitude could turn to pharmaceuticals. As in the Victorian era—the last time mothers were encouraged to do all the child-rearing themselves—drugs again became a popular at-home activity. Enter Miltown and Valium, aka mother's little helper. For children, there was mother's little knockout drug, Nembutal, also available in suppository form if Junior had a problem swallowing pills. I'm not sure it's such a good idea to give your child heavy barbiturates, but I guess it's nice to share a hobby.

Even the expert who coined the term *parenting* agreed that parents needn't do all the work themselves. This was Fitzhugh Dodson, whose 1970s

advice book *How to Parent* introduced the word as a verb. He wrote, "I'm going to define this new verb as a dictionary might define it: *to parent*—'to use, with tender loving care, all the information science has accumulated about child psychology in order to raise happy and intelligent human beings.'"

Dodson continues: "This verb does *not* describe the simple biological act of giving birth to a child. And it does *not* describe the raising of that child by the usual trial and error methods. The raising of a child is a complex and difficult proposition."

All the more reason to hire help, then, and mercifully, Dodson endorses this idea. In his 1977 book *How to Discipline with Love* he devotes an entire chapter to "The Working Mother" and the need for childcare, claiming that "it should be obvious that neither a mother nor a father can find *all* of his other fulfillment through parenting . . . It is completely normal to want to get away from your children from time to time. And this is a perfectly valid reason (among others) for wanting to take a job outside the home."

They were, instead, by and for physicians, who could impart the contents to their patients. The oldest and best known is probably Soranus's *Gynecology*. As the title indicates, the text mostly concerns lady parts, but there is a full chapter on the care of newborns, which gives us an idea of what was prescribed, proscribed, and actually done at the time. Mainly because people didn't have a whole lot of alternatives, it was used until the sixteenth century.

Though advice manuals would get much, much weirder over the years, this first one is, for the most part, fairly reasonable. Much of Soranus's advice comes from experienced, practical sources like midwives, so it generally sounds sane and sensible, and he's quick to condemn dangerous practices. This usually means anything non-Greek, like the foreign habit of dipping the baby in cold water, wine, brine, or the urine of "an innocent child" to test the baby's fitness.

What you *should* dip the baby in, says Soranus, is salt. Though it sounds crazy now, this was widely done throughout the ancient world (and in the more rural corners of the world, still is). It's even

mentioned in the Bible. Soranus directs you to pat down the baby with fine powdered salt like a cut of corned beef, taking care not to get it in its eyes or nose. If you're dealing with a particularly delicate baby, he says, you may want to mix the salt with olive oil or honey, which is getting very close to a recipe I sometimes use for salad dressing. I don't know how good it is for a baby, but for carrots it's *delicious*.

The Greek Soranus also explains why Roman children's legs are frequently deformed. Contrary to popular belief, he writes, it's not because Roman women have too much sex, or because they have sex while drunk, though they do both. It's because they're *bad mothers*, who aren't as devoted and attentive as their Grecian counterparts are. As for Roman childcare advice, the primary source is Galen, who aims his barbs at the Germans: "Among the Germans, children are not well brought up. But we are not now writing this for the Germans or for any other savage or barbarian people, any more than for bears, boars, lions, or for any of the other wild beasts." While childcare books would change quite a bit down the line, this aspect—faulting other cultures—would remain fairly constant for

WRITING IN THE FIRST CENTURY, Soranus could circulate his judgment only so far. But by the late Middle Ages, mechanical reproduction made it possible to spread the judgment farther and faster. Enter the printing press, and with it, a good deal more parenting advice. The print itself, however, was just about the only thing that was new. Medicine and psychology hadn't advanced much since Soranus's time. Medieval parents and advice-givers were working with a limited arsenal. There were no six-month checkups or speech therapy, no antibiotics or after-school enrichment programs. What there was, was prayer.

Medieval childcare books are generally very stern and preachy. They are still fun for the modern reader, however, because early printers used a long s that, to the modern eye, looks just like an *f*. Since

One of the more prominent preachers was Giovanni Dominici, who, in addition to composing countless sermons, authored a book on raising children, *Regola del governo di cura familiare*. Though

Dominici didn't have any of the qualifications you'd expect in a childcare expert such as a medical education or, you know, *his own children*, he did have the necessary xenophobia. Even for a fifteenth-century Italian priest, Dominici was unusually anti-Semitic. He was a driving force behind the Jews' expulsion from Venice, a city from which Dominici himself would be banished a few years later. He then went on to continue his campaign in Florence, even though it didn't actually have any Jews.

