THE MIGHTIEST INFLUENCE ON EARTH:
AMERICANS’ EMERGING CONCEPTION OF PARENTHOOD, 1820-1880

By

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This study examines the emergence in the early nineteenth-century United States of the idea of “parenting” and its evolution through the 1880s. During this time, Americans’ modern notion of parenthood and what it means to be a parent came into being, shaped in large part by parental advisers. Beginning in the 1820s, parental advisers—physicians, jurists, ministers, and didactic authors—began to articulate expectations of parents, establishing guidelines for proper parenthood and denoting what a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ parent was. Over the course of the century, parental advisers crafted an ideal of purposeful parenthood—parenting with an eye not to raising farm hands or heirs, but to raising children with intention and in a particular way.

As they crafted and refined their ideal of a good parent, parental advisers sharply narrowed who qualified for the title. Parental advisers of the early decades of the nineteenth century focused on teaching parents the best way to parent, by providing them with exacting moral and educational standards that they believed represented proper parenting. By midcentury, their successors embraced a more rigid notion of parenthood, casting parenting itself as a profession—one that required particular training and one that not all could attain. In the postbellum era, this idea of proper parenting narrowed even further, as parental advisers of the 1860s and 1870s
began to argue that only certain people should be allowed to become parents in the first place. Over the course of the century, then, the idea of parenthood became increasingly restrictive, to the point that it resembled an exclusive club.

This history illuminates the development of modern family relations broadly, as well as the articulation of shared middle-class values specifically. Parental advisers themselves were middle class and the values the promoted—such as industry, thrift, and morality—were intended for a middle-class audience. During the nineteenth century, middle-class Americans sought to differentiate themselves from those below and above them. The ideal of parenthood that emerged during this time enabled the middle class to both define itself and police its boundaries.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Some parents err by presuming that their children know less, or more, than they do; or have worse or better dispositions than they have; or less or more command over their minds or feelings. Some place too much reliance on force, others on kindness; some change their plans frequently, others have no plans at all, but notice or pass over faults, blame or approve, according to their own feelings at the moment. Many unteach by example faster than they instruct by precept.

—Theodore Dwight, *The Father’s Book*¹

All too often, the mothers and nannies I see are tuned in to their cellphones, BlackBerrys and iPods, not to their young children. There were no such distractions when my husband and I, and most parents of a certain age, spent time with our babies, toddlers, and preschoolers…. We read to them and sang with them.

—Jane Brody, “From Birth, Engage Your Child with Talk”²

When social commentator and author Theodore Dwight (1796-1866) lamented the failures of American parents in 1835, he could not have known that he was engaging in an argument that would still be raging more than a century and a half later. And yet, as *New York Times* columnist and author Jane Brody and countless others demonstrate, this particular argument—about what makes a good parent—is far from being resolved. Its origins predate Dwight to the early nineteenth century, when parental advisers—doctors, ministers, judges, and authors of prescriptive literature—stepped forward to define what qualities made a parent, what responsibilities parents had, and—most importantly—what, exactly, a parent was.

Positioning themselves as experts in the field, parental advisers answered these questions as they provided guidance to families about what I have termed “purposeful parenthood.” Over


the course of the century, they fashioned an ideal of parenthood that emphasized intention, purpose, and merit. Terrified that parents were raising children incorrectly, parental advisers established guidelines by which they could instruct parents on how to raise children properly. Early parental advisers first articulated the notion that “parenting” was too important to be left to chance and created exacting moral and educational standards for good parenting, while advising parents on how to achieve them. By the 1850s, parental advisers began to frame their own work as training—not merely advice—and cast parenting as a profession, complete with trade journals and instruction manuals. During the 1860s and 1870s, parental advisers shifted their focus away from the moral suasion of the earlier periods and instead emphasized their belief in the desirability and necessity of restricting parenthood to particular people for the good of society. At best, according to early parental advisers, parents were inept and made mistakes. At worst, according to their successors, they were threatening the very fabric of society.

As they attempted to teach mothers and fathers appropriate childrearing, these self-defined experts had a particular type of parent in mind. The hallmarks of good parenting that they constructed bore the stamp of nineteenth-century middle-class values: hard work, morality, religion, thrift, and domesticity. Parental advisers themselves were middle class, as were the parents they targeted and the ideals they espoused. The purposeful parenthood ideal they crafted was a marker of middle-class status and it became the model for the urban middle-class family as well as a benchmark against which real parents were judged. It embodied not only the responsibility of parents to their children, but also the obligation of mothers and fathers to society to raise children in a particular way. That there were specific traits or attributes that comprised good parenting (and, likewise, unmistakable hallmarks of bad parenting) was obvious to parental advisers like Dwight. A century and a half later, these traits would be obvious to Jane
Brody as well. The emergence of this discussion, and how it came to be shaped, are the subjects of this dissertation.

This dissertation traces the history of the concept of parenthood in the United States from its emergence in the 1820s through 1880. It is not a history of parenting, but rather a history of ideas about parenting—ideas held by one particular group of ‘experts.’ Parental advisers started to articulate their notion of proper parenting in the 1820s, when they began to establish themselves as experts. By the 1880s, the discussion about parenthood had taken a distinctly different path. Where early parental advisers focused on social parenting and what parents could do to raise their children well, by the late nineteenth century discussions of parenting and parenthood began to focus more intensely on biological parenthood, ‘bad stock,’ and on the desirability of limiting the population of procreating adults. This thread of the conversation would shape the debate about parenthood for decades.³ It also saw the pragmatic ideas of parental advisers intersect with the utopian ideas of John Humphrey Noyes, leader of the Oneida community. At Oneida, Noyes experimented with stirpiculture—an effort to create perfect children by scientifically pairing select members for breeding. Nineteenth-century ideas about parenting ranged widely, yet for parental advisers, Noyes’s ideas were the logical conclusion to many of the issues they raised. While much of what he espoused was too radical for many Americans, some of his ideas became mainstream.

³ In 1877, for example, Richard Dugdale published The Jukes, a study of (he claimed) a mentally and morally inferior family. Such people, he argued, led to society’s decline. (Richard Dugdale, The Jukes: A Study in Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity [New York: Putnam, 1877].) A stream of arguments like Dugdale’s followed. Fear that the ‘wrong’ people were breeding in greater numbers than the ‘right’ people led many (among them Theodore Roosevelt) to worry about ‘race suicide’ at the turn of the century. In “The Challenge of Facts,” published posthumously in 1914, William Graham Sumner declared poor heredity to be part of “the correlative of misery and poverty.” (William Graham Sumner, The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays, ed. Albert Galloway Keller [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914], 23.) Writing the majority opinion of Buck v. Bell in 1927, Oliver Wendell Holmes famously asserted that “three generations of imbeciles are enough,” declaring eugenic sterilization legal and in the public’s best interest. (Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200 [1927].) The arguments prevalent in the parenting debate by the late nineteenth century, then, gave way to a larger discussion of the benefits of restrictive parenting.
Although this time period spans the Civil War, I have found no indication that the war transformed parental advisers’ ideas about proper parenthood. This is not to say that the Civil War did not alter parenthood or, indeed, ideas about parenthood more generally. Parental advisers’ work, though, remained quiet about the war. Rather than an antebellum-postbellum shift, the sources indicate a shift in emphasis between the desirability of influencing social parenting and the necessity of controlling biological parenting. Later generations of parental advisers seem to have been less swayed by the notion that moral suasion could work and more convinced that parenting needed to be managed at the source. In this regard, they may have been influenced by the rise of science, as the later decades of the nineteenth century saw Americans beginning to embrace science and scientific answers to social problems. According to Charles Rosenberg, “in the decades after Appomattox, science tended to play an increasingly important role in the minds of generations still inspired by the zeal of an earlier, more specifically religious earnestness, but unable any longer to accept solutions formulated in traditional religious terms. The absolute of science became increasingly autonomous.”

Parental advisers came from disparate professions: they were judges and lawyers, physicians and phrenologists, ministers and cultural critics, writers of domestic advice and of children’s literature. As judges and lawyers, they clearly articulated what was expected of American parents through rendering their decisions and arguments in custody cases. As physicians such as William Potts Dewees, and phrenologists like Orson Squire Fowler, they used

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their particular brand of expertise as a platform from which to deliver medical as well as moral advice. As ministers and writers of traditional prescriptive literature, such as Lydia Sigourney and Reverend John S. C. Abbott, they emphasized the importance of a child’s early years to the formation of their character. And as children’s book authors, like Lydia Maria Child and others, they used their books to train a dual audience of children and parents. Although I have grouped them together as ‘parental advisers,’ these men and women were rarely united. Their ideas about proper parenting were as diverse as their occupations, and they often disagreed wildly about what proper parenthood was. As a group, though, parental advisers’ ideas shaped an ideal of middle-class parenthood in nineteenth-century America. The sources they penned—opinions and judgments in court cases, scientific and medical treatises, and didactic literature—provide insights into a broad spectrum of nineteenth-century debates about parenting. The sources themselves may not be particularly erudite or masterful examples of American writing. Nonetheless, they are invaluable as ideological work. To use scholar Diana Pasulka’s argument, their value “lies in the cultural work they perform, not necessarily in their artistic merits.”

Individually, each type of document only tells a fraction of the story. Taken together, however, these sources provide a much more complete picture of what nineteenth-century men and women deemed to be one of their most important undertakings: parenthood.

By far, most of the parental advisers considered here were Northeastern, suggesting that this debate about parenthood—and the norms that it gave rise to—was limited to that region of the United States. At the same time, there are outliers, in places like Chicago, Cincinnati and San Francisco, Mississippi, Kentucky and Tennessee. Such sources—smaller in number though they

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are—nonetheless raise the question of whether this is a national conversation of shared urban middle-class values. This issue is further complicated by the fact that historians are divided on the question of the presence of a national market for books (and ideas) during the nineteenth century. In his study of the burgeoning nineteenth-century American publishing industry, Ronald Zboray notes that “if Michigan wheat, Troy stoves, Danbury hats, Lackawanna iron, Lowell gingham, and Black Belt cotton found their way into homes across the nation, so could Boston books, Philadelphia fiction, and the New York *Knickerbocker.*”7 At the same time, though, Zboray argues that “the railroad created geographical biases in literary distribution.”8 “Authors and publishers,” he notes, “aware that the Northeast constituted the primary market for literature and that the distribution of imprint by rail left most of the South untouched, could afford to ignore the South altogether.”9 Zboray’s argument regarding the lack of a national market is contradicted by other historians. Daniel Walker Howe, for example, argues that improvements in both printing technologies and transportation “had reached the point where a national market for published material existed” after 1830.10 Sarah Wadsworth concurs, describing a “large, national market” in which smaller publishers hoped to compete by targeting submarkets (distinguished by topic, rather than region).11 Adding another layer of complexity is the question of whether this conversation crossed national boundaries. Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that it was at least trans-Atlantic in nature: the works of such British authors as Maria Edgeworth, William

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8 Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 12.


Cobbett, Mary Hughes, Charles Atmore, Elizabeth Sandham, Rev. Thomas Searle, and more mirror that which was being published by contemporary American didactic authors. In short, elements of this same conversation about parenting extend beyond the American Northeast. It seems likely that, within the United States, this represents the development of a national conversation that draws on shared urban middle-class values. Much more research would need to be done to prove that unequivocally, however. This dissertation takes as its starting point the idea that this is essentially a story of the emerging white northeastern middle class, but does not shy away from utilizing American sources that hint at a broader geographic discussion.

When parental advisers began their work in the 1820s, their success was made possible by their ability to capitalize on a unique moment in American history during which a number of transformations were underway. New advents in publishing allowed their advice to reach American mothers and fathers more readily. Changes in the ways in which Americans perceived professionals enabled parental advisers to create a new category of experts. Shifting family dynamics meant that there was an advice vacuum that they could fill. And, perhaps most importantly, the emergence of the American middle class provided them with a ready market of men and women open to advice that would help them reinforce their class status.

Parental advisers were confident that parents needed the guidance they alone could offer. Having advice to give, however, was one thing; these experts needed to be able to get their advice to those who needed it. In this regard, their timing could not have been more advantageous. Several factors converged in the early nineteenth century to help bring these parental advisers into American homes. First, the transportation revolution meant that more people could access published materials. Second, new printing technologies that allowed

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12 For more on the transportation revolution and its impact on publishing, see Zboray, A Fictive People.
published materials to be produced not only in greater numbers but also more cheaply meant that more people could afford to buy them. Furthermore, the (largely urban and northeastern) publishing industry was growing exponentially. According to Mary and Ronald Zboray, “between 1850 and 1860 alone, the printing industry’s product value increased by 168 percent, from nearly twelve to over thirty-one million dollars a year.” There was also a tremendous market for these published materials. Historian Isabelle Lehuu describes an “exuberant print culture” in the decades before the Civil War that encompassed books, newspapers, journals, and every variation thereof (serials, the penny press, dailies, and so on). “It was in the antebellum era,” Lehuu argues, “and not the 1880s and 1890s that the United States faced its first information explosion.” And finally, literacy rates nearing 90 percent for adult white Americans by 1850 meant that more people could read these materials. In short, this was an ideal moment for parental advisers to make their mark.

Yet Americans’ willingness to entertain the expertise of others, with regard to parenting or otherwise, was not a given. Here, too, transformations were underway that enabled the expertise of parental advisers and others to be heard. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, regular physicians, for example, had a difficult time convincing Americans of the need for their particular expertise. Many Americans were simply too remote or too poor to rely on doctors for healing. Furthermore, they were skeptical of the remedies doctors peddled. For these and other reasons, they turned to widely available medical manuals to treat themselves and their

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13 Zboray, A Fictive People, 15.

14 Ronald Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People’s History of the Mass Market Book (New York: Routledge, 2005), xi.


16 Zboray, A Fictive People, 96.
families. In order to grow their field as well as their clientele, regular physicians standardized medical education and licensing, thereby heightening their claims to authority, and they formed the American Medical Association in 1847, which further contributed to the professionalization of their ranks. Later in the nineteenth century, bewildered by such sweeping changes as industrialization, nationalism, and urbanization, Americans would embrace the Progressives, who embedded professionalism into American society.

This Progressive professionalization impulse was able to build on the early work of regular physicians as well as parental advisers. As they collectively worked to shape the American parent, parental advisers individually negotiated claims to expertise. While they were no doubt genuinely concerned about confronting the changes they saw around them, their assertions about parenthood could also establish their claims to speak with cultural authority. Self-styled experts, parental advisers attempted to insert themselves into households as indispensable parenting aids, and along the way they shaped the nature of parenting itself. They worked to convince American parents that their advice was invaluable, limited to their ranks, and that their voices were trustworthy. Over the course of the century, they provided parents with reams of advice and instruction on how to parent—how to wield the ‘mightiest influence on earth.’

Advances in transportation and publishing, as well as a growing reliance on expert advice, enabled parental advisers to share their expertise with their clientele. Their success in

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finding a captive audience was further made possible by the advice vacuum left behind as the
pre-industrial family grew into something new. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth
centuries, the United States witnessed a transformation in parenthood that enabled parental
advisers to gain a foothold in family life. The transitions that made it possible for parental
advisers to so thoroughly entrench themselves into American homes did not happen overnight, or
even noticeably over the course of a few years. They took place over many decades, after which
American families looked fundamentally different.

The discrete nuclear families of the nineteenth century urban middle class would have been
out of place in pre-industrial America, when families were intimately connected with both
community and kin. Pre-industrial communities relied on heads of households to ensure order
and discipline, together the foundation for the success of the community.21 Households also
performed a number of functions for the community that today have been outsourced to other
entities. According to historian Stephanie Coontz, “the household was the center not only of
economic production but also of social services, education, socialization, work training, and
religious instruction.”22 The household, then, was an indispensable and integral part of the
community. And as much as the community relied on households, households relied equally on
the community for support. Each was not only aided by the other, but also policed by the other.
Puritan communities, according to Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, felt “a responsibility not
only to punish misconduct but also to intervene within households to guide and direct

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21 See Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life (New
York: The Free Press, 1988); Mary Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York,
1790-1865 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in

Verso, 1988), 83. See also: John Demos.
behavior." Pre-industrial households also relied on extended kin networks. Although families often did not live together as extended kin groups, such networks remained heavily involved in a family’s day-to-day activities, an intimate connection of support.

Both the intrusion of communities and the interconnectedness of families and extended kin networks were critical to shaping the pre-industrial notion of parenthood, as well as the nature of childrearing. To use historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s term, pre-industrial parenting was ‘extensive’ rather than ‘intensive.’ She argues that mothering, for example, “meant generalized responsibility for an assembly of youngsters rather than concentrated devotion to a few.” Indeed, pre-industrial children grew up with any number of people taking care of them. According to Helena Wall, “childrearing responsibilities were dispersed to relatives, neighbors, masters, even strangers.” Often ‘put out’ to learn a trade (or to ease the burden on already-stretched household resources), children lacked the intense emotional connection with their parents that would become a hallmark of the nineteenth-century idealized family.

These distinctive features of pre-industrial family life began to change as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth and as the pre-industrial family gave way to the urban middle-class family. As this transition took place, the family turned inward and separated itself from the larger community. From this separation, more emphasis was placed on parents in

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23 Mintz and Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions, 7. See also Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class.


26 Helena Wall, Fierce Communion: Family and Community in Early America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 86.

particular, as they became the sole rearers of children. This focus on parents was made all the more intense in the context of changing notions of childhood. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, childhood began to be seen as a unique stage in a person’s life, and children were recognized as needing certain things. This, in turn, placed a bigger burden on mothers and fathers; parents faced increased scrutiny as they were the ones expected to meet these needs. Furthermore, among the urban middle class, households became private units of consumption, affection, and socialization. This new kind of family faced new expectations, and parents’ relationship to their children—the bond between mother, father, and children—was a critical component of this.