Dominici advocates a regimen of toughening beginning when the child is small. The child should be treated like "the son of a peasant": denied affection and punished and beaten regularly. He should be dressed in rough clothing, forced to go without food or wine, deprived of a bed and made to sleep in the cold, when he's allowed to sleep at all. When he's older, he should be given strong laxatives so he can get used to feeling sick. Even the paintings on the wall of the family home should make him miserable: "It will not be amiss if he should see Jesus and the Baptist, Jesus and the boy Evangelist pictured together; the slaughtered Innocents, so that he may learn the fear of weapons and armed men. Thus it is desirable to bring up little girls in

the contemplation of the eleven thousand Virgins as they discourse, pray and suffer."

As for the mother, she doesn't have things much easier. Dominici reminds his female reader that her husband is the master and she is the servant. The wife goes to sleep and gets up at her husband's orders, and he determines what she will wear, eat, say, and do. The book is in fact as much a guide to raising your wife as it is to raising your children. It's probably worth noting that at the time, Italian grooms were typically over thirty while their brides were still teens.

An age gap that was sometimes smaller between mother and child than between husband and wife may be the reason why Dominci seems preoccupied with the importance of making it clear to your children that you love them, but not in *that* way. Fathers must not be lighthearted with their daughters, "lest they may become enamored of masculinity." Mothers shouldn't even smile at their sons. And if you're hiring your newborn son a wet nurse, you'd better make sure she's not young and attractive: "Many such have aroused the fire of passion prematurely, as true accounts relate and, I venture to say, experience proves."

Medieval child-rearing manuals have plenty of passion as it is. Most of them tend to cover the mechanics of conception, and many offer more discussion of positioning than seems strictly necessary. Take, for instance, 1655's *Callipaedia, or, the Art of Getting Beautiful Children*. The short answer, according to the author, is to be good-looking yourself, and French. The long answer is just as xenophobic and much, much steamier.

Written by Claude Quillet, a French physician and abbot, the book is in large part a medieval sex manual. Though less a *Joy of Sex* than a *Dampened Pleasures of Procreative Congress Sanctioned Within Certain Rigid Bounds*, it is still pretty racy, especially for a medieval childcare book, especially for a medieval childcare book by an *abbot*.

For a book by a physician, its grasp on physiology is shaky. Like many of his contemporaries, Quillet believed that male infants come from the right ovary, females from the left. Because boys were much preferred ("A female child deceives the father's hopes"), Quillet helpfully suggests sexual positions that will produce the desired male. He advises the would-be father to aim to the mother's right: "From a Left Womb a Female Issue flows, /

THAT WAS IN THEORY. In practice, however, much of this advice was ignored until the Enlightenment, when two men came along and enlightened everyone to the fact that they were doing everything wrong. These were John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Apparently they were widely read authors a few hundred years before they performed the far more important function of providing names for characters on *Lost*. Locke's and Rousseau's books were hugely influential, and though not intended as such, they were the first phenomenally popular advice books for parents. The fact that these philosophical tomes were dragged into this particular service suggests what a demand there was for the genre, how desperate parents were for some sort of guide. Thus they clung to the closest thing they could find—a philosophical treatise and an allegorical novel—which is a little like raising your children according to the principles of *The Celestine Prophecy*.

Or it would be if *The Celestine Prophecy* were written by one man (Locke) who had no children, and another (Rousseau) who had five but gave every single one up to the foundling home. Though this was tantamount to a death sentence for a child, the

decision did not appear to cause Rousseau much concern. He gave so little thought to trying to find the children later, as many parents did, that he did not record their birth dates or even their genders. He seems to have been a good dog owner, though.

The bachelor Locke had even less experience with children, but was at least a doctor who sometimes treated them, and was moved by the many questions their overwhelmed parents had for him. His 1693 work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which also included some thoughts on feeding, sleep, and bathing, established the format that advice manuals would continue to use through today, and not just because other authors freely plagiarized his text. For a philosophical treatise, the book offers a great deal of practical preventative hands-on advice for the typical parent of a typical child, not "the sick or crazy." Gone were the flowery verse couplets on conception and the superfluous chapters on hair removal; in were specifics on sleep, feeding, and for the first time, even potty training.

Unlike his *Lost* namesake, Locke does not seem to have had any particular father issues, and much of his advice sounds sensible even now. He advocates a simple diet and lots of fresh air, exercise,

and rest. He was an early and influential critic of swaddling, which at the time was rigid, head to toe, and rarely changed, immobilizing the child in its own filth for the better part of each day. Locke does not, however, advocate coddling. He emphasizes the importance of “hardening” children by putting them to sleep on uncomfortable surfaces and rejecting regular mealtimes so they don’t learn to expect food. What they should learn to expect is for their feet to be wet and cold. Locke wants you to dunk their feet daily in cold water, and dress them in shoes that are thin and leaky.