Among the loudest voices articulating expectations of parents were parental advisers. Through their work, they issued endless decrees about what good parenthood was. Some (inadvertently) defined parenthood in terms of what it was not: childlessness. Commentators noted that those who chose not to have children were selfish, hard-hearted, and worse. “A woman who, by cool and calculating choice, is no mother, and who congratulates herself that she has no ‘young ones’ tied to her apron strings, is either very unfortunately organized, or she is essentially immoral. A man who can tip up his feet, over against his lonely wife, and thank his stars that he has no ‘squalling brats’ around to bother him, is a brute.” More often than not, though, parental advisers defined parenthood (or the ideal of parenthood) by what it ought to be. Parents needed to remember, for example, that “children need, not only government, firm and

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mild, but *sympathy*, warm and tender.”30 Parental advisers exhorted parents to “exercise your authority as seldom as possible, and instead of it employ, [sic] kind persuasion and deliberate reasoning; but when you exercise it, make it irresistible.”31 Parents needed to adopt “gentle measures” of childrearing which “tend to exert a calming, quieting, and soothing influence on the mind,” rather than “ungentle measures,” which “tend to inflame and irritate the mind, or to agitate it with *painful* excitements.”32 This delicate balance was imperative, because children “come to us from heaven, with their little souls full of innocence and peace,” and parental influence “should not interfere with the influence of angels.”33

This myriad of edicts from parental advisers comprised a seemingly unending list of injunctions which, taken together, form a standard of parenting that was nearly (if not completely) unattainable. Mothers and fathers needed to strike an impossible balance in order to be considered a “good” parent. They needed to be doting, but not too doting; protective, but not stifling; unwavering, yet sympathetic; strict, yet tender. As a group, parental advisers helped to shape the concept of a parent over the course of the nineteenth century, from a relatively amorphous entity to a recognizable constituent of the modern family. But along the way, the bar for a “good” parent was set so high that few could hope to reach it.

The nature of the transition that gave rise to the middle class family targeted by parental advisers has been the subject of much debate among historians. Mary Ryan and Stephanie Coontz argue that external pressures on American families—specifically the decreasing

30 “Parents,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) 14, no. 2 (February, 1849): 30. Emphasis original.

31 E. D. Griffin, “Rules for Governing Children,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) 14, no. 4 (October, 1849): 82.


availability of farmland and jobs—triggered the shift. This meant that families had to rethink such things as family size, inheritance, and occupations for children entering adulthood. It also meant that the strong community bonds that tied pre-industrial children and families to a particular geographic area were weakening.

These changes had tremendous implications for parenting. Smaller families meant that parents could devote increased attention to their children. However, it also meant that there were fewer opportunities for older children to apprentice as parents with their younger siblings. Furthermore, as land in and around their communities became increasingly scarce, young adults had to look elsewhere for work. When these men and women then became new parents, they had fewer opportunities to get parenting advice from their own families. The result of these changing family dynamics was that parental advice—as well as experience raising children—was harder for new parents to obtain from familiar sources. Parental advisers recognized and capitalized on this advice vacuum, providing middle class mothers and fathers with an inexhaustible source of childrearing guidelines.

This new middle class worked to distinguish itself from others by adhering to certain markers of class status. Historian Stuart Blumin notes that middle class Americans employed a number of markers to distinguish themselves from those below—and above—them. Blumin argues that work was certainly one of these markers, noting that the middle class distinguished itself from the working class by (for example) physically separating nonmanual and manual labor. Among other markers, these differences meant that clerks, retailers, manufacturers and

34 See Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class; Coontz, The Social Origins of Private Life.

35 For alternate treatments of the rise of the middle class, see Paul Johnson, A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); for a British perspective of the same development, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
others could not “be spoken of in the same breath with the poor and ‘inferior’ inhabitants of the city…but neither were they members of the mercantile elite.”36 Additionally, Blumin notes, middle-class markers could be found in the home as well as in the workplace. Here, changing domestic ideals helped to distinguish middle class families from both the working class and the elite mercantile class. Historians Jan Lewis, Jacqueline Reinier, and others agree, arguing that within the family, members of the middle class placed a premium on the affection and emotional support of family life, as well as the privacy their homes afforded.37 As a group, the middle class began to valorize the ideal of the private home that was insulated from the harsh outside world, despite the fact that so few of its members could attain this ideal.38 In truth, much of the middle-class’s first steps were unsteady. Middle-class status was hardly static, as the unstable economy made for an ever-changing membership. Historian Scott Sandage argues that, given the rocky nineteenth-century economy, awash in financial panics, middle-class status, once attained, was no guarantor of future success.39 Furthermore, according to historians Karen Halttunen and Thomas Augst, membership within the middle class was also fraught with identity crises: many legitimate members of the middle class struggled to act their class well, while others simply acted middle class without actually being so.40

36 Stuart Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience and the American City, 1760-1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 137.

37 See Jan Lewis, The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson’s Virginia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Reinier, From Virtue to Character; Wall, Fierce Communion; Mintz and Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions.


As the middle class embraced markers of status with which to define itself, certainly one of them was emerging standards of parenthood. These standards, established by parental advisers, grounded ‘good’ parenthood in morality, religion, and a commitment to the work ethic demanded by childrearing. Those who fell short of these standards were deemed inappropriate parents. By adopting these ideals, middle-class mothers and fathers could distinguish themselves from those of the lower classes. By emphasizing other values, such as hard work and thrift, middle-class parents could also distinguish themselves from the upper class. Furthermore, good parents could help to bring some stability to an insecure middle class, as the results of parenting (children) could not be faked. According to parental advisers, it was painfully clear who was a good or a bad child and, by extension, a good or a bad parent. Such a clear division helped to distinguish true middle-class parents from any imposters. Moreover, such parents—who adhered to established standards of good parenting—would go on to raise future citizens who were a blessing to their families and a benefit to their country—a far cry from ‘confidence men’ and ‘painted women’ who led others to believe they were something they were not.41

Among markers of middle-class status, however, good parenting was as elusive as others. The barrier to entry for good parenting was impossibly high. Middle-class mothers and fathers had to navigate an endless number of edicts from parental advisers in order to be considered ‘good’ parents; good parenting was not guaranteed on the basis of one’s bank balance. Furthermore, neither middle-class status nor success in parenting were guarantors of future childrearing triumphs. Parenting was as much a method by which the middle class policed itself as it was a means of differentiating between social classes. It could help middle-class men and

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41 Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women.*
women reinforce their class status, but it could also be a harsh reminder of their failure to meet that class status.

The middle class also distinguished itself from other classes by embracing certain ideological tenets, perhaps none more so than separate spheres. The ideology of separate spheres, which sociologist Michael Kimmel argues was invented to shore up and defend middle-class masculinity, held that men and women occupied distinct spheres that dictated what was expected of them.\textsuperscript{42} Men’s public sphere encompassed (among other things) work, commerce, and politics and was cast as harsh, dirty, and cut-throat. By contrast, women’s private sphere of domesticity and the home was gentle, serene, and virtuous. Each was the opposite of its mate, and each was dependent upon the other. Men were the providers, who toiled to support their families and who, at the end of the day, were able to retreat to their homes, where their nurturing wives awaited them. In the early nineteenth century, these emerging ideas of manhood and womanhood, informed by the ideology of separate spheres, were also inextricably tied up with ideas of parenthood; within the middle-class family, they pervaded and shaped notions of fatherhood and motherhood.

For middle-class men, breadwinning was central to both their masculinity and their roles as fathers. Robert Griswold writes, “to be middle class was to consume, and men underwrote the act.”\textsuperscript{43} Their work in the public sphere made it possible to maintain their family’s middle-class lifestyle and status. Whether this led to a decreased role for men in the household is the subject of much debate among scholars. Several historians contend that as men increasingly worked outside the household to provide for their families and fulfill their roles as breadwinners, they

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had correspondingly less time to spend with their families and raise their children.\textsuperscript{44} Yet, as historian Shawn Johansen points out, twentieth-century fathers who similarly labored to provide for their families have not faced such ham-handed treatment; scholars recognize that these men (even in fictional depictions) found time for both work and home life.\textsuperscript{45} In the hands of Johansen, Stephen Frank, and John Tosh, nineteenth-century fathers have begun to receive the nuanced treatment they deserve. Their work is invaluable, as it illuminates the ways in which nineteenth-century fathers were vital to their families, not just as breadwinners and providers, but as playmates and nurturers, helpmates and companions.\textsuperscript{46}

As with men, notions of nineteenth-century middle class womanhood were similarly entangled with ideas about parenthood. In the years following the Revolution, fathers increasingly worked outside the home, families’ reliance on servants dwindled, and women became less involved in economic production. This restructuring of what historian Ruth Bloch calls the ‘familial division of labor’ led to the privatization and insular nature of the middle-class family, as well as the growing valorization of women as mothers.\textsuperscript{47} It was during this time period that women were urged to embrace the pseudo-political role open to them through the ideology of “republican motherhood.” Not recognized as citizens themselves, republican mothers were


\textsuperscript{45} Shawn Johansen, \textit{Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Industrializing America} (New York: Routledge, 2001), Introduction.


nonetheless critical to the foundation of the new nation as shapers of future citizens.\(^48\) Furthermore, women could use their dominance in the domestic realm to influence their husbands and children. Pious and pure, moral and submissive, the ideal middle-class woman produced nothing, but her reign over home and hearth was nonetheless indisputable.\(^49\)

Understanding the history of men and women, of manhood and womanhood, and of masculinity and femininity are important components of a larger understanding of our gendered history. Yet, as illuminating as such a framework is, it is also by necessity limiting because studying the sexes in relative isolation from one another can only tell us so much. The work of Kerber, Griswold, and other comparable studies are somewhat limited in that they primarily deal with one sex, attending to the other sex tangentially as it relates to the first.

Parenthood, however, provides an ideal way of articulating a unifying theory—one that bridges rather than supplants. It merges the gender history of women with the gender history of men and thereby enables scholars to see things in a new light. Rather than examining men and fathers in isolation from women and mothers, it provides a new way of thinking about how we conceive of people in the family. It builds on the theoretical framework of gender by supplementing our knowledge. Furthermore, its usefulness as a framework extends beyond family and gender history. Parenthood was also a way of demonstrating or defining class status and, in the hands of parental advisers, became a marker of the middle class. Finally, parenthood was a vehicle by which parental advisers themselves could become experts. In short, parenthood provides a lens through which we can understand the ways in which nineteenth-century


Americans negotiated lines of gender, class, and expertise. As a framework, it unifies and builds on other literatures and suggests new ways of thinking about this history.

The ideological constructs that Kerber, Griswold and others have recognized had a profound impact on the family in general and on parents in particular. While it is true that mothers and fathers individually faced certain obligations within these constructs, what is perhaps more revealing are the expectations they faced together, as parents. New demands on family life led to higher expectations for parents (not just mothers) to act in certain ways and to raise their children properly. As the urban middle-class family came to place greater importance on affection and emotion, the relationship between parents and children faced increased scrutiny. As my dissertation will demonstrate, parents were expected to adhere to a myriad of edicts in order to be considered ‘good’ parents who raised their children well. For parents who did not (or could not) meet such high expectations, the consequences would reach far beyond home and hearth.

As the eighteenth century bled into the nineteenth, the urban middle-class family fundamentally changed. It shifted from a basic economic unit of production to an affective unit of consumption. While the pre-industrial family had been held together by notions of responsibility and duty to one another and to the community, the family that replaced it was a social unit held together by bonds of affection. Naturally, the pre-industrial family engaged in consumption and childrearing, and certainly showed affection towards one another. Yet the modern urban family that emerged held to fundamentally different ideological underpinnings than its pre-industrial precursor, grounded more in emotion rather than obligation. No longer a unit of economic production, the family focused more intensely on bonds between parents and children. Furthermore, and more importantly to this dissertation, no longer moored by a world in
which expectations were clear, this new family found itself adrift in a fundamentally changing world.

It was into this setting that parental advisers stepped, asserted their expertise, and reshaped familial expectations by crafting the ideal of the parent. They capitalized on this moment: a crisis of confidence within the family in which parental advisers were able to assert themselves and be heard. It is important to remember that their work aimed to instruct and shape a particular kind of family: white, urban, and middle-class. Among rural and farm families, for example, extensive parenting and childrearing remained the norm into the twentieth century. These types of families, as well as immigrant, black, and working-class families, did not fit the mold that parental advisers sought to standardize. These self-styled experts had a particular image in mind of what the ideal American parent looked like, and a particular audience they targeted.

Parental advisers’ success in their profession is evidenced by the fact that not only does this debate about parenting have a rich history, it also does not have an ending. From Theodore Dwight to Dr. Spock and beyond, Americans have continued to debate the proper meaning of parenthood. Pick up any newspaper or magazine in this country and you will likely uncover a wealth of evidence of this contentious and ongoing debate. As a society, we argue constantly about what it means to be a good parent, and what responsible parenting is. This debate plays out not only in traditional sources such as newspapers and magazines, but also in online forums, blogs (notably so-called “mommy blogs”), and social networking services such as Twitter. Here, debates about parenting often focus on how to parent “properly” and they generate discussion (often vehement discussion) about “good” and “bad” parents. They reflect a belief that there is a “right” way and a “wrong” way to parent. While technology has moved it into new venues, the
argument itself is not new. Its roots can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, to the subject of this dissertation, when parental advisers began to debate what they believed American parenthood ought to look like and, as a result, shaped the expectations surrounding parenting for years to come. This dissertation aims to provide the historical background on how American parenting and parenthood came to be such a divisive topic.

Understanding the emergence of parenthood as an ideal requires that we understand what historians have said about family history, the rise of the middle class, the creation of experts and the changing nature of medicine and science, and push it a step further by asking slightly different questions—namely, what can we learn of attitudes about parenting? To what extent was parenting a product of the experts offering advice in a burgeoning consumer culture? What did the experts focus on about parenting? My work suggests that the creation of parenting in the nineteenth century was not only a way in which the urban middle class distinguished itself, and in which parenting experts created a market for their advice, but more importantly that it became a hallmark of society that has carried into the present day.

The chapters that follow are laid out in chronological order from the 1820s through the 1870s. They pick up threads of the parenting debate where they are most heavily concentrated. Such long-ranging discussions, however, are not tidy, nor do sources conform easily to the organizational strategies historians employ. Therefore, while there is a rough chronological order to the chapters, there are outliers of sources in each chapter that belie that chronology.

Chapter 2 addresses the rise of advice for this new thing called a ‘parent.’ Generically speaking, parents, it stands to reason, had been raising children successfully for countless generations. Why, then, did they suddenly emerge as a new species of family member who needed to be told how to fill their role? As traditional family kin and community networks
became more dispersed, and the vacuum created thereby threatened social cohesion, parental
advisers stepped in to fill a perceived void. They established themselves as people whose advice
could be trusted and, along the way, created their own consumer market: parents as consumers of
advice. Here, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they commenced their work of
shaping and defining what it meant to be a parent. They began to create a vision of purposeful
parenthood—their idea of raising children was not that children would become future laborers or
that they could be economic assets, but that the parent-child relationship itself was critical and
that parents needed to raise children with intention in order for them to thrive in a changed
landscape. This notion of a purposeful parenthood was revolutionary and would wind its way
through the discourses of parental advisers through the century.

In the 1830s and 1840s, parental advisers began to clarify exactly what was expected of
parents. The requirements were rigorous and it is these high expectations that Chapter 3 explores.
During this period, parental advisers began to articulate the idea that parenting was not an innate
skill. Parents, they insisted, were made and not born. In order to stand a chance of being
successful, they needed to rely on parental advisers, who could teach them appropriate,
purposeful parenthood. Parents also needed to understand the incredible responsibility that they
bore—a responsibility with ramifications not only for home and society, in the here and now, but
also into the hereafter. Parental advisers then took up the monumental task of prescribing
appropriate parental behavior. This they did by providing examples of good and bad parenting,
and illustrating the effects thereof.

Although mothers and fathers both were parents and had certain shared expectations,
parental advisers also articulated a gendered vision of parenting. This vision is the topic of
Chapter 4. Mothers were cast as the more ‘natural’ parent—more nurturing, more innately caring
than fathers. As such, they had certain expectations with parenthood that were uniquely theirs. Yet this did not mean that men were in any way exempt from expectations of their own. In fact, parental advisers insisted that it was because mothers and fathers imparted different things and had different expectations that children needed both. A family without maternal affection, after all, could hardly be called a home. Nor could children growing up in a household lacking paternal guidance be expected to succeed. Children needed both maternal and paternal influences in order to be raised properly. (In cases involving child custody, justices weighed the influence of each parent with the age of the child, awarding the child to the parent whose gendered influence seemed the most important to the child at that age.) Yet although parental advisers were quick to point out women’s many virtues as mothers, they also saw women’s weaknesses. A woman who was overly doting, or overly lenient, was not a good mother. Parental advisers expressly delineated the notion that part of a father’s role was to correct the failings of the mother. Therefore, in the realm of parenting, the will of a father trumped the affection of a mother.

In the 1850s and 1860s, parental advisers set out to create an elite force of exclusive, highly trained, professional parents. As Chapter 5 illustrates, they began by insisting that parents needed good information from reputable sources (themselves) in order to parent properly and in order to protect their children from the treacherous world beyond home and hearth. Parenting advice gleaned from non-experts, such as neighbors or friends, might be detrimental to children. Furthermore, children faced dangers from nurses, servants, and even childhood acquaintances. In order to minimize the impact of these external threats, parental advisers insisted that parents alone were the only entity capable of parenting. Servants, nurses, and even family members were unacceptable replacements. Along these same lines, parental advisers found fault with common
schools. As schooling became more prevalent in the nineteenth century, parental advisers worried about removing children from parental influences for such long hours. Furthermore, they fretted that parents would willingly shirk their duties and obligations to their children, preferring instead to pass them off to teachers.

During the 1860s and 1870s, parental advisers became increasingly concerned about shaping future generations. Their concern was born out of the societal ills they saw around them, manifested in an army of the infirm and the deranged—people harboring heritable diseases and tendencies. Were such people to marry and procreate, parental advisers feared the worst for society. Chapter 6 illustrates the ways in which parental advisers took it upon themselves to protect ‘the family’ and society from certain destruction by insisting that parenthood was a privilege, not a right, and that only the best should be allowed to breed. In this regard, they mirrored certain ideas held by utopian visionary John Humphrey Noyes, whose Oneida community engaged in a brief experiment in stirpiculture—human husbandry—during this time period. While other of his ideas were too radical for most, his notion that humans could be selected on the basis of their traits and paired scientifically in order to improve society would have resonated with parental advisers. By the end of this period, they firmly believed in the idea of restrictive parenthood: of perfect parents creating ideal children.

Over the course of the century, then, the purposeful parenthood that early parental advisers pioneered revealed its less benevolent, more disquieting character. Its goal was not simply to ensure that parents raised children properly for the wellbeing of the American family and for the good of society. Rather, parental advisers ultimately sought to transform American parenthood into an exclusive club. In the end, purposeful parenthood meant that only certain people ought to be allowed to become parents. All others were not worthy of the title. At Oneida,
John Humphrey Noyes acted on this idea in the form of stirpiculture. In doing so, he turned the discourse advocated by parental advisers into action. For Noyes and others, the social definition of a parent that they—the white middle and upper classes—shaped came to exclude those who did not meet impossibly strict standards.

Before the notion of purposeful parenthood became so narrow, though, parental advisers sought to reconfigure the notion of American parenthood and to establish themselves as people whose advice could be trusted. In the 1820s and 1830s, their work was just beginning.
CHAPTER 2
A REVOLUTION IN PARENTING

It appears… that the relation which subsists between parents and children, is a very interesting and important relation. That the obligations and duties which arise from it are no less interesting and important, and demand the constant attention of parents. That the good of society, the good of posterity in the world, and the eternal happiness of children are, in an interesting and solemn manner, connected with the discharge of these duties.

—Cyrus Comstock, *Essays on the Duty of Parents and Children*¹

When Cyrus Comstock (Methodist preacher, 1765-1862) wrote about the duties of parenthood in 1810, he was describing a notion of a familial relation that was relatively new. The American family had undergone a number of changes over the previous century, and had emerged in the nineteenth century fundamentally changed. Over the course of a century, it had shifted focus from a patriarchal and economic unit of production to a more democratic and affective unit of consumption. The family, once held together by duty and obligation, now aspired to emphasize emotion and affection. Childrearing practices had changed as well, as childhood began to be seen as a unique stage in a person’s life. It was within this context that Comstock and others began to focus intently on parents themselves. As American mothers and fathers struggled to find their footing on unstable ground, parental advisers stepped forward to pin down what it meant to be a parent and what it meant to be a family in this chaotic new era.

During this period, parental advisers began to assert themselves, giving shape not only to themselves but also to their target audience. Likewise, their target audience was also beginning to define itself: the middle class, in the 1820s and 1830s, was taking its first steps, defining what it was (and was not). As Stuart Blumin argues, “in the urban-industrial revolution of the

Jacksonian era and beyond, middling folk would redefine themselves, and elevate themselves, in ways that were not possible in the craft economies and little urban worlds of the eighteenth century.” As Blumin notes, a definable middle class was not fully formed by this time. But it was emerging, differentiating itself in many ways from the working class below and the elite class above. Parenting, as we shall see, was becoming one of these distinguishing characteristics. Parental advisers themselves were part of this burgeoning middle class, the values they espoused were middle class, and the parents they targeted were middle class. They helped to build, in short, part of the foundation of the middle class. What they did in the 1820s and 1830s was to assert their claim to expertise, outline the tenets of purposeful parenthood, and lay the groundwork for their work to come.

They began to define parenthood by arguing, first, that parents needed advice in order to parent properly. Second, they hoped to convince their audience that they—parental advisers—were the ideal people to provide such advice. Self-styled experts, they established themselves as people whose advice could be trusted (and needed to be trusted), in the process creating their own consumer market along the way. Third, aided by changes in household authority, parental advisers articulated what they believed was expected of both fathers and mothers. Finally, as changes in childhood redefined what it meant to be a child, they harnessed these new expectations to give shape and definition to what they believed a parent to be. Along the way, they articulated a purpose to raising children that, in the 1820s and 1830s, was nothing short of revolutionary.

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2 Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, 65.
“The Unfaithfulness of Parents”

By the early nineteenth century, people around the world had been raising children successfully for millennia. And yet, within the United States, there existed a growing body of people who believed that, whatever success parents had enjoyed in the past, the future required a different approach. As pre-industrial childrearing practices gave way to a recognizably modern family form, these individuals began to focus on parents alone as childrearers. In this new era, parents needed advice in order to parent properly. This motley collection of self-styled experts represented a burgeoning group of parental advisers. A varied mix, the parental advisers of the 1820s and 1830s included men and women, trained physicians, domestic advice writers, and jurists. Different clusters of parental advisers would make a number of arguments over the course of the century—that parenting was a learned skill, not an innate talent, for example, or that only certain people should be allowed to parent. But here, at the outset of the nineteenth century, parental experts aimed merely to establish themselves—as advisers to and about this new thing called a ‘parent.’

Although they did not speak with one voice, what bonded them together was a firm belief that parents needed to be told how to parent. Without the steady and reasoned advice of seasoned experts, parents simply could not expect to succeed. Dr. Samuel Kennedy Jennings (1771-1854) observed, “if every woman were properly qualified, and would faithfully perform her duty in having children; their virtuous affections might be so confirmed, their disposition to vice so effectually subdued, that, the greatest revolution in morals and health of the world, would be the consequence.”³ That not being the case (for if it were, there would be no need for Jennings to publish a book of this nature), mothers and parents clearly needed direction. Too many parents,

according to parental advisers, did not take their duties seriously, or perhaps did not know how to execute them properly. Novelist and author Catharine Sedgwick (1789-1867), for example, believed that parenting could not be done “slothfully or remissly,” yet noted that far too many parents seemed to do just that. “There are many who seem to think their duty quite discharged by supplying their children with comfortable food, clothes, and lodging, taking them to church on Sunday, and sending them to what is called ‘a suitable school.’”4 Sedgwick’s appraisal of American parenting provides two key insights. First, that proper parenting could not be passive; parents needed to take an active role in childrearing. Second, her comments anticipated an argument that future parental advisers would emphasize in the 1850s and 1860s: that parents should not just assign schools the duty of raising their children.

Beyond being slothful and remiss, it was clear to parental advisers that far too many parents simply did not know what they were doing. Theodore Dwight illustrated the extent of their ignorance. “Some parents err by presuming that their children know less, or more, than they do; or have worse or better dispositions than they have; or less or more command over their minds or feelings. Some place too much reliance on force, others on kindness; some change their plans frequently, others have no plans at all, but notice or pass over faults, blame or approve, according to their own feelings at the moment. Many unteach by example faster than they instruct by precept.”5 Dwight’s comments indicate a far worse problem than passive childrearing: these parents were actively making poor childrearing choices. With such ill-informed parents raising the nation’s youth, what lay in store for the future? Parental advisers like Sedgwick, Dwight, and others were wary of what they saw in parenting methods and looked

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4 Catherine Sedgwick, “A Plea for Children,” American Ladies’ Magazine (Boston) 8 (1835): 95.
5 Dwight, The Father’s Book, 119.
to the future with uncertainty. They did not know what it held in store, nor whether the rising generations would be capable of grappling with it if they were raised with unsteady hands.

Parents, it seemed to parental advisers, were in dire need of guidance and instruction when it came to raising their children properly. Proper training was needed in order to ensure success. While observing that it was up to mothers to ensure that children were morally, intellectually, and physically fit, author and educator Catherine Beecher (1800-1878) went on to point out that these same mothers were untrained in these skills. If it was the profession of women “to guard the health and form the physical habits of the young,” Beecher wondered why these women were not instructed as people in other professions were.6 On the subject of education, for example, she asked mothers:

Have you been taught the powers and faculties of the human mind, and the laws by which it is regulated? Have you studied how to direct its several faculties; how to restore those that are overgrown, and strengthen and mature those that are deficient? Have you been taught the best modes of communicating knowledge as well as of acquiring it? … It is feared the same answer must be returned, if not from all, at least from most of our sex. No; we have acquired wisdom from the observation and experience of others, on almost all other subjects, but the philosophy of the direction and control of the human mind, has not been an object of thought or study.7

While Beecher acknowledged women’s important role in the lives of children, she also indicated that they were unprepared to take on such a task without the wisdom of others. In these early decades, parental advisers were beginning to establish their arguments: that parents were lost without instruction and that they needed to be active and not passive when it came to childrearing. Furthermore, by intimating that parenting skills needed to be taught, parental

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6 Catharine Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education* (Hartford, CT: Packard & Butler, 1829), 7, 8.

advisers of the 1820s and 1830s anticipated arguments that later parental advisers would make in subsequent decades: that parenting was something learned, not something innate.

They laid the groundwork for these later arguments by pointing out the damage that untutored parents had caused. Parents could not raise their children properly without advice and the proof of this, at least according to Cyrus Comstock, could be seen in deteriorating conditions around the globe during the early nineteenth century. In Essays on the Duty of Parents and Children, Comstock bemoaned the state of the world in 1810 and placed the blame on parents. While children were born into the world wholly impressionable, he argued, parents alone could determine how they would mature. Unfortunately, according to Comstock, a great many parents did not take their duties seriously, and the ills of the world could be blamed on them. He argued, “to the unfaithfulness of parents must be attributed most of the calamities, which man is bringing upon man, in this sinful, distracted world. The natural consequences of unfaithfulness in parents, are disobedience, obstinacy and unfaithfulness in children. And undutiful, obstinate children commonly make unfaithful parents. …To this source may be attributed a great part of that moral darkness which covers the earth, and that gross darkness that covers the people.”8 In order to remedy this dreadful situation, parents needed advice on how to bring up their children properly, to endow them with education, moral fortitude, and reverence to God. The happiness of mankind itself, Comstock claimed, depended on it.

That parents needed advice seemed clear to parental advisers, who were only too happy to provide it. Why parents needed this advice is less clear, yet transformations in community and kinship networks may hold at least part of the answer. By the second or third decade of the nineteenth century, the urban, middle-class family looked fundamentally different from the rural

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or village family in its pre-industrial form: it was smaller and more nucleated; its focus was no longer production and the maintenance of family property, but affection, childrearing, and consumption; the community could no longer trespass familial boundaries as easily as it once had. Certainly the pre-industrial family had also engaged in childrearing, had affection for one another, and so on. But the key difference here is that the focus of the family had shifted. This was a new way of thinking about the family and about the role it was supposed to play. This new family had evolved, in short, into the modern private family. Historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg support this view: “Instead of being viewed as an integral component of the network of public institutions, the family was beginning to be seen as a private retreat. The term ‘family’ generally referred not to the household or kin group but to the smaller and more isolated nuclear, or conjugal, family.” And where once the community or the extended kin network would have provided advice about family matters, instruction from professional parental advisers now filled the void left by community and extended family. These men and women responded to the changing social, economic, and even geographic landscape of the middle class family by providing advice to parents in a time of crisis. Their work existed, in effect, to fill a perceived vacuum.

Books such as those written by Sedgwick and Comstock provided parents with important childrearing advice in the early decades of the nineteenth century, just as the family was groping its way into its modern form. When Mary Palmer Tyler advised parents as to the best method for curing “snuffles,” when Theodore Dwight urged fathers to train children early for a trade, and when Rev. Daniel Smith instructed parents about the best method for teaching children, they worked to fill a gap they saw emerging as the family became more isolated and insular. These

9 Mintz and Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions, 44.
early American advice tracts were among the first hints of an enormous wave of advice about parenting that was to come in the years following 1830. They provided parents with critical information on raising their children properly, and they did so at a time when ties to community and extended kin networks were weakening.

“Reason and Experience”

Merely being able to provide advice, however, would hardly be enough for this new group of experts to be welcomed into the nursery. As parental advisers came to the fore, they needed to gain the trust of parents in order to fully exert their influence. They accomplished this by establishing themselves as people whose advice could be trusted and needed to be trusted.

In the preface to Letters to Mothers, author Lydia Howard Sigourney (1791-1865) addressed herself to mothers, as a mother. “You are sitting with your child in your arms. So am I. And I have never been as happy before. Have you? How this new affection seems to spread a soft, fresh green over the soul. Does not the whole heart blossom thick with plants of hope, sparkling with perpetual dew-drops? What a loss, had we passed through the world without tasting this purest, most exquisite fount of love.”10 Using a friendly, conversational tone, Sigourney established herself as a mother, someone who could relate to another mother. In the same breath, though, she also established herself as someone with advice to give: “Now, how shall we bring up this babe, which Heaven hath lent us? Great need have we to repeat the question of the father of Samson, to the angel who announced his birth, ‘how shall we order the child?’”11 Sigourney parlayed her congenial tone into an avenue by which she could administer advice. Early in her book, she established that although she was a mother like other mothers, she

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differentiated herself from others by having advice to give. Furthermore, her status as a published author also gave her claims to expertise. In order to establish themselves in middle-class homes, parental advisers began to position themselves as experts in the field of parenthood. They did so by staking a variety of claims to expertise. Like Sedgwick, Mary Palmer Tyler (1775-1866) took a similar approach in *The Maternal Physician*, by setting herself up as a mother whose advice book was "the result of sixteen years' experience in the nursery."12

Tyler not only established women as the proper nurses of their children (usurping fathers, physicians, midwives, and paid nurses), she also established herself as the ideal administrator of advice to mothers. While professional trained physicians such as Dr. Samuel Kennedy Jennings had already published such advice books, Tyler contended that their expertise could not compete with her own sixteen years of hands-on experience. She felt that she was not in the best position to give advice on childrearing.13

These gentlemen must pardon me if I think, after all, that a mother is her child's best physician, in all ordinary cases; and that none but a mother can tell how to nurse an infant as it ought to be nursed. Who but a mother can possibly feel interest enough in a helpless new born babe to pay that unwearied, uninterrupted attention necessary to detect in season any latent symptoms of disease lurking in its tender frame, and which, if neglected, or injudiciously treated at first, might in a few hours baffel the physician's skill, and consign it to the grave.14

Tyler not only established women as the proper nurses of their children (usurping fathers), but she also established herself as the proper administrator of advice to mothers. She felt that she had something in her that no other professional could bring to the task of childrearing. Though she felt indebted to these men for their "many useful hints," she felt that they were not in the best position to give advice on childrearing.
asserted, that fathers and physicians simply could not mimic. “I need not attempt to describe the
rapture that swells a mother's heart, when, after agonies almost insupportable, her babe is given
to her arms. Every mother knows that language is inadequate to such a description.”15 According
to Tyler, enduring such trials established a bond between mother and child that no man—family
or stranger—could replicate. Like Sigourney, Tyler positioned herself as a mother whose advice
could be trusted. She indicated that mothers often knew more than medical authorities about
raising children properly. And in doing so, she established her advice as better than that of other
parental experts. As mothers, Tyler and Sigourney were able to stake their claim of expertise, in
part, on experience. This claim was fundamentally different than declarations of authority made
by physicians. These men could not speak from the experience of motherhood, but spoke from
(and staked their claim of expertise on) theory and scholarly knowledge. By emphasizing their
unique connection with mothers and attempting to gain the confidence of their readers in this
way, Tyler and Sigourney signaled that their advice was trustworthy.

Other parental advisers took a different tack in establishing themselves as people with
important advice, relying on fear and, again, a different type of expertise rather than trust to do
the legwork for them. Rather than setting themselves up as congenial people whose advice and
experience could be trusted, they focused instead on establishing themselves as people whose
advice with regard to parenting needed to be trusted. Physicians, in particular, relied on this
approach, insisting that their wisdom was necessary if parents truly wanted what was best for
their children. Dr. William Potts Dewees (1768-1841) noted that much of what dictated
childrearing (“custom, prejudice, and speculation,” according to him) was based neither in

15 Tyler, Maternal Physician, 20.
Doctors, he argued by contrast, rely on both. Dewees claimed that were it not for doctors, nineteenth-century parents would still engage in such primitive customs as swaddling their infants. This practice, he noted, left the little ones “no resemblance to anything living: its frequent but unavailing cries alone determined it to be human.” The inescapable implication is that parents alone—relying on custom or guesswork—could not hope to raise their children successfully; in order to do so, they needed to rely on expert advice. Not to do so, they warned, would result in inevitable disaster. Dewees implored parents to heed his advice, lest their children fall into infirmity. With regard to a child’s health, he argued, there was no room for error. “For upon the judicious application of physical agents healthy development takes place; and by their misapplication, the soundest stamina may be converted into never-ending debility, or pitiable helplessness.” If parents did not heed the advice of parental experts, then, their offspring would suffer the consequences, creating for them an uncertain future. Dewees and others like him differentiated themselves from other parental advisers by focusing on the dire outcomes that (they claimed) resulted from parents’ ignorance. Engendering fear, rather than establishing common ground, was the method by which Dewees and others attempted to gain the trust of their audience.