To his credit, Locke also did away with the xenophobia that characterized earlier parenting advice. Locke notes with approval the practices of many other cultures, especially if they involve frequent bathing in cold water. He devotes several pages to the virtues of cold water, which he considers quite healthful as long as you’re doing something sensible like bathing the baby in it in the middle of winter and not drinking it on a hot day. Because *that*, writes Locke, will make you sick: “drinking cold drink, when they are hot with labour or exercise, brings more people to the grave, or to the brink of it, by fevers, and other diseases, than any thing I

know." If the child must drink, he should, of course, be served room-temperature beer.

Seventy years later Rousseau published *Émile, or On Education* and took up where Locke left off, inspiring a revolution in more "natural" parenting that was a decidedly mixed blessing. On the good side, he condemned swaddling, advocated breast-feeding, introduced the idea of developmental stages—a huge innovation—and exhorted parents to raise their children themselves rather than dump them on indifferent hired help. On the bad side, he took the idea of hardening a wee bit too far.

Émile is an allegorical novel, not an advice book, and Rousseau's ideas could be intriguing in the abstract. In practice, however, they could be dangerous, and practice is exactly what some parents did. Rousseau may have been speaking metaphorically, at least in part, when he suggested parents wear fright masks and fire pistols near their children's heads to make them less skittish; expose them to spiders to make them less squeamish; and discontinue all formal education and ban all books so that the young'uns might spend all their time scantily clothed outdoors in all weather, but many parents took him at his word. The prince and princess of

indulgences of the past. In spite of this, his 1894 book *The Care and Feeding of Children* remained enormously popular for the next fifty years. Dr. Spock himself was raised according to its tenets, and Spock's relative permissiveness was in no small part a reaction to Holt's iron fist. Holt laid down a strictly regimented schedule that was supposed to make life easier for both mother and infant. It was designed to make the child more independent, and it did that, but also, if Spock is any indication, very resentful.

Holt certainly gave the child plenty to resent. He recommended that toilet training begin at one or two months, and suggested soap suppositories to get things started. Other than that, however, Holtian parenting was largely a hands-off affair, with little physical contact: "Infants should be kissed, if at all, upon the cheek or forehead, but the less even of this the better." If it cries, let it.

Though he did not, apparently, practice it on his more nubile students, Watson, like Holt, preached a hands-off philosophy as far as offspring were concerned. In his popular 1928 book *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, Watson advised: "There is a sensible way of treating children . . . Let your

THE NEXT WAVE of childcare books sought to undo Watson's damages. Among these was the pointedly titled *Babies Are Human Beings* by Mayo pediatrician C. Anderson Aldrich (who would later be Dr. Spock's boss) and his wife, Mary. First published in 1938, the book contains almost nothing a modern

parent would object to; it's a thoughtful, practical guide to child-rearing based on the Aldriches' own experiences and solid science. Still, despite, or perhaps because of, all the parenting advice, mothers were feeling addled. Pediatricians reported visits from large numbers of anxious mothers, frantic and confused by experts' conflicting advice, exhausted and worried that they were doing everything wrong. They were only further demoralized by the publication of books like Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*, which argued that the overbearing culture of "Momism" was ruining America. Or as Wylie himself put it: "Gentlemen, mom is a jerk."

Into this rumble Benjamin Spock arrived like a calm, bespectacled Fonzie, reminding everyone to just be cool with his enormously popular 1946 book, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. It opened with the now-famous mantra "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do," then proceeded to dole out the sort of advice parents of the nascent baby boom were eager to hear: Don't worry too much about schedules. Feed them when they're hungry. Put them to bed when they're tired. When they cry, pick them up. Kiss them as much as you like. Trust your instincts.

BY THE SIXTIES and seventies, the party was ending. Though the book continued to be popular and widely used—and others, like the wonderful *How to Raise Children at Home in Your Spare Time* took the same relaxed tack—the backlash had begun. Spock's child-driven, easygoing style of parenting was blamed for the excesses of the era by critics who

One of these critics was Walter Sackett, Jr., a Florida pediatrician who published *Bringing Up Babies* in 1962. Declaring that "Citizenship begins at birth," Sackett argued that Spockian coddling is a recipe for bolshevism: "If we teach our offspring to expect everything to be provided upon demand, we must admit the possibility of sowing the seeds of socialism. The dictators of our age have utilized early indoctrination well. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and more recently Castro have all taken the malleable child from the home and trained him to look toward the state as the source of all beneficence. Aren't we doing much the same thing, somewhat less efficiently, when we temporarily interpose an over-indulgent parent who provides the answer to every desire during the early formative years?"