The expert advice that Dewees and others peddled meant, they believed, not only the difference between success and failure, but more importantly between life and death. Dr. Caleb Ticknor (1804-1840) agreed with this assessment. “Of one thing, however, I am confident, and may be allowed to express my conviction of its truth,—that is, that if all the precepts contained in

17 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, viii.
18 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, x. Emphasis original.
the following pages are honestly carried into practice, much sickness and suffering in this world, from the cradle to the grave, will be prevented.”¹⁹ In the eyes of parental advisers like Dewees and Ticknor, parents were not simply raising their children improperly; they were harming them. According to Ticknor, “notwithstanding the affection of parents, from unavoidable ignorance and voluntary inattention, the lives of many of their offspring are no doubt sacrificed.”²⁰ Ticknor and others established themselves as people whose advice needed to be heeded, lest parents consign their children to early graves.

The experiences of Philadelphia physician Charles Meigs (1792-1869) corroborated this idea. According to Dr. Meigs, sick children—including those still in the womb—“are children wounded; they are children dying, and needing the aid of a physician, and depending on his skill and judgment for their rescue.”²¹ Physicians like Ticknor and Meigs were only too happy to provide examples to back up their claims. Meigs provided several examples of patients who had not heeded his expert advice, and had paid the consequences. One woman in particular stood out in his memory. The mother of a young girl stricken with “scarlatina,” or scarlet fever, she stubbornly refused to keep her sick daughter dressed and confined according to Meigs’s instructions. She called on him again and again, each time asking if Meigs would consent to loosen his instructions. After he finally consented, “in an evil hour of complaisance,” the mother failed to prevent the child from scampering outside into the damp and cold weather, after which


²⁰ Caleb Bingham Ticknor, *The Philosophy of Living: Or, the Way to Enjoy Life and its Comforts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 162.

she became violently ill and died suddenly.\textsuperscript{22} He noted bitterly, “the mother detests me from that hour, though I think she ought rather to mourn over her own folly in abusing the complaisance of a physician to wrest from him a reluctant assent to her imprudent and restless desires.”\textsuperscript{23} The fact that Meigs yielded to the mother (his client) indicates, in part, the extent to which parental advisers like him relied on the market they were creating. Though he insisted he knew best, that his expert advice was sound, he nonetheless submitted to her pressure in order to appease her and retain her as a client. The consequences, he argued, were predictable.

Meigs was not alone in insisting that families risked disaster if they did not follow the advice of a physician. His colleagues agreed, and many added that the consequences of following the advice of someone other than a physician could be equally dangerous. Navy surgeon and medical author Dr. Thomas Ewell (1785-1862), for example, entreated women not to entrust the care of their children to “ignorant nurses,” whose outdated and foolish practices could harm the little ones. He claimed to know of one such nurse who made it a practice to shake babies by their heels after birth. Such conventions, he argued, could only lead to despair. “If the little innocents could speak, they would tell you, they knew no difference between being disordered and destroyed by intended kindness, or by intended neglect.”\textsuperscript{24} Parents simply could not trust (untrained) others to give good advice with regard to childrearing. William Potts Dewees agreed, and beseeched readers to speak to none other than their physician about children’s diseases. He urged, “let the mother confide in no judgment for her child’s disease, but that of her physician, if his advice can be commanded, and, above all, let not his prescription be interfered with by the

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\textsuperscript{22} Meigs, \textit{Observations on Certain of the Diseases of Young Children}, 91.


\textsuperscript{24} Thomas Ewell, \textit{Letters to Ladies, Detailing Important Information, Concerning Themselves and Infants} (Philadelphia: W. Brown, 1817), 240.
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obtrusive advice of a nurse, or still more ignorant old woman.” Dewees’s remarks not only reinforced the frequency with which physicians relied on fear, they also anticipated an argument that parental advisers would make in later decades: that parents alone were responsible for parenting, and relying on the untrained advice of others was tantamount to a child’s death sentence.

However they went about gaining the trust of their parent audience, parental advisers cast their advice as indispensable. They established themselves as fixtures in the nursery by providing something that (they claimed) parents desperately needed. By casting their advice as trustworthy and essential, parental advisers hoped to insert themselves into the nursery, making themselves an inextricable component of home and hearth. By intimating that they held the secrets to successful parenting and that parents were doomed to fail if they did not make themselves aware of these secrets, they fabricated a market for their product: advice.

Among parental advisers, there was perhaps no greater salesman than Jacob Abbott (1803-1879). A children’s book author, Abbott went to great lengths to demonstrate to parents how his books ought to be used in childrearing. In the introduction to The Little Philosopher, for example, Abbott described how his book should be used to teach children, going so far as to instruct mothers on what they should say when they begin a lesson. After describing how a mother might teach her young child to notice the traits of a handkerchief or a piece of paper, for example, Abbott then instructed her how to end the lesson. “A similar experiment might be made with a book; and then (the whole lesson having not occupied more than five minutes) the mother should say, ‘Well, I cannot teach you any more now; give me the handkerchief, and the book, and the paper, and run away to play.’” The next day the same exercise precisely should be

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25 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, 141.
repeated. The child will, if the case is properly managed, take a great pleasure in it.”

Abbott carefully described how parents should manage the day-to-day education of their children, inserting himself into their lives and offering indispensable advice. At the outset of his 1835 book entitled *The Little Scholar Learning to Talk*, Abbott included a “Notice to Parents” in which he gave specific directions on how the book was to be read and also on the general use of the book. He cautioned parents against allowing children to have the book too often or for the wrong reasons. “Do not let him have it too often, however, so as to lead him to treat it with contempt; and, above all never let him have it for crying, --nor for stopping crying. The regular way in which some children get their wishes is to begin to cry, and then have their parents tell them they cannot have what they want until they are pleasant. They cry for the express purpose of getting an opportunity to stop.” In such instances, not only did Abbott provide expert advice to parents, he also seamlessly placed his books at the core of this instruction, a clever technique in a market in which parenting advice was highly sought after.

Parental experts like Jacob Abbott marketed advice to parents ingeniously by gaining their trust, making them keenly aware of the risks of ignoring such advice, and inserting themselves into the family. They crafted a market for their advice as they worked to convince parents that they had what parents needed. In doing so, they cast parents not only as rearers of the next generation, but also as consumers of parental adviser’s expertise.

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Once they had gained the trust (or sharpened the fear) of parents and convinced them of the need for advice, parental experts then turned their attention to articulating what was expected of mothers and fathers. Here, their work was aided by a shift in household authority that had begun in the previous century. Under English common law, which governed life in much of early America, a father and husband had unquestioned authority over the dependents in his household, including his wife, children, and any servants. While ideas of an unquestioned male authority in the household did not die out immediately, as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth century signs of change were unmistakable. Slowly, this authority began to wane as middle-class Americans began to favor maternal affection over paternal authority, and mothers began to gain authority and rights within the household, assuming a more central role in parenting. This change—a sharing of power rather than a coup d’etat—can be seen across parental advisers’ work, as they emphasized what was expected of both mothers and fathers in charge of childrearing.

Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century child custody cases illustrate these shifting expectations for parental responsibility. Like other parental advisers who articulated expectations of American parents, jurists, too, expressed similar expectations. Examining custody cases reveals the ways in which jurists (and, occasionally, lawyers) worked to shape how mothers and fathers ought to behave. While published parental advisers wrote aspirational pieces intended to prescribe behavior, the work done on the bench was intended to more tangibly alter behavior (not only of the parties directly involved, but of others for whom the case would set a legal precedent). The following two cases, Nickols v. Giles and Stanton v. Willson and Smith, demonstrate the ways in which jurists near the turn of the century hoped to dictate parental behavior and the expectations they had of parents.
In 1796, William Nickols filed a writ of habeas corpus with a Connecticut circuit court for the return of his young daughter, whom he claimed was being “unjustly detained and withheld” from him and “unlawfully imprisoned” by Thomas Giles.\footnote{Nickols v. Giles, 2 Root 461 (Conn. 1796).} When the court investigated, it found that his estranged wife and daughter were living with Thomas Giles, the child’s maternal grandfather, and were both being “well provided for.”\footnote{Nickols, 2 Root 461.} Nickols’s claim was denied. The court argued that Nickols, “having no house and very little property” and being “very irregular in his temper,” was not likely to be able to provide for his daughter.\footnote{Nickols, 2 Root 461.} Though the case itself gives very few details as to how the court came to its conclusion, one can surmise from the wording of the verdict that Nickols was deemed to be a poor provider for his child, and one unfit to fill the role of a father. Not only did the court’s decision deny Nickols custody of his daughter, it also indicated some of the ways in which parental experts defined what the expectations of a father were. A man like Nickols, with little to recommend him in terms of wealth or character, could not hope to meet the demands of fatherhood.

Twelve years after the Nickols decision, in 1808, the Supreme Court of Errors of Connecticut heard a motion for a new trial involving the custody and maintenance of the children of Eunice Stanton and John Bird. The two had married in 1789 and divorced nearly nine years later. Under the terms of the divorce decree, Eunice got sole custody of their youngest children, William and Maria, and Bird was ordered to pay $3,000 for their support (which he did). Eunice did not get custody of their oldest child, John. When she remarried in 1803, to Joshua Stanton, her new husband began paying for her children’s upkeep. Although she had been denied custody of John, they were reunited when John ran away from his father “for fear of personal violence”\footnote{Nickols, 2 Root 461.}
and went to live with his mother. Bird never agreed to pay for John’s support and maintenance, a duty that then fell to the Stantons. The case went to trial and the court found in favor of Eunice, on all counts. Bird’s lawyers requested a new trial, arguing that he was no longer required to support his children: “the same act which has sealed his existence as a husband, has also closed his existence as a natural parent and guardian.” Eunice’s lawyers, however, disagreed with that rationale, arguing that Bird’s duty to support his children transcended divorce. “Does the divorce discharge his liability? There can be no pretense of it. He is still the father of his children. The relation between them is not impaired, nor affected.” Fortunately for Eunice, the court agreed, arguing that while the divorce terminated the relationship between husband and wife, the relationship between Bird and his children was unaffected. The court further ruled that Bird was required to pay for the support of his runaway son, noting, “because the father has abandoned his duty and trust, by putting the child out of his protection, he cannot thereby exonerate himself from its maintenance, education and support…. The father having forced his child abroad to seek a sustenance under such circumstances, sends a credit along with him, and shall not be permitted to say, it was furnished without his consent, or against his will.”

Both Nickols and Stanton illuminate what was expected of parents in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The cases directly signal what the courts believed to be the role of a father. The Nickols decision was a complete departure from English common law in that it marked the first time that a court denied a father his unquestioned right to his children. The court based its decision on his material wealth (‘no house and very little property’) and on his

31 Stanton v. Willson and Smith, 3 Day 37 (Conn. 1808).
32 Stanton, 3 Day 37.
33 Stanton, 3 Day 37.
34 Stanton, 3 Day 37.
character (‘irregular in his temper’). The implication here is that fathers were expected to be able to provide for their children and maintain a steady disposition. William Nickols, not being able to prove either, lost custody of his children. That said, the court under Nickols was not entirely prepared to grant the mother the sole right to her children, as both child and mother remained under the protective wing of a father, in the figure of Thomas Giles. It was, arguably, because Giles was able to fill the role of a good provider that the child was taken away from William Nickols in the first place. Had an appropriate surrogate father figure not been available, the decision may have gone the other way. In any case, the court’s decision indicates that at the end of the eighteenth century, a man’s status as a father or head of a household was no longer enough to guarantee him custody of his children. In his own household, a father’s authority was beginning to be questioned.

The Stanton case, too, illustrates the duty and expectations of a father. Eunice Stanton and John Bird’s 1797 divorce dissolved the bonds between husband and wife, relinquishing them of any duty they owed to one another. Yet the court was quick to point out that the divorce did not affect or amend Bird’s duty to his children. Whatever transpired between husband and wife, Bird remained his children’s father and nothing—not even the presence of a stepfather—could relieve him of his fatherly obligations of material support, duty, and trust. As with Nickols, the Stanton decision communicates the ways in which parental experts gave shape to what it meant to be a father.

Furthermore, the Stanton case also illuminates a change in parental authority: that of mothers gaining authority and rights. While the case does not focus on Eunice as a mother, it does tell us, first, that women at the turn of the century (at least in Connecticut) were entitled to the custody of their children and, second, that women were gaining the right to sue for their
claims as mothers. Whether or not Eunice was a good mother, we do not know. What is clear is that she was willing to launch a campaign for what she felt was owed to her as a mother, for the upkeep of her children. And the Connecticut court that heard her argument in 1808 saw her claims as legitimate. The Stanton case reveals that women as mothers were gaining authority and rights at the turn of the century.

Parental advisers and experts outside the courtroom were also quick to point out what they expected of mothers and fathers. As was the case in Nickols and Stanton, simply being a biological father was not enough to qualify a man for the title. A good father knew that his station required him to be not only present at home and among his dependents, but also an integral part of home and hearth. “What is to be thought of the father,” asked teacher and physician William Alcott (1798-1859), “who is silent and absorbed, or, peradventure, unhappy, when there is nothing to excite his attention but home, and wife, and family, but whose eye at once brightens, and whose tongue loosens, when a neighbor comes in; and who is still more cheerful, and happy, and talkative, and instructive, when he gets among his companions and sits in the midst of his wonted club of associates—men, perhaps, of coarse minds, and still coarser nature?” Fathers needed to be engaged with their children and their families, active participants in home life. Those who did not, cautioned Reverend John S. C. Abbott (1805-1877), risked setting a bad example for the next generation to follow. “Look at this man, who makes his home but a boarding house, where he may eat and sleep. His wife is merely his house-keeper. His children are necessary evils, to be kept out of the way as much as possible. Today he is at the bowling alley. Tomorrow he is at the billiard room. And the next day he is, till midnight, at the whist party…. See him at home—how petulant and irascible! The least annoyance is, to his

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mind, like the spark to the powder.”36 Such a man, Abbott implied, was hardly fit to call himself a father. A father who would happily escape the company of his children, viewing them as pests rather than delights, was more fit to bear the title ‘brute’ than ‘father.’ Worse still, the influence of such a man spread like a cancer to the younger generation: “His children, while they flee from his frown, imbibe his spirit.”37 Neither parental advisers in the courts nor those publishing didactic tracts were willing to let fathers escape the demands of childrearing—according to parental advisers, it took both mother and father to successfully raise children.

Perhaps to counter the effects of a ‘petulant and irascible’ father, parental advisers expected mothers to reign over home and hearth with a calm, nurturing, and steady hand. In his preface to the American edition of a popular British advice manual, printer James Buffum took the opportunity to endow mothers with authority in the household. It was a mother’s “especial duty and privilege to preside habitually over that home which is all the world to a child,” he observed. “Let then mothers reflect that their responsibility is commensurate with the peculiar opportunities which they enjoy of influencing the minds of their children. All that is sound and useful in the science and art of early education, deserves their peculiar attention.”38 It was up to mothers to embrace their responsibility with regard to wielding their influence in the household. If they would fully realize this obligation and exert their benevolent influence, they would uplift the entire country. The anonymous author of A Present for a Husband or Wife asked, “who would not be a mother, and preside in her circle! Others may enjoy a sceptre, but here are

36 John S. C. Abbott, The Path of Peace: or, A Practical Guide to Duty and Happiness (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1836), 108. Rev. John Abbott was the younger brother of children’s author Jacob Abbott’s.


subjects controlled by an eye, whose hearts like sweet toned instruments vibrate responses to the master tones of the great harp. Instead of the sound of arms, here is the voice of peace. And here is laid the foundation of a pure and happy country!”

Author William Cardell agreed: “There are mothers,” he observed, “and their number is increasing, who not only love their children, but manifest high intelligence in the exercise of maternal affection.” Lest his point go unnoticed, he underscored it with a hint of nationalism: “The character of the United States, as a nation, will be high or low, in proportion to the number of such mothers.”

Yet while parental advisers raced to enthrone mothers as queens of their domain, they also cautioned them against letting children take up too much of their time. The anonymous author of The Young Lady’s Own Book, for example, observed that mothers ought to identify with their children in order to become their friends, but cautioned against overdoing it. “Some mothers err a little in this respect. One would scarcely find fault with a parent for giving up too much time to her children; yet children are not the only objects of a mother’s regard, and by her making them so, she may in some measure defeat her own wishes.”

The careful mother, then, needed to strike a delicate balance. Too little devotion would make her a neglectful mother. Too much devotion would render children selfish. “For as the skilful gardener knows when it is better that nature should do her own work; so does the judicious parent feel that children should sometimes be left to try their own strength, and should neither expect nor need assistance.”

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39 A Present for a Husband or a Wife (Springfield, MA: G. and C. Merriam, 1832), 90-91.
41 Cardell, The Happy Family, 10. See also Kerber, Women of the Republic.
43 The Young Lady’s Own Book, 70.
Tyler agreed, noting that mothers ought not to indulge children in their every whim and desire, for this would render them “injudicious and unprincipled.” Instead, she argued, mothers ought to begin governing their children early, even before an infant reached its sixth month. “Let it then be amongst the earliest impressions received by the infant mind that you know what is best for them, and are determined to consult their good without attending to their whims, or weakly yielding to their impetuous tempers, and you will quickly reverse the picture entirely, and harmony, peace and happiness shine resplendent round your dwellings.”

Just as being a biological father did not mean that such a man was a good father, so too did it take special qualifications to make a good mother. Dr. William Potts Dewees observed that it took a certain character, and an attention to detail, to be a judicious mother. “To constitute a mother, in the best sense of the term, much more is required than giving birth to progeny—it requires qualities both rare and estimable; it exacts a patient endurance of fatigue, and anxious solicitude, as well as a submission to privations, which nothing will render supportable but that love of offspring which a kind Providence has so generally and so deeply implanted in the female heart.” By noting that the qualities required to be a mother were ‘rare and estimable,’ Dewees indicated that merely becoming a mother did not qualify a woman to be worthy of bearing that title. In making this claim, he anticipated arguments that parental advisers would make in the waning decades of the nineteenth century: that not everyone could (or should) parent. Furthermore, he refuted claims by Lydia Howard Sigourney and Mary Palmer Tyler, who argued, in part, from the experience of motherhood to make their claims to expertise. Dewees would have found fault with such an argument because, while any woman could become a


mother, it took the theoretical knowledge of a male physician to really become an expert on motherhood.

As notions of patriarchal authority began to give way to a sharing of household power, parental experts began to detail what they expected of mothers and fathers. By valorizing women, parental advisers such as William Cardell and James Buffum endowed mothers with authority in the nursery and in the household. This belief, however, was tempered by Mary Palmer Tyler and William Potts Dewees, who illustrated how difficult it was to navigate motherhood. There was a fine line between being a proper mother and being a negligent one. While mothers needed to assert themselves at the hearth, for the good of the country, fathers also needed to demonstrate their worthiness for the role. As Thomas Nickols’ failed custody battle demonstrated, a good father was one who provided for his family all the comforts they deserved and did so while maintaining a steady and even-tempered demeanor. A good father also embraced (rather than shirked) his duty to his children, and preferred above all to spend his time in the presence of his little ones. In the early decades of their work, as they were establishing themselves, parental advisers began to articulate gendered expectations of mothers and fathers. This was just a start, though; in later decades, they would more fully flesh out this gendered parenting. And increasingly, as parental experts concerned themselves with what those little ones needed, they worked to further define what they expected of parents.

“Parental Tutelage”

Just as changes in household authority at the turn of the century helped to shape what parental experts expected of mothers and fathers, changes in notions of childhood also helped to establish what parenthood meant. While children were considered to be household laborers into the early years of the nineteenth century in some areas, these attitudes were giving way to ideas more common to modern culture among the urban middle class. Childhood was beginning to be
seen as a distinct stage in a person’s development, and children began to be seen not as adults in miniature but as “special creatures with unique needs.”47 Children were thought to need nurturing, playtime, and toys and books created specifically for them. Increasingly, parental experts focused greater attention on what was best for the child. As they defined what childhood was and as they focused on what children needed, they indirectly signaled what parents needed to do to provide children with these things. In essence, they defined parenthood via childhood, and gave shape to this new thing called a ‘parent.’ Along the way, they advanced a purpose to parenthood heretofore unseen. Parenthood, in the hands of parental advisers, was an enterprise to be undertaken not to increase one’s labor pool or for economic reasons, but to raise children sensibly and in a particular way. In the decades to come, they would make it clear that not everyone could meet the demands of this purposeful parenthood.

Custody cases, again, are useful in that the jurists deciding them clearly articulated what they expected of mothers and fathers. The cases People v. Landt and Commonwealth v. Addicks are particularly effective in this regard. They demonstrate the ways in which the bench worked to shape parental expectations by way of these new conceptions of childhood and incorporated new ideas of what children needed from their parents.

In 1807 the Supreme Court of Judicature of New York rendered its decision in the case People v. Landt. Around the turn of the century, Maria Brower gave birth to a child out of wedlock. The man she named as her daughter Cornetie’s father was a Mr. Harder. After the birth, Cornetie’s grandfathers determined that they would split maintenance of their granddaughter until the age of seven. In 1800, at Maria’s request, her father allowed the child to live with Maria and her new husband (a Mr. Landt). The case went to trial when Cornetie’s putative father,

47 Mintz and Kellogg, Domestic Revolutions, 21.
Harder, claimed that his illegitimate daughter suffered cruelly at the hands of Mr. Landt. His lawyers provided “several affidavits, to show that the child had been ill treated, and severely abused by the defendant.”\textsuperscript{48} The justices, however, felt that the child was still best left in the hands of her mother. “In the case of illegitimate children, they wrote, “and especially as to females, the mother appears to us to be the best entitled to the custody of them.”\textsuperscript{49} They did, however, admonish Landt, “that he be careful to restrain his passions in the future,” and warned that if the child appeared to be abused again, they would “remove her from his custody.”\textsuperscript{50} Even though there was some lingering concern about the fitness of the child’s new father, the court nonetheless felt that Cornetie’s mother would serve her better than her biological father. They further indicated their concern for her best interests by noting that they would remove the child from the custody of her stepfather if he appeared to abuse her again. Just as William Nickols and John Bird were reminded that fathers were expected to act in a certain way, so too was Mr. Landt. Although he was a stepfather and not a biological father, he nonetheless filled the role of Cornetie’s father and needed to alter his behavior accordingly. Cornetie deserved not only her mother’s love, but proper treatment at the hands of her stepfather. The ‘best interests of the child’ doctrine was beginning to take shape.

The 1796 Nickols case demonstrated that justices were willing to take a child away from a father of questionable character—a father who did not fulfill the requirements of that station. But what if the father’s character was relatively blemish-free and if, instead, the mother’s character was called into question? Such was the situation in Commonwealth v. Addicks. In the early nineteenth century, a Pennsylvania woman named Barbara Lee, finding herself quite unhappily

\textsuperscript{48} People v. Landt, 2 Johns. 375 (NY 1807).

\textsuperscript{49} Landt, 2 Johns. 375.

\textsuperscript{50} Landt, 2 Johns. 375.
married, engaged in an adulterous affair with John Addicks and gave birth to his child. Her husband, Joseph Lee, divorced her in 1813 and went to court to obtain custody of their two daughters. In the trial proceedings, Joseph Lee’s lawyer attempted to gain custody for his client based on the common-law notion that a child’s “natural” custodian was its father. “He contended that the father, as the natural guardian of the children, had a right to their custody, and that the nature of the intercourse between their mother and Addicks, rendered it highly improper to permit them to remain under her care.” 51 A decade or so earlier, the justices would have likely agreed with this reasoning and awarded Joseph custody of his young daughters. After all, unlike William Nickols, he was not the parent whose character was called into question. Despite the fact that his wife was at fault for the divorce, however, the justices declined to give Joseph custody. Though they scolded Barbara for her conduct as a wife, noting, “we cannot avoid expressing our disapprobation of the mother’s conduct,” they ultimately granted her custody based on her conduct as a mother: “so far as regards her treatment of the children, she is in no fault… It is to them, that our anxiety is principally directed; and it appears to us, that considering their tender age, they stand in need of that kind of assistance, which can be afforded by none so well as a mother.” 52 In short, the young girls needed the attention of a loving and dutiful mother. Despite Barbara’s transgressions, the justices acted in the best interest of her children by acknowledging that their young ages demanded a mother’s devotion.

Three years after the initial Addicks ruling, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania reversed their decision and awarded Joseph Lee custody of his daughters, once again acting in the best interest of the children. In 1816, the justices argued that the ages of the girls, now thirteen and

51 Commonwealth v. Addicks, 5 Binn. 520 (Pa. 1813).
52 Addicks, 5 Binn. 520. Emphasis original.
nine, meant that the situation had changed from that of 1813. While they noted that they did not view Barbara as “a vulgar prostitute,” they nonetheless censured her previous adultery and argued that her actions within the marriage contract would have an ill effect on her daughters. They asked, “If they are permitted to remain with their mother, will they not conclude that her conduct is approved?” While the girls’ young ages in 1813 dictated that they needed the shelter of a mother’s loving arms, as the girls got older their needs changed. In 1816, as they approached puberty, the girls now needed to be removed from their mother, lest they follow in her footsteps. The court upheld the essence of the 1813 decision, then, by deciding the case based on the interests of the children involved.

As they articulated ideas about what was best for children, parental experts and advisers simultaneously signaled what was expected of parents. Their insights into the new conception of childhood that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century shed light on how they defined appropriate parenthood. If something was best for children, after all, parents had to provide it. Here, again, there was a fine line to negotiate. In order to provide children with the best start in life, parents needed to execute their duties in a particular way so as not to ruin the child for life. Parents, according to author Samuel Goodrich (1793-1860), needed to ensure they parented just right. “Let them not, under an idea of government, over-govern; let them not, under the notion of educating, over-educate; let them not, under the idea of training them to labor, overtask their child. Let it be understood that the child has a right to be happy so long as he remains under parental tutelage; and let it be remembered that if the parent interfere with this right, beyond what is demanded by a due regard to the child’s


54 *Addicks*, 2 Serg. & Rawle 174.
future prosperity, he uses the power of a despot, with the spirit of a tyrant.”\(^55\) Rather than ruling with an iron fist, parents needed to befriend their children and govern them accordingly. “A parent,” observed Theodore Dwight, “should be the adviser of the child, and is designed to be so by Providence; and it is generally owing to some neglect of duty if he be not competent to direct him in his youth, and to advise him in manhood.”\(^56\) The new tenets of childhood demanded that parents execute their duties in particular ways, providing children with that which the little ones needed: government, but not tyranny; friendship, but not to the extent that it threatened government; devotion, but not at the expense of other obligations.

At the same time that parents were obligated to respond to what their children needed, they simultaneously needed to instill in children the idea that what was best for them was, often, obedience to parents. According to author and social reformer Lydia Maria Child (1802-1876) “implicit obedience is the first law of childhood. The simple belief that their parents know what is best, is all the light children have to follow, at first.”\(^57\) In order to maintain a well-ordered household, parents needed to be able to rely on well-ordered children. This meant establishing their authority early and without exception. According to Rev. Daniel Smith, “parental government does not consist in so many whippings, or corrections of this or the other kind, but in fixing the mind of the child this impression, ’I must and ought to obey.’ Make no compromise on this point.”\(^58\) Without obedience, there would be chaos—again, a narrow margin divided parental success from parental failure. It was critical for parents to extract obedience from their children,


\(^57\) Child, *The Mother’s Book*, 50.

because an orderly (or disorderly) household had far-reaching ramifications. Rev. Smith argued, “obedience to a mild but firm parental authority easily transfers itself to civil laws and divine government. On the other hand, a rebellious child easily becomes a rebellious citizen, and a rebel against divine government.”\(^5^9\) Parents, in other words, owed it to the state and to God to raise good, obedient children. Here, Smith articulated the beginnings of an argument that other parental advisers would raise in the decades to follow: parenting and its results (good or bad) had ramifications beyond the hearth, reaching not only into the rest of society, but also into the hereafter. To safeguard both, parents needed to secure the obedience of their children.

In order to succeed in this regard, parents needed to provide a model for their children to follow—to demonstrate themselves what they wanted to see in their little ones. “Let the parent be what he would have the child be, and do as he would have the child do.” “Do you desire your child to be courteous? be courteous yourself: --intelligent? be so yourself: --affectionate? be so yourself: --speak kind words in kind tones? speak thus yourself: --maintain a strict regard for truth and honesty? do so yourself.”\(^6^0\) This was one of the strictest tenets of the purposeful parenthood parental advisers advocated: good parents produced good children. Unfaithful parents, as Cyrus Comstock had argued, would lead to ‘disobedience, obstinacy and unfaithfulness’ in their little ones. Neither parents, society, nor God could expect good things from children if parents themselves did not act appropriately. Parental advisers firmly believed that ‘like begets like,’ an argument that they would insist upon throughout their various transmutations across the nineteenth century. In the 1860s and 1870s, as they grappled with the question of heritability, parental advisers would insist that healthy parents would produce healthy


\(^6^0\) Smith, The Parent’s Friend, 10. Emphasis original.
children. Here, in the 1820s and 1830s, as they started to define what it meant to be a parent, they began with the idea that good parents would create good children.

Finally, despite the fact that parental advisers articulated specific tenets for mothers and fathers to observe, they also expected good parents to act in concert and for both parents to be involved in childrearing. How could true obedience and discipline be achieved, after all, if one parent thwarted what the other attempted?

In regard to government, it should be a principle with both parents not to interfere with each other in the act of correction, or contradict the rules or regulations and prohibitions of each other. What government can there be if one commands and the other forbids, if one prohibits and the other allows, if one threatens and the other protects, if one corrects and the other chides for so doing? If parents differ on any given point, or one supposes the other to act wrong, let this be settled elsewhere than in the presence of the child.  

In order to succeed at parenthood, parents needed to secure the obedience of their children, behave appropriately as they expected their children to behave, and work in unison. The stability of the household and of the state depended on their success. Future generations of parental advisers would build on this idea, arguing that the consequences of their failure would influence not only the present, but the hereafter as well.

Summary

Catherine Sedgwick, Cyrus Comstock, and many others provided families with important childrearing advice and directives at a time when the family seemed to be on unsteady ground. The country was undergoing growing pains, political and economic shifts that would change it irrevocably. Similarly, the family itself had just experienced an incredible change; slow though it

had been, the shift from old to new was nonetheless dramatic. Under the previous conceptions of family, parenthood, and childhood, a person’s expectations were known, were set from the beginning. Questions as elemental as where a person would live, how they would worship, and whom they would marry, were known. Under this new conception of family and parenthood, though, the ground seemed to be shifting underfoot, and expectations were suddenly unknown. Like Theodore Dwight, other Americans were unsure what the future would hold. The family, a basic social unit, was searching for “order and cohesion amidst vast social and economic change.”

Just as the family was turning inward and becoming more private, parenthood itself began to take on a public dimension. As ties to community and extended kin networks weakened, the conjugal family took on greater importance, and parental advisers rushed to fill the gap with childrearing advice. Authors and observers across the country began to argue that parents were not raising their children successfully—the ‘moral darkness’ covering the earth was proof enough of that. In order to raise children correctly, they needed the wisdom and advice of parental advisers. Self-styled experts, these advisers relied on reason and experience to prove their trustworthiness. If that was not enough, they were prepared to strike fear into the hearts of parents to convince them of their need for advice. Peddling their advice, they created a consumer market for it and transformed parents from childrearers to consumers of expertise. As they crafted what they expected of mothers and fathers, they were aided by a change in household authority that demanded fathers share household power with mothers. In order to properly wield this authority, though, mothers and fathers needed to conform to certain expectations to be worthy of their titles. Parental advisers were further aided by changing ideas of childhood that

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insisted childhood was a unique stage in a person’s development, one that demanded certain needs be filled. By defining what those needs were and what was best for children, parental advisors also indicated what was expected of parents. In doing so, they gave shape and structure to this new thing called a ‘parent.’ Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, they articulated the beginnings of arguments their successors would expound upon in later decades. Nineteenth-century parental advisers took up the business of pinning down parenthood. The parenthood they created had a sense of purpose that meant raising children with intention and according to specific guidelines. It was a structural response, a way of creating order out of chaos, and making some sense of the turbulent world in which they lived.

In the decades immediately following this period, parental advisers would capitalize on the foundation of expertise they had established. They began by outlining the high expectations they had for parents: the incredible responsibility that parents had to their children and to society, as well as the behavior they demanded of good parents if they were to execute such an awesome responsibility. They also came to contrast this with the reprehensible behavior they expected from bad parents. As they articulated these high expectations, they emphasized their emerging belief that parents were made, not born.
CHAPTER 3
HIGH EXPECTATIONS

The duty of training children is an important duty, and I meet with none more so. O, the importance of giving direction to an immortal mind! Who can comprehend it? It is a sublime work—a grand, a glorious, an awful work. I tremble as I write, when I think of my responsibility. Will my children, or any one of them, be lost through some fault, some mismanagement of mine, or some wrong impression made by me?

—J. Knight, Letter to the Editor

On January 3, 1843, a Mr. J. Knight wrote a letter to the editor of The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend about what an important, yet perilous duty it was to raise children. He said, “I often feel, in the presence of my little family of four, as though I were in the presence of no less than little angels, watching my every step, and every movement, and whom I may, by some wrong bias, or fatal impression, throw from the track of virtue, safety, and religion, to become a total wreck. There is no duty for which I feel so inadequate.” Certainly Knight was not alone in his feelings of inadequacy. Nor was he the only one who recognized the important duty that lay before parents and questioned parental preparedness in the face of such a task. Across their writings, parental advisers attempted to address the concerns of Mr. Knight and other parents, as they lamented what they perceived as parents’ ignorance when it came to raising children properly. They argued that parents simply were not prepared to raise children. Merely becoming a parent, they contended, did not qualify a person for success in this area; parenting was a learned art, not an innate skill. Mr. Knight, and presumably other parents who consumed this advice literature, agreed in whole or in part with the need for outside assistance.

1 J. Knight, Letter to the Editor, The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 3, no. 1 (1843): 33. Emphasis original.

2 J. Knight, Letter to the Editor, The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 3, no. 1 (1843): 33.
To remedy this perceived ignorance, parents had to be educated in the field of parenthood, molded and shaped into good parents. Scores of mothers and fathers needed to be transformed from hapless, bumbling parents, into wise and benevolent parents, torchbearers for their families, their communities, and their country. In order to do this, though, they first had to be made to understand the awesome responsibility that parenting embodied, and the incredible influence they wielded over their children. Then, and perhaps more importantly, they had to be taught how to parent. Their instructors could not be found in a school house, however; rather, legions of parental advisers took it upon themselves to produce countless parenting manuals and magazines chock full of parenting advice and instruction. Who better to provide this education, after all, than those who recognized the problem at hand and saw the remedy?

The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate parental advisers’ attempts to clarify the high expectations that middle-class parenting demanded. They continued their work of shaping and clarifying what, exactly, a middle-class parent was, thereby giving greater structure to emerging class ideals. At the same time, they began to give shape to an idea that subsequent parental advisers would explore more fully in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Their claims here, in the 1830s and 1840s, that parents were made and not born would become the seeds for their successors’ overarching idea that not just anyone could parent.

“Untaught and Neglected”

In *The Father’s Book*, Theodore Dwight lamented the fact that “those who have to practise [sic] the duties of parents, receive little instruction from those who might give it. Every generation, and every parent, is left too much alone to learn this most important science.”