The most prominent of the Spocklash books was the one that introduced parenting as a verb, Fitzhugh Dodson's *How to Parent* (1970), a title that sounded so bizarre to contemporary ears that it required a definition. What is this strange verb *to parent*? According to Dodson, a psychologist and minister, it meant combining the latest science and

the Child, in reformer Ellen Key's book of the same name, which called for a world devoted to the well-being of children and to the study of their development. Methodical research would be brought to bear in the pursuit of ideal outcomes. Science was transforming so many disciplines at the time; why shouldn't it transform child-rearing?

It did. Within a couple of decades, child development would become a discipline, and childhood stages from birth to adulthood would be codified and canonized. This was in large part the doing of Arnold Gesell, the Yale psychologist whose theories shaped our understanding of early childhood and remain mostly in place today. Gesell more or less originated the terms *toddler* and *preschooler*.— He also invented the concept of terrible twos, after observing how rigid and difficult his subjects seemed to become right around the time they turned two and a half.

Like Darwin, Freud, and Piaget, Gesell was a proponent and pioneer of stage theory, the idea that children pass through predictable developmental phases on their way to adulthood. (His particular take on it is known as Gesell's Maturational Theory.) Though stage theory seems old hat

and obvious to us, it was pretty novel at the time, the science of stages not having progressed much past Ptolemy and humorism. Gesell advanced it exponentially, establishing minute stages for every skill and timetables for acquiring them. By which I mean he really went to town. He found fifty-three developmental stages in the act of holding a rattle alone.

Gesell also had the innovative idea of linking stages with ages. We group by age so routinely that it's hard to remember there was a time when age did not signify a whole lot. This was true even in schools, where a single class would include students of all different ages, many of whom probably didn't even know what age they were. Until recently, grouping by age would have seemed as arbitrary as, say, grouping by first initial, hair color, or hat size. In all levels of society, adults and children mixed fairly freely, and the idea of something being age appropriate wouldn't have made sense to anyone before the twentieth century. The phrase itself only dates to 1950.

For Gesell it became gospel. The Gesell Institute went so far as to give age-appropriate birthday-party-planning advice to *Life* magazine in the

1950s, and later published *The Gesell Institute Party Book*. I have a copy, and its suggestions are mostly fairly sensible and realistic, though I will note that the proposed schedules fail to include a thirty-minute segment for the birthday boy to lose his shit, an event that will, in my experience, inevitably occur.

Gesell's science, though pioneering, wasn't perfect. The main problem was his sample size: it was small and extremely homogeneous, consisting almost exclusively of white middle-class New Haven kids. The academic term for this demographic is WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic). And it is indeed weird in how little it reflects the rest of the world, and how hugely middle-class Americans, at least, extrapolate from it. From Gesell's little cohort emerged just about every expectation of early childhood stages we have.

Gesell's group was even weirder than WEIRD. Instead of being fairly representative of most Western babies, they were representative of only a very specific subset of them. Gesell did a lot of his research on the sixty children attending Yale's on-campus preschool.⁶ Most were children of faculty. Which means, in essence, that much of what we

IN THE MODERN WEST, we mark the transition from child to adult with the less violent if more prolonged rite of passage known as adolescence. Though it seems eternal, adolescence is in fact quite new. Like the terrible twos, it's a stage that didn't occur until the early twentieth century. Before then, there was childhood and adulthood and no stage in between. Even today, many cultures, including the majority of preindustrial societies, have no word for adolescence, because the category doesn't exist.

The invention of adolescence is credited to psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who named and defined it in a seminal 1904 two-volume work. Hall's

book was intended for academics, but proved popular with mainstream audiences, in no small part because it was seminal in another way: there was an awful lot of semen in it. As critics were quick to note, Hall tends to foam on about sex, twice using the rather colorful metaphor of "ripple marks" on an ancient "pubic beach." As one colleague wrote, the text was "chock full of errors, masturbation, and Jesus. He is a mad man."

If Hall was a little eccentric, you could hardly blame him. Early in his career he had suffered his own Shakespearean tragedy when, while he was away recuperating from diphtheria, a leaking gas pipe asphyxiated his wife and eight-year-old daughter (a son survived). Hall floundered for some time after that, finally finding his purpose again in studying children and then teens. By that time he had a teen of his own. Hall's relationship with his son tended to be somewhat testy and rocky, so it's no surprise that this is how Hall defines adolescence in general, describing it as a time of "storm and stress," of "mental and moral inebriation," of experimentation and rebellion that endures from fourteen to twenty-four.

Ten years is a very, very long time. Now that pu-