Certainly, Dwight was not the only one who deemed parenthood to be a science, something that

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needed to be taught. If parenting was a subject, legions of parents were in desperate need of an
education. Rev. Edward Kirk wondered, “Who can guide and govern a steam-car, unless he be
acquainted with the handles to the several parts of the machine? and who can guide a child,
unless he know the various handles of the mind?” ¹⁴ The idea that parents came to parenthood
untutored and in need of parenting education was one that many other authors repeated. They
believed parents to be utterly blind when it came to raising children, damned to make mistakes at
every turn. While children received instruction from a very early age, parents remained
“untaught and neglected.” ⁵ They needed education in order to properly execute their duties.
Raising children, parental advisers argued, was not a natural ability, but rather an art or a science
that had to be learned. Authors such as Dwight, Kirk and others believed parents were left too
much in the dark when it came to undertaking this most important task. Their argument in this
regard was not purely selfless. Parental advisers stood to gain from convincing parents that they
needed to be educated, and from providing that education. As they laid the groundwork, casting
themselves as professional experts with advice for sale, they also began to shape parenthood into
a skill, a trade, a profession. This language would become more prevalent in later decades, as we
will see, but the seeds of it were planted here.

This focus on parenting education led parental advisers to wonder why there existed a
dearth of such instruction, when parenting was so important a duty, and especially when training
abounded for other skills. In all other aspects of life, people relied on instruction to guide the
way, yet not so when it came to raising children. It was ludicrous to expect that parents could
parent well without being properly trained, as other occupations demanded. In a chapter entitled

⁴ Edward Kirk, “Use the Best Motives,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 6, no. 1 (1845):
1. Emphasis original.
“Parental Qualifications,” from his book *Christian Nurture*, pastor Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) observed:

> There is almost no duty or work, in this world, that does not require some outfit of qualifications, in order to the doing of it well. We all understand that some kind of preparation is necessary to fill the place of a magistrate, teach a school, drill a troop of soldiers, or do any such thing, in a right manner. Nay, we admit the necessity of serving some kind of apprenticeship, in order to become duly qualified for the calling, only of a milliner, or a tailor. And yet, as a matter of fact, we go into what we call the Christian training of our children, without any preparation for it whatever, and apparently without any such conviction of negligence or absurdity, as at all disturbs our assurance in what we do.⁶

Authors such as Bushnell, Dwight, and many others put parenting on the same level as any other job. Parenting was an occupation, and occupations demanded training and education. It was not a task to be entered into lightly, or without careful preparation. According to educational reformer Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888), “the formation of infant character is a work too great to be entrusted to hands unwise and unskilled.”⁷ One could not simply become a parent and expect to do well, because it was not a skill that came naturally. Reverend Artemas Bowers Muzzey (1802-1892), too, marveled at the lack of instruction for parents. Children, he argued, are taught to learn. Teachers are taught how to teach. “But who, meantime, counsels the parent?... I have sometimes thought it is the parent, rather than the teacher or the child, who needs this array of aids and instructions. … I say that the times call… for a prophet-tongued eloquence to teach the parents the duties, the responsibilities, the toils, that rest inevitably—directly, personally, inevitably—upon them.”⁸ Parents like Mr. Knight were helpless without an education, that much was clear to parental advisers. They began to narrow their idea of good parenthood, to

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encompass only those who had been trained for the task. The training, however, did not yet exist—it would be up to parental advisers to produce it.

Lydia Howard Sigourney noted that it was because of the dearth of parental instruction available and the pressing need for it that she launched *The Mother’s Magazine* in 1833. “If to the welfare of every science, it is necessary that the results of past experience and recent discovery be embodied and circulated; if periodical publications have been deemed indispensable to the progress of philosophy, politics, philanthropy, and religion, why should not the same privilege be extended to her who imparts to the philosopher his alphabet; and instructs the politician to *govern*, by first requiring him to *obey*; and plants the earliest germ of sympathy in the bosom of the philanthropist; and teaches him who is to make others wise unto salvation, his first lisping prayer to God?”9 Driven by a firm belief that parents needed instruction just as much as people engaged in other undertakings, Sigourney helped to establish a periodical devoted solely to parental education. The fact that no such publication existed was, for Sigourney and others, a travesty. It was also a golden opportunity for parental advisers to make their mark.

Yet respected authors and religious leaders were not the only ones echoing this sentiment; laypeople, too, recognized the flaw that lay in the lack of instruction for parents, especially when the task charged to them was so great, and the pitfalls so numerous. In an anonymous letter to the editor of *The Mother’s Magazine*, one reader remarked on the absurdity of the fact that many women come to the task of raising children woefully unprepared and uneducated. “Were she going to set up for a milliner, for *that* she must have served a due apprenticeship. But the mere training of her offspring, on which hangs the issues of two worlds, *that* any body can do, and do

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without the trouble of preparation.”10 In another letter to the editor, this one to Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend, reader James Porter marveled at the lack of preparation mothers had with regard to childrearing. Many mothers, he said, face the duties of raising children “without a single qualification for them, other than that of love. They never learnt the trade, never had the care of children, nor have they been in a situation to see them well governed. Nay, far worse than this, many have served an apprenticeship, where nearly everything they learned was wrong. And now they have more difficulty in unlearning it, than learning the right.”11

Naturally, anyone could have a child and become a de facto parent. What is noteworthy here is the idea that merely becoming a parent did not qualify a person for parenthood. In order to be a “good” parent—in order to conform to the standards of middle-class parenthood that parental advisers were creating—a person had to be properly trained. In the minds of Sigourney, Muzzey, and countless others, parenthood was a position that required training and intense preparation, perhaps even an apprenticeship. Their work reflected a fundamental belief that parents did not know how to parent properly. Parents, they argued, were not born knowing how to raise children. According to the anonymous writer of the letter to the editor, parenting “is an art not inherited, not innate, attainable only by diligent research.”12 Parents were seen as being unprepared for their station by virtue of their lack of education in the field of parenthood. This left them vulnerable to making innumerable parenting errors. According to Muzzey, “it is ignorance alone that can explain the fearful prevalence of errors in domestic education.”13

11 James Porter, Letter to the Editor, The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 14 (1849): 103.
hands of a parent ‘unwise and unskilled,’ an innocent child could be led down the path to ruination, even (perhaps especially, as we shall see) by a doting and loving parent. Authors such as Bushnell and Muzzey knew that parents loved their children—the reams full of the flowery language they employed to describe maternal affection and paternal devotion attest to that. But mere affection, they argued, was not enough. While parents were born, as it were, with a natural and unfailing love for their children, they had to be educated in order to raise these children properly. Good parents, in short, were made and not born. How, though, to go about making good parents?

“A Station so Full of Responsibility”

Parental advisers themselves took up the task of educating parents for parenthood, first by making parents understand the immense power and responsibility that they held. Parents had to know that it was not simply that they were charged with the day-to-day business of raising children. Rather, they were rearing the next generation, molding future citizens, and shaping destinies—not only their children’s, but their own. (After all, as many authors pointed out, who but children would care for elderly parents?) Crafting the character of a child would either result in great success for family and nation, or utter ruin for all. Thus, it was imperative that parents understood the magnitude of the task at hand.

Authors went to great lengths to impress upon parents the incredible responsibility they faced, and the tremendous influence they held. Parents, according to Samuel Goodrich, “are the lawgivers of their children. They lay down the chart by which those whom God gives them, are to regulate the voyage of life. Whether this voyage, therefore, be disastrous or successful, mainly depends on parents.”14 It was up to parents, then, to steer their children down the right path on

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the voyage of life. “The stamp is in your hand, with which to place upon their characters, that impress which never can be effaced. It is therefore almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of domestic influence.”\(^{15}\) In the realm of home and hearth, parents reigned supreme. Parental advisers tapped into the discourse of middle-class domesticity, which elevated the home above almost all else, to make their point. Here, in the middle-class home, they could make an indelible mark on their children’s characters. Parental advisers insisted that parents had the potential, by their words and actions, to lay the foundation for the future. “The fireside,” Goodrich wrote,

is a seminary of infinite importance. It is important because it is universal, and because of the education it bestows, being woven in with the woof of childhood, gives form and color to the whole texture of life. There are few who can receive the honors of a college, but all are graduates of the hearth. The learning of the university may fade from the recollection; its classic lore may moulder in the halls of memory. But the simple lessons of home, enamelled [sic] upon the heart of childhood, defy the rust of years, and outlive the more mature but less vivid pictures of after days.\(^{16}\)

In what other aspect of life could parents lay claim to such dominance?

So powerful was their influence that all that they desired for their children could be realized. Yet it was equally true, as Rev. John S. C. Abbott was quick to point out, that one misstep by parents could lead to ruin. “This, home of their childhood must be either the nursery of heaven, or the broad gate of destruction. These infant prattlers are acquiring feelings and habits, which are to control them through life and to guide their destinies forever. How necessary then, that purifying influences should surround them in their early home! How important the duties, devolving upon those, who have control of the family!”\(^{17}\) Many parental advisers spoke

\(^{15}\) John S. C. Abbott, *The Path of Peace*, 82.

\(^{16}\) Goodrich, *Fireside Education*, 71-72.

in this manner about the influence parents had over their children. In the words of Samuel Goodrich, “it should be remembered that this influence is for good or ill; that it must result in promoting the happiness or misery of those who are subjected to its action.”18 The influence of parents was mighty, and parental advisers cautioned those who would wield it to do so carefully and with an eye to the future.

This was especially important because parental responsibility in this regard did not impact their family alone. According to Cyrus Comstock, the effects of this duty reached much further. “Infinite wisdom has invested parents naturally with a power or authority over children, and has laid them under obligation to exercise it for the good of society, as well as for the purposes of religion.”19 Cast as unquestioned and unlimited, this powerful influence needed to be wielded carefully, to train up children properly—for the good of the family as well as of society.

Parents held an awesome responsibility not only to their children and themselves, but to the broader society. “No higher duty, except in some few particular cases, can devolve upon a parent than the training (physical, moral, and intellectual) of the immortal beings committed to his care. To present to his country, the church, and the world, a well-trained family-- is not this the highest honour, this the noblest field of usefulness?”20 Through their work, parental advisers were beginning to elevate parenthood to something beyond the biological imperative to procreate. In their hands, parenthood was entered into with purpose, intention, and a sense of a higher duty. Parental advisers would make this point stronger in subsequent decades, but they began to outline it here: parents were raising children not merely for themselves, but for society.

18 Goodrich, *Fireside Education*, 75.
According to parental advisers, however, few parents understood the incredible influence they possessed. Author Ann Porter wrote, “few mothers realize that they are influencing minds for eternity, that the impressions which their children receive before they can scarcely lisp a parent’s name, are more durable than if graven upon a rock with a pen of iron. … Let the young mother remember that the babe in her bosom, and the prattling young boy at her knee, are now completely under her influence. As she would twine the tender vine, so can she give bias and direction to those pliant spirits.” Even their audience recognized the influence parents held, and remarked on how few parents realized their own power. The author of a letter to the editor of *The Mother’s Journal and Family Visitant*, for example, wrote, “how few the number of those who realize, fully, the importance of the station they occupy, and the fearful responsibility resting upon them as parents.” Parents wielded power greater than they could imagine, yet few understood that fact. Parental advisers took it upon themselves to rectify that.

Through their work, they attempted to impress upon parents that the influence they held over their children was absolute, and even permanent. According to Artemas Bowers Muzzey, “We are making a mark on the characters of our children which time will never efface. Let it be done with a full sense of its consequences.” In no other relationship was this power dynamic so skewed. In the words of Lydia Sigourney:

> You have gained an increase of power. The influence which is most truly valuable, is that of mind over mind. How entire and perfect is this dominion, over the unformed character of your infant. Write what you will, upon that printless tablet, with your wand of love. Hitherto, your influence over your dearest friend, your most submissive servant, has known bounds and obstructions. Now, you have over a new-born immortal, almost that degree of power which the mind exercises over

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21 Ann E. Porter, “Permanency of Early Impressions,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) 9 no. 3 (1846): 26-27.


the body, and which Aristotle compares to the ‘sway of a prince over a bond-
man.’

With such absolute authority and influence over their children, parents had to be certain that they
exercised it with care, wielding it for the betterment not only of their family, but (as parental
advisers often cautioned) for the good of society. For parents, the stakes were high.

In the minds of Goodrich, Comstock, and others, parents needed to be made aware of the
awesome responsibility they took on and the influence they held when they became parents.
Once they understood that, they could begin to learn how to be good parents. Here again,
parental advisers took the reins as teachers of parents, prescribing behavior that would enable
parents to succeed. Future generations of parental advisers would come to believe the task of
parenting was one only parents themselves could complete.

If parents hoped to succeed at their craft, parental advisers agreed, they needed to begin
early. The early years of a child’s life were the most crucial to shaping its character and
influencing its future. “The influence and importance of EARLY TRAINING—EARLY
IMPRESSIONS can scarcely be exaggerated. Children are imitative beings, and their minds and
hearts catch up, imbibe, and reflect the morals, the manners, the tastes and habits of the society
in which they ‘live and move.’ The vices will thus be imitated and perpetuated as well as the
virtues.” Parents could not hope to succeed in raising their children properly if they waited too
long to begin their task. There was no time allotted for a learning curve—parents had to be
prepared to exert their power and influence immediately. According to Rev. John S.C. Abbott,
“the influence which is exerted upon the mind during the first eight or ten years of existence, in a

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24 Sigourney, Letters to Mothers, 10.

25 Robert Morris, Courtship and Matrimony: with Other Sketches from Scenes and Experiences in Social Life
Particularly Adapted for Every-Day Reading rev. ed. (1858; repr., Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1879),
88. Emphasis original.
great degree guides the destinies of that mind for time and eternity.” Horace Bushnell agreed, noting that the work done by parents during a child’s early years was critically important, as what took place during this period was concentrated character-building. He said, “more, as a general fact, is done, or lost, by neglect of doing, on a child’s immortality, in the first three years of his life, than in all his years of discipline afterwards.”

The work that parents did in these early years would affect not only a child’s future in life, but in the afterlife as well. Lest parents think this early work to be inadequate, or somehow shrugged off, Lydia Sigourney argued that parents were doing critical work in laying the foundation of a child’s future. “The habits which [a mother] early impresses, though to her eye they seem but as the flimsy line of the spider, trembling at every breeze, may prove links of tempered steel, binding a deathless being to eternal felicity or woe.” Abbott, Bushnell, and Sigourney were not alone in their references to the afterlife. Many authors used such references to impress upon parents the lasting effects of their work. Cyrus Comstock, for example, noted “we are now forming characters for eternity. Matters of everlasting consequence are depending upon our conduct in time.” The idea was a pervasive one, that parents were doing work that affected not only life on earth, but in heaven as well.

“Hints to Parents”

Perhaps, if allusions to authority, responsibility, and influence could not convince parents of the awesome duty before them, then promises of afterlife rewards (or threats of afterlife consequences) would be more persuasive. Parental advisers peppered their tracts with

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27 Bushnell, Christian Nurture, 211.

28 Sigourney, Letters to Mothers, 17.

descriptions of good parents and bad parents in order to persuade their audience of the rewards of proper parenting and the consequences of negligence. In doing so, they emphasized the idea that parental influence could have an everlasting effect for good or for ill. By establishing what constituted appropriate or inappropriate parenting, parental advisers further defined their conception of an ideal parent.

Parental advisers lauded mothers and fathers who took their responsibilities seriously and who devoted themselves to proper parenting. A child whose character and will were molded and shaped early on would be a joy to his mother and a source of pride of his father. “How many parents have found life cheered by the virtues of their children; have had all life’s blessings multiplied, and every individual blessing magnified, by the affection of those, whom they have nurtured to virtue.”30 Parents who understood the tremendous responsibility that was childrearing and who devoted themselves to the task served as a model for others to follow. They understood that the work involved was great, but that the rewards were even greater. “If parents are faithful, the career of their children will, most ordinarily, be that of usefulness, success and honor. Every department of society will be blessed by them.”31

The rewards of raising good children could not only be found on earth, though. Parents who executed their task properly would be rewarded in the hereafter as well. Ann Porter, for example, spoke of the rewards due to mothers who raised their children well. “Blessed, thrice blessed is that mother who fulfils her high and holy duty with an humble, patient, trusting heart, remembering that her work will be tested in heaven, and her reward rendered there.”32 If taken

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seriously, this responsibility could have great and everlasting consequences. Dutiful children, having been raised properly and advisedly and with an eye to the magnitude of the task, would be an asset to aging parents as well as their country, and would meet their loving family in the hereafter.

Parental advisers provided specific examples of how parents should achieve good parenting—how they might receive their earthly and heavenly rewards. Such parental instruction often provided concrete examples for parent readers to follow. Jacob Abbott, for example, inserted such instruction into *Learning about Right and Wrong*, a book for children. In a short story about the importance of learning to be diligent, a young boy named Theodore has been instructed by his mother to do yard work for half an hour. After the allotted time, during which the young boy shirked this chore, his mother comes outside and sees that he is not yet finished. She tells him that she intends to go for a ride in the wagon, and that while she hoped to bring Theodore along, his inability to complete his chore leaves her with no choice but to go alone. “You knew that I wished you to be diligent, and do the work as soon as possible, and so you ought to have done it.” All attempts by Theodore to cajole her into changing her mind are unsuccessful. At this, Abbott notes, “Theodore’s mother was right in this answer. It is only very silly mothers that put off the government of their children to the next time.” Here, Abbott presented his instruction for mothers in two key ways. Through his praise for Theodore’s mother, he instructed mothers in taking the appropriate measures in dealing with their children. This was reinforced with his criticism of mothers who did not manage their children well.

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34 Abbott, *Learning about Right and Wrong*, 65.

35 Abbott continued to instruct mothers throughout *Learning about Right and Wrong*. In another story, he stressed the importance of punishment and argued that if a mother punished her child every time the child disobeyed her, the
Yet even parents who dedicated themselves to raising their children properly could run into pitfalls. According to parental advisers, parents needed to be constantly vigilant in government, discipline, and attention to detail if they wanted their children to grow into fine young men and women. They needed to make sure they governed with a consistent hand. This was especially important, Philadelphia physician Dr. David Condie (1796-1875) noted, when a child was very young. Too often, he observed, well-intentioned parents send their child mixed messages by acting a certain way one moment and exactly the opposite the next. “At one time he is dandled and coaxed, in order to quiet him; at another he is scolded and beaten for the same purpose.”

According to Condie, the result is utter confusion for the child. Furthermore, good parents needed to ensure that they relied on discipline. But the balance between discipline and over discipline was delicate. When disciplining their children, parents needed to avoid speaking to their children harshly, or acting out of anger, as their words and actions had indelible effects on their children’s later lives. Strong tones and actions could excite anxiety or hatred in the child, Dr. Stephen Tracy (1810-1873) claimed, after which “the pitiable object of parental severity or neglect may receive a bias in early childhood which shall lead him to become a desperado in wickedness, or a miserable son of discontent, inefficiency, and timidity, ending in poverty and disgrace, or an early death.”

Parental advisers also urged parents to be extraordinarily diligent in raising their children. Dr. William Potts Dewees, for example, counseled parents to govern the child would quickly learn to obey. However, he noted, “some mothers do not punish their children when they disobey, but only say that they will punish them the next time. What do you think of such a mother as that?” Here, it is interesting to wonder whether Abbott really intended that question for his young readers or if, in fact, he was speaking to mothers directly. Learning about Right and Wrong, 88.


number of hours their children could sleep, to be careful not to educate them too early in life, and to monitor the types of games their children played.

At the same time that they argued such solicitousness was the mark of good parents, parental advisers warned that too much of a good thing could actually harm a child. Parents, Dr. John Eberle (1787-1838) argued, should not fret over their children. Children who are “continually warned against trifling accidents, seldom fail to become unduly timid, helpless and irresolute in their actions.” Even for well-meaning, dutiful parents, the guidelines that parental advisers prescribed represented an impossible balance. With so much riding on their actions—the very shape of their children’s characters, as both youths and adults—parents needed to navigate the waters of parenthood carefully. Any deviation, according to parental advisers, could lead to ruin.

Parental advisers relied heavily on direct instruction to their parent readers. Yet instruction intended for parents can also be found in comparisons of a parent from one family with a parent from another. Among parental advisers, this was a technique that children’s literature authors employed much more so than other parental advisers. Typically, they would contrast an admirable parent with a parent who has an obvious flaw, such as overindulgence or a lack of discipline. It was an ingenious technique because it illustrated more clearly than anything else the differences between a good and a bad parent. Parents who recognized themselves in these fictional depictions could either congratulate themselves, or could alter their behavior.

In the story “Discontented Dora,” Lydia Maria Child constructed one such comparison between parents. Dora Manning, a young girl from a wealthy family, “wanted every thing she

saw, and was never willing to make anything for herself.”39 Despite the fact that Dora got whatever she desired, she was perpetually unhappy. Her cousin Jane Loring, on the other hand, comes from a poorer family. She makes her toys herself and, argued Child, as a result was happy, “for busy people are always happy.”40 Dora asks her mother to buy her a big French doll, which she soon tires of, then requests a more magnificent doll, which bores her after just a few weeks, then finally asks for an expensive music box. At this, her mother refuses, saying that the music box is too costly. She observes that Dora is never as happy with her playthings as her cousin is with her own, and sends her daughter to Jane’s house. Here, Jane is pasting pictures onto a small white box, which Dora admires and remarks that she will ask her mother to buy her one. Jane says that she would be happier if she made it herself. Having overheard their exchange, Jane’s mother interjects, telling Dora:

You are not happy because you are not busy. You buy every thing already made, and then you have nothing to do but to look at it. This soon gets tiresome; and it gives you no chance to improve yourself. Put some of your own taste, and your own industry into your things, and depend upon it you will like them a great deal better. If I were you, I would ask my mother not to buy me any more playthings. I will teach you to make many little things for yourself and others; and when you are busy, you will be happy.41

Here, Mrs. Loring intervenes, both in the conversation and—more importantly—in Dora’s upbringing. Dora’s own mother had failed her daughter by being overindulgent, and Mrs. Loring would correct that. For her part, Lydia Maria Child also intervened, by presenting a middle-class message: thrift and industry were good, while greed and idleness (traits, she indicated, of the wealthy) were to be avoided.


40 Child, *Flowers for Children II*, 149.

41 Child, *Flowers for Children II*, 152.
Catharine Sedgwick’s *Means and Ends*, published in 1842, provides another example of the use of contrasting parenting styles to make a point about parental training. In the book, dedicated to “young country-women,” Sedgwick acted as a teacher and tour guide, providing starkly different depictions of families and households in order to instruct children and parents.

In one chapter, entitled “Contrasts,” Sedgwick invited her readers to journey with her to two neighboring houses. The first house, occupied by Mrs. Doolittle and her family, provides little to recommend it. Sedgwick noted, “…I have declined a seat, and taken my stand in the doorway, where, beside [sic] indulging my prejudice in favor of pure air, I can survey both rooms.”42 Between gasping at the kitchen cupboard—the door of which is missing, having been converted by the Doolittle boys into a plaything—and the mantle-piece covered with garbage, she notes that the children are not at home learning their lessons. And how could they, the implication is, in this filth? Mrs. Doolittle, she argued, was “suffering the consequences of her bringing up under a mother, the prototype of herself; and Miss ‘Anny Matildy’ [her daughter] bids fair to repeat the same scene to the next generation.”43 Each generation, then, was doomed to repeat the sins of their forebears.

Sedgwick provided the tidy house next door, occupied by the James family, as a stark contrast to the havoc found at the Doolittle’s. She observed that the yard is full of flowers, the house is tidy and clean, and even the Bible is well cared for. The kitchen cupboard is complete with its door, for Mrs. James’s boys “though as fond of play as the Doolittles, would as soon have burned up the house as taken off one of ‘mother’s cupboard doors’.”44 Mrs. James has three daughters and two sons, and takes great care to raise them properly. Of the James boys, the

author notes, “they will probably, at no very distant day, emigrate to the West. They may become magistrates, possibly members of Congress; but, whatever their station may be, they will look back with a grateful pride to their early home. The memory of their mother will be held sacred by them, and they will every day bless her for the virtues she cultivated, and the good habits she formed.” Though Sedgwick provided few descriptions of day-to-day family life and little interaction between family members, the message could not be clearer: good mothers raise good children and bad mothers raise bad children. In the hands of Sedgwick, Mrs. James emerges as a shining example of motherhood, while Mrs. Doolittle appears ill-equipped to raise children properly.

Through such dramatic contrasts between parent characters, in which it is clear that one is good and the other bad, parental advisers such as Child and Sedgwick instructed parent readers as to the appropriate way in which to raise their children. This technique was also used, in more serious stories, as a caution to parents. Through the child characters they depicted, these parental advisers issued warnings to parents that sketched for them what would happen if they failed. Often, their stories demonstrated that bad parenting does not go unpunished; rather, it leads to some accident befalling the children or, worse, to bad children.

In “The Story of the Orphans,” Samuel Goodrich wrote of two very different fathers with two very different sons. One father was very rich and indulged his son Edwin, while the other father was very poor and taught his son Edward to be industrious. By virtue of his father’s indulgence, Edwin grew up to be spoiled and mean, while Edward grew up to be amiable, hardworking, and kind. Goodrich noted, “you see, my little friends, that indulgence is bad for

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45 Sedgwick, Means and Ends, 100.
children, and being made to give up their wishes is good for them.”  

Through the contrasting characters of Edward and Edwin, Goodrich not only instructed children in the virtues of denying themselves constant pleasure, he also took care to instruct parents on the vices of over indulging their children. Furthermore, like Lydia Maria Child, Goodrich imparted a middle-class message about hard work. While Edwin did not suffer from a tragic accident, the result of his father’s indulgence was Edwin’s mean character. Goodrich’s “Story of the Orphans” is but one of many examples in which the author used contrasting images of parents and parenting to issue such warnings.

Lydia Maria Child used a similar tactic in her story, “Making Something.” Here, she set up the characters of James Merchant and John Carpenter as very different little boys. Like Goodrich’s character Edwin, James was overindulged and got anything he wanted. His mother routinely gave him new toys, while John in turn figured out how to make his own toys, with the encouragement of his parents. As they grew up, James became a merchant and made a great deal of money, yet no matter how much money he made, he became more and more discontented. John, who earned a modest living as a carpenter and mechanic, was quite happy. As to how it came to be that two such young men, having grown up together, attended the same schools, and played together became so different later in life, Child pointed to their early education, imparted to them by their mothers. She noted, “early education was one great reason of this dissimilarity. One of the first things James could remember, was hearing his mother remark that her little Jimmy’s cap cost more than any other cap in the village.”

James’s mother regularly bragged about her son and indulged him in anything he wanted. Because of this, the implication is, James


never found true happiness. John’s mother, on the other hand, encouraged him to learn and work with his hands. She did not spoil her son and he grew up to be happy and content. Though her message is perhaps not as carefully spelled out as that of Goodrich, the essence is the same.

As much as parental advisers may have wished to focus on good parents, they were convinced that parents did not know what they were doing and, as a result, made a lot of mistakes. As we have already seen, parental advisers insisted that such mistakes could lead to ruin. Parents, therefore, needed to be made aware of the consequences of their many ineptitudes. Parental advisers accomplished this by vividly illustrating the ramifications of bad parenting.

Perhaps the greatest mistake that parents could make lay in a lack of parental authority, or a weak commitment to parental governance. Children who grew up without a clear respect for authority would make slaves of their parents through their demands and would doubtless grow up to be insolent and miserable men and women. When children’s author Jacob Abbott cautioned parents against letting their children have his book in order to stop a tantrum, for example, he spoke to the importance of parental authority.48 Children who were rewarded for crying, he implied, would learn how to manipulate their parents. In alerting parents to this, he hoped to alter their behavior and reaffirm their commitment to stern governance. Like Abbott, Samuel Goodrich also spoke of the necessity for parental authority and resolve. Children who tested their parents’ authority and won, he warned, could soon find themselves in jeopardy. Goodrich spoke to this danger in his story of “Young Solomon,” found in Parley’s Present for all Seasons.

Solomon, a young boy “full of self-confidence and self-conceit,” constantly tries to get his way and attempts one day to pressure his mother to let him go to the swamp.49 After much pestering,

48 Jacob Abbott, The Little Scholar Learning to Talk, 7-8.

she finally consents to let him go. Solomon quickly gets lost and falls into a ditch, necessitating his older brother to come to his aid. The lesson, Goodrich noted, that Solomon took from the ordeal was “mother does know best.” Clearly this was meant as a warning to children, but it also serves as a cloaked warning to parents to not let their children override their better judgment. While a writer such as Jacob Abbott would have most likely spelled out the ways in which Solomon’s mother went astray in her parenting, Goodrich’s style tended to let the text speak for itself. Through this story, Goodrich used Solomon’s mother as a caution to other parents and an example of poor parenting. Parents needed to be fully committed to upholding their authority, lest their children throw themselves into harm’s way.

Perhaps no story was as explicit about the ramifications of weak parental governance as Jacob Abbott’s Rodolphus. It furnished readers with a formidable example of bad parents and the resulting bad child. Abbott opened his story by noting that Rodolphus’s story clearly illustrates “the manner in which indulgence and caprice on the part of the parent, lead to the demoralization and ruin of the child.” Rodolphus learned as a very young boy the many ways in which he could manipulate his ineffectual parents to his own ends. His father, Mr. Linn, was a workman and was away almost all day. When he returned, “sometimes he played with Rodolphus, and sometimes he quarreled with him; but he never really governed him.” Occasionally, Mr. or Mrs. Linn would attempt to discipline him, but inevitably one parent would encourage the other to let the boy have his way. When Rodolphus resorted to skipping school and stealing from others, the Linn family decides to bind him out to a master to learn a trade. No longer able to have his

50 Goodrich, Parley’s Present for all Seasons, 105. Emphasis original.
52 Jacob Abbott, Rodolphus, 15. Emphasis original.
character altered or his will bent to another, however, Rodolphus robs his new master and is sent to prison.

Far from leaving the details of Rodolphus’s life of crime to the imagination of his readers, or from failing to note how the young boy got to be that way, Abbott devoted an entire book to this warning story. There can be no doubt as to the impetus for this seed gone bad, as all fingers point to the parents. Because Mr. and Mrs. Linn were not disciplined enough themselves to govern their young child, Rodolphus grew up to be not only headstrong, but a delinquent. With regard to such poor parenting, Abbott argued, “it is not surprising that [Rodolphus] came, in the end, to be a very bad boy.”

Yet weak parental authority was hardly the only error to which bad parents were prone. Parental advisers saw perhaps a greater threat in parents who loved their children too much. Jacob Abbott’s brother, John, was explicit in illustrating how overindulgence born of love could go awry.

Here is a lost son dying in the forecastle of a ship, far away upon the ocean. Why is he there, far from his own pleasant fireside and the love of home? Because his mother never established any control over her boy. In his infancy she indulged him, under the influence of an overweening maternal fondness... Here is a mutilated corpse upon some blood-stained field of battle. The form is that of a graceful youth, whose fair cheek is hardly browned by the southern sun. Why has this young man been plunged into these awful scenes of human butchery, and come to this untimely and disgraceful death? It is because his mother did not control him when he was a child.

Such parents, parental advisers argued, did more damage in the name of love than did parents who were outright abusive to their children. For parents who claimed to love their children too much to discipline or punish them, parental advisers had stern words. “There is nothing more

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than mere animal instinct in all this. Conduct like this is not in the least above that of brutes—it is indeed below theirs. Brutes seek the welfare of their offspring, and often sacrifice themselves for them, in the only or best ways within their ability. Human parents often act blindly, without taking pains to inform themselves, and oftener act counter to their acknowledged convictions of what the real good of their children demands.”

Rev. Orange Clark (1797-1869) agreed, noting that for parents who claimed to love their children too much to keep them in check, “a life of wretchedness on earth is well secured, or an early and tragical, if not infamous death, shall blast the hopes of a too fond and doting and misjudging parent, and bring his gray hairs down with sorrow to the grave. All ye who hear me, be admonished.

Parents who, out of an overabundance of love, refused to discipline their children did not understand the meaning of parental love. A good parent, they claimed, one who truly loved their child, knew that discipline and even punishment was in a child’s best interests. Loving and doting parents, who would never lift a finger to harm their children, could inflict just as much damage as neglectful or abusive parents. The consequences of overindulgence, parental advisers warned, would come back to haunt parents who perpetrated it. “If you are unfaithful to your child when he is young, he will be unfaithful to you when he is old. If you indulge him in all his foolish and unreasonable wishes when he is a child, when he becomes a man he will indulge himself; he will gratify every desire of his heart; and your sufferings will be rendered the more poignant by the reflection that it was your own unfaithfulness which has caused your ruin.”

Furthermore, poor parenting of this nature had consequences that reached beyond the family. Because bad parents unleashed their children on society, and because what happened at

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56 Orange Clark, *Discourse on Family Discipline* (San Francisco: Royal P. Locke, 1860), 8.

hearth and home did not remain there, the effects of unsatisfactory parenting were far reaching indeed. If parents neglected to “use the means for restraining the evil inclinations of their children, and for moulding them into virtuous and useful members of society, the probability is, they will grow up only to be pests in the earth; and for the parents will be the reflection that they were made such by their own parental delinquency.”

Children born of bad parenting, these ‘pests in the earth,’ brought shame to their parents and a corrupting influence to society. They represented a daily reminder of the ramifications for poor parenting. In particular, evidence of such parenting could be found among society’s criminal element. Rev. J. W. Guernsey (1820-1894?) wrote, “we doubt not, an examination would show that all those whom society has been obliged to cast out of her bosom, because she could not endure their presence—the inmates of our prisons, penitentiaries, houses of correction, and the victims of the gallows—were prepared for their career of crime, and end of infamy, by the neglect of proper restraints in their early years.”

Parental advisers insisted that there was a direct correlation between bad parents and criminals. They firmly believed that bad parenting would result in bad children, and the worst children of all wound up in prison. Parents, they argued, were “responsible for the vices and crimes of which their children, as they progress in life, are guilty. How many practical exemplifications of this truth are set before us in the confessions of different criminals, who, at the close of life, have traced their career of crime to the days of childhood, and discovered its source in the defective family discipline of their parents.”

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60 H. Clark, “The Ruined Son,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) 3 no. 4 (October 1845): 74.
connection between jail inmates and parental negligence, parental advisers articulated an argument that later generations of experts would revisit in the late nineteenth century.

Parents who neglected their duties released a scourge upon the world, in the form of their defective and, often, depraved children. These parents could not hide the results of their negligence; they were visible in the world’s ills. Proper childrearing, then, was critical, and the work done by parents needed to be taken seriously. The effects of poor parenting could be seen across prisons and in moral decay. Posterity would judge whether or not parents had been successful.

Yet there was an even greater measure of parenting success. Just as good parents would reap their everlasting rewards in heaven, bad parents would also face the consequences of their actions in the afterlife. With regard to a child’s soul, “whose life is nourished by our own,” Lydia Sigourney remarked, “every trace that we grave upon it, will stand forth at the judgment, when the ‘books are opened.’ Every waste-place, which we leave through neglect, will frown upon us, as an abyss, when the mountains fall, and the skies shrivel like a scroll.”61 Just as good parents could look forward to reaping the rewards of their hard work in the afterlife, so too could bad parents expect to suffer the consequences. If parents neglected their duties and disregarded their parental responsibility, these consequences—both in life and death—were dire indeed. Jacob Abbott argued that by a father’s “neglect and unfaithfulness,” he might make his children “thorns in his side while they remain at home, a bitterness and a curse to his declining years, and a source of unmixed and never ending sorrow in eternity.”62 The fate of the child, in life and in death, hinged on parents performing their duties faithfully.


“A Rational Discharge of Parental Duty”

The reality of these stories was born out in the courts, where parental advisers on the bench reinforced the advice their colleagues peddled. Unfit parents, who did not conform to middle-class standards of good parenthood, did not gain custody of their children. Four custody cases from this period—*State v. Smith* (1830), *People v. Chegaray* (1836), *People v. Nickerson* (1837) and *State v. Hand* (1848)—illustrate that, like didactic stories, courtroom judgments also revealed who was and was not a good parent.

In 1830, the Supreme Court of Maine heard arguments in a very strange custody battle, one in which the custody of the children involved should never have been up for debate. Before he married, Jonathan Hall drew up a prenuptial custody agreement stating that if his wife ever found herself unhappily married to him by virtue of his mistreatment, she was free to leave and take any children by their marriage with her. By virtue of her husband’s infidelity, Mrs. Hall did indeed find herself unhappily married and chose to separate from him, taking their three children with her. Jonathan Hall then brought her to court to fight for the custody of his children. In his decision, Justice Parris declared that a father’s right to the custody of his children comes with obligations to “maintain, protect and educate them,” duties which are “thrown upon him by the law of nature, as well as of society, which he is not permitted to disregard.”63 Citing the decision in *Addicks* (1813) as part of the basis for the court’s decision to award custody to Mrs. Hall, Parris contended that Jonathan Hall could not claim his children “as a matter of right,” and that having “waived his parental rights, [Hall] ought not to be permitted to now reclaim them.”64 Furthermore, Parris noted that he was reluctant to turn the children over to their father when they

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63 *State v. Smith*, 6 Me. 462 (Me. 1830).
64 *Smith*, 6 Me 462.
seemed quite happy under the care of their mother, especially given “that the parental feelings of the mother toward her children are naturally as strong, and generally stronger than those of the father,” and when taken into consideration that it was Jonathan Hall’s “imprudent conduct” that led to the family’s breakup in the first place.65

Jonathan Hall demonstrated that he was unfit for parenthood in a number of ways. First, by virtue of his infidelity—his “imprudent conduct”—he broke the bonds of family. Perhaps the court felt that if he were truly a good father, he would not have strayed in the first place. Second, by virtue of his prenuptial agreement, he cast off his children to their mother, disregarding any obligation he had to them. Once he had done that, the damage was done. The court was unwilling to let him have them back. By attempting to deny his obligations to his children and by straying from his wife and family, Hall irrevocably damaged a tenet of the middle class: the exaltation of the family. Furthermore, the language used in the decision reveals that parental advisers in the courtroom, too, considered parenting to affect the world beyond the home. The duties of a parent, after all, were “thrown upon him… by society.” Like other parental advisers, justices were beginning to articulate the idea that parenting affected society as well and that society, therefore, had a vested interest in how parents raised their children.

The courts exercised their ability to uphold middle-class standards of parenthood and protect the best interest of society by ensuring that custody remained with parents who could be trusted to raise their children properly. Like Jonathan Hall, Elizabeth Ordronaux and a Mrs. Nickerson found out that they did not meet these standards. Elizabeth Ordronaux, separated but not divorced from her husband, requested custody of their three children in 1836. Her husband, John Ordronaux, had placed the children into boarding schools. Justice Bronson refused her

65 Smith, 6 Me. 462.
petition, noting that John (unlike herself) was a fit custodian. Bronson argued that the children “are in good health—they are in schools of the best repute, where their morals and comfort, as well as their education, receive all proper attention. Their mother is permitted to visit them at pleasure, and they occasionally visit her. The father is a man of good character, and it is abundantly proved that he is a fit and proper person to have custody of the children. On the evidence before me I am unable to make the same remark in relation to the mother.” Although the record does not reveal the ways in which Elizabeth Ordronaux proved herself unworthy of custody, it is clear that Justice Bronson found her abilities as a parent lacking in comparison to her estranged husband.

Like Elizabeth Ordronaux, a Mrs. Nickerson also did not qualify for custody. Unhappy in her marriage, Mrs. Nickerson left her husband in 1837 and moved away with their daughter, claiming afterwards that his unkindness prompted her to leave. In deciding which parent should get custody of the child, the court argued that Mrs. Nickerson was unfit to keep her. She could not be considered worthy of maintaining custody “when she had willfully and without pretense of excuse, abandoned her family and the protection of her husband.” Like Jonathan Hall before her, it was Mrs. Nickerson’s behavior toward her family that helped to make her unfit for custody. “Mrs. Nickerson has greatly mistaken the obligations and duties which devolved upon her by the marriage vow” and “is now living in a state unauthorized by the law of the land.” By stark contrast, her estranged husband appeared perfectly fit for parenthood: “nothing appears that can justify the conclusion that the father is not a fit and proper person to have the care and

66 People v. Chegaray, 18 Wend. 637 (N.Y. 1836).

67 People v. Nickerson, 19 Wend. 16 (N.Y. 1837).

68 Nickerson, 19 Wend. 16.
education of his child.”69 As Nickerson demonstrates, courts were willing to deny parents custody of their children simply because of their behavior outside of parenting itself. Mrs. Nickerson may have been a loving and dutiful mother—at the very least, she was unwilling to abandon her child—but because of her actions toward her husband, she did not qualify for custody.

Nineteenth-century courts also demonstrated that they were willing to place children in the custody of people who were not their parents if they felt they had no viable alternative. Stephen Ball of Ohio, a widower, found this out in 1848. After the death of his wife, Ball took up residence at his parents’ house, where his mother took care of his two daughters. When he and his father left to join the Millerites (eventually known as the Seventh Day Adventists), his mother was no longer able to care for the children. The girls then came into the care of their maternal grandmother, Mrs. Hand. Upon his return, Stephen Ball became a Shaker and wished to take his daughters with him to live in the Shaker village, and so filed for custody. The court noted that “a father has a right to the custody of his own children, to protect, feed, clothe, and educate them in his own way.”70 But they also observed that, in cases of immorality, intemperance, imbecility, insanity, or other disqualification, custody would be denied. While they confirmed that Ball was neither immoral nor intemperate, they questioned the sanity of a man who would abandon his children in favor of religious frenzy.

Furthermore, they hesitated to grant him custody since he himself would not raise the girls. Among Shakers, they noted, “the relation of parent and child exists not,” and “the love of the father and the fondness of the mother give place to the vigilance of the ‘care-takers.’”71

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69 Nickerson, 19 Wend. 16.
71 Hand, 10 Ohio Dec. Reprint 361.
they did not doubt that the girls would be well cared for, they took exception to the fact that Ball would have no hand in it. Indeed, his financial circumstances prevented him from doing so. “He has no bread for them to eat, but the bread of the community. He has no clothes for them to wear, but the clothes of the community; and over their education the ‘female care-takers,’ and not Stephen Ball, would preside.” Finally, the court revealed that Stephen Ball’s reasons for wanting custody were inconsistent with their idea of proper parenting.

He does not seek these children that he may rekindle the fire on his desolate hearth, and relink them around it in the family circle. He does not seek them that he may rebuild his family altar and unite with them in consecrating it with prayers and songs of family devotion. He seeks them that he may sever them from the bosom of their grandmother, and from his own bosom, and plant them in the cold ascetic bosoms of the ‘female care-takers,’ and transfer all his right, title and interest in the children which God has given him, to total strangers. All this might be done by an honest man, and a pure man. But can it be done by a sane man? Does it not argue, at least, a morbid state of the amative and philoprogenetive faculties, bordering on insanity, and totally inconsistent with a rational discharge of parental duty?

For the time being, the court opted to leave the children in the care of their maternal grandmother, “till I am satisfied that the father has again ‘put on the bonds of natural affection,’ and recognizes in his own right the correlative obligations and rights of a father, and the natural relations of parent and child.” Stephen Ball fell so far outside the boundaries of acceptable middle-class parenting that the court could not imagine that he was even sane. In abandoning his children in the heat of religious fervor, and in his desire to have his girls reared by ‘female care-takers,’ Stephen Ball had disavowed parental advisers’ notions of appropriate parenthood. Only when he could prove that he had regained his sanity and conformed to proper middle-class ideals of parenthood would the court consider Ball worthy of custody once more.

72 Hand, 10 Ohio Dec. Reprint 361.
73 Hand, 10 Ohio Dec. Reprint 361.
74 Hand, 10 Ohio Dec. Reprint 361.
It is worth emphasizing Ball’s membership among the Shaker community. Certainly, middle-class standards of parenthood were not the only way in which people raised children during the nineteenth century. Much of the United States was still rural, and rural communities embraced a different standard of childrearing—one that mirrored the pre-industrial family and its communal childrearing practices. Utopian groups, such as the Shakers and the Oneida Community, also engaged in communal childrearing. But, as Stephen Ball discovered, communal childrearing was not acceptable to middle-class parental advisers for whom parenthood had evolved beyond such pre-industrial practices. The parenting methods that the Shakers and the Oneidans practiced simply did not conform to middle-class standards.

In their decisions regarding custody, nineteenth-century courts helped to define the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate parenthood. They refused custody to parents who did not conform to developing middle-class standards. In doing so, they executed the code that published parental advisers had written. Their work helped to further illuminate parental advisers’ image of ideal parenthood, and sharpened the dividing line between good and bad parents.

**Summary**

Parental advisers went to great lengths to shape what they saw as uneducated and hapless parents, wielding their authority blindly, into trustworthy and enlightened parents. Their work reflected the belief that parents were not born, but were made. Ignorant parents could not be expected to raise children properly, and the children that resulted from such ill-informed parenting could wreak havoc not only on their families, but on society as well. Someone had to take up the charge to train these mothers and fathers: to illustrate the responsibility and influence they held, and to demonstrate how to parent properly. And parental advisers, from Rev. John S. C. Abbott to Lydia Maria Child, did that with gusto. They worked to inform and educate parents
on the most important job they would undertake: raising children. Their message here was clear: the effects of parenting, good or bad, could be seen in the children themselves. Proper parenting resulted in dutiful, amiable children, while unfaithful parenting resulted in unhappy, bad children. Children did not turn bad by accident; rather, it was inadequate discipline, overindulgence, or inattention to parenting that led them to be so. In providing such instruction to parents, their work aimed to help mothers and fathers navigate their roles as parents. In the coming years, parental advisers would further refine what they expected of parents in general, and of mothers and fathers in particular, as gender began to inform their discourse about ideal parenthood.
CHAPTER 4
THE GENDER OF PARENTING

The father may instruct, but the mother instils [sic]; the father may command our reason, but the mother compels our instinct; the father may finish, but the mother must begin. The empire of the father is over the head; of the mother, over the heart.


When Rev. Artemas Bowers Muzzey articulated the essential differences between male and female parents, he spoke a language familiar to all Americans. The idea seemed logical that mothers and fathers parented differently, served contrasting yet complementary roles in their children’s lives, and that both filled functions critical to raising well-rounded children. That mothers and fathers were fundamentally different was particularly clear to parental advisers of the 1840s and 1850s, for whom gender informed their discourse of parenthood. This chapter illustrates the ways in which parental advisers thought of male and female parents differently. As parental advisers fleshed out these distinct roles, they further defined what was expected of parents, giving even greater shape to the middle-class parent by tapping into emerging middle-class gender roles. Furthermore, they cemented the importance of a two-parent middle-class household by insisting that both parents were necessary in order to parent properly.

This marriage of gender and parenting is clearly visible across their work in three key ways. First, the emergence of what Rev. Muzzey (and others, such as author Henry C. Wright) called “the empire of the mother.”² In countless sources, parental advisers cast mothers as the more natural parent. Mothers were considered to be more nurturing than fathers, and more innately caring. Many parental advisers, in fact, assumed and wrote for a female parent and

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² See, for example, Henry C. Wright, *The Empire of the Mother over the Character and Destiny of the Race* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1863).
presupposed that a woman would do the bulk of childrearing. This is not to say, however, that parental advisers never addressed a father’s role in a child’s life; they did. In fact, parental advisers devoted substantial effort to convincing fathers of their importance in this regard. (Their efforts here were considerable and they faced an uphill battle. First, because they believed fathers to be naturally disinterested in parenting and second, because they wondered if their attention to mothers had caused this disinterest.) They demanded that fathers take an active role in childrearing because they believed mothers and fathers imparted different things. They insisted that in order to be raised properly, children required the particular expertise of both a mother and a father. While mothers were cast as naturally nurturing, fathers were seen as more authoritative. A careful balance of both elements ensured that children would receive sensible, acceptable parenting. (For parental advisers who assumed a female parent, these ideas coexisted in an uneasy partnership.) For cases in which the family unit dissolved, whether by death or by divorce, justices articulated and relied on a doctrine that claimed that a child’s gender and age determined which parent he or she needed most at that time. Custody, too, understood the gender of parenting. Finally, parental advisers articulated a hierarchical gender of parenting as fathers were assumed to be parents not only of their children but also, in some ways, parents of their wives. For all the valorization of women as mothers and despite the prominence of the “empire of the mother,” the gender of parenting did not fundamentally challenge developing gender norms. Fathers remained the heads of households, with all the rights and privileges attached to that post. As articulated by nineteenth-century authors, the gender of parenting shaped a role for fathers that seemed to cast them as parents of mothers: educating them and correcting them when they were in the wrong. The gender of parenting may seem anachronistic compared to our
modern notions of egalitarian parenting. To nineteenth-century Americans, though, it simply made good sense.

A “Natural Fountain of Unfailing Love”

Many historians have argued that the early decades of the nineteenth century saw a dramatic change in the discourse about parenthood.\(^3\) At this time, according to historian Stephen Frank, “a new and insistently maternal note entered the social conversation about parenting…. Domestic advice writers were clamoring… to enthrone wives and mothers as the natural and primary parents of children, especially young children.”\(^4\) It is important to remember that this does not necessarily translate into action; that is, what was going on ‘on the ground’ in the nineteenth-century United States may well have been quite different. But in important ways the discourse about parenting assumed that women were more natural caregivers.

In James Buffum’s American preface to a popular British childrearing manual, he paid homage to mothers. “This edition,” he began, “is sent abroad under the deep conviction that families are the first schools in the great discipline of life, that lessons are to be learnt there which can be learnt no where else, and that parents, and especially mothers, are incomparably the best and most effective instructers [sic].”\(^5\) As to what made mothers in particular the ideal educators of children, Buffum noted that they “are naturally the objects of a peculiar preference and love which give to their counsels and example a most persuasive influence.”\(^6\) Buffum was

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\(^4\) Frank, *Life with Father*, 23.

\(^5\) Buffum, preface to *Hints for the Improvement of Early Education and Nursery Discipline*, 4.

\(^6\) Buffum, preface to *Hints for the Improvement of Early Education and Nursery Discipline*, 4.
not alone in articulating the idea that mothers had a deeper, perhaps more natural, love for and influence over their children than fathers. Nor were parental advisers alone in this belief, as it found its way into popular impressions held by laypeople. In a letter to the editor of *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend*, one reader remarked on the incredible power mothers—not fathers—held over their children. “Though not permitted to speak in our halls of legislation and courts of justice, they control both. The destiny of the nation is in their hands. They make the first impressions, shape the character, and give such permanence to the mind and heart as seldom yields to after instructions.”

Many parental advisers declared this to be one of the great differences between mothers and fathers, and supported the idea that the love, care, and influence of a mother was irreplaceable. Rev. Ralph W. Allen, for example, observed that a mother’s influence was paramount. “Who can properly estimate the extent of a mother’s influence over her offspring? It will be felt when other influences are measurably lost; felt powerfully for good or ill on the destiny of millions.” Rev. Muzzey agreed and spoke extensively about this critical difference between fathers and mothers. While he acknowledged that both parents were influential in a child’s life, he argued that mothers were more so. The impression made by a mother, he observed, “is always deepest and most permanent. …however dear may be the father, or however important his services, the love of the mother is usually stronger, and her assiduities the more unwearied.” No matter how much fathers loved their children, it seemed, the nature of a mother’s love and tenderness was exclusive.

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8 Ralph W. Allen, “A Mother’s Influence,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) 8 no. 5 (November, 1848): 97.
Furthermore, both men argued that the love and nurture of a mother was irreplaceable. Rev. Allen asserted, “the mother holds a sacred and dear relation to her children, and such as none other can hold. Consequently, she has an influence over them which no others can exert.”¹⁰ Muzzey agreed with his colleague and extended that argument by drawing a distinction between biological mothers and stepmothers. The latter, he argued, had “no such natural fountain of unfailing love” as biological mothers possessed.¹¹ Muzzey explained, “the tie that binds her to the child in her care was created by man. She does not possess—and it is unreasonable to demand of her—that deep, inexhaustible affection which is spontaneous in the child’s own mother.”¹² While these substitute mothers may care for their newfound charges, and love them inasmuch as they could, there was simply no replacement for the love of a child’s ‘own’ mother. It is understandable that authors such as Muzzey would assume a nonbiological parent (such as a stepmother) could never have the deep affection for a child that a biological parent could. Yet it reveals much more about the discourse surrounding parenting at this time that even a biological father could not match the care and tenderness of a biological mother. This was one of the key differences parental advisers perceived between male and female parents.

Many authors took a similar approach to Muzzey’s, noting that mothers were more connected to their children, that they possessed a deeper love for their children and a more natural devotion. In her book Woman in Her Various Relations, Mrs. L.G. Abell pointed to these reasons when she argued that a woman should spend as much time as possible with their

¹⁰ Allen, “A Mother’s Influence,” 97.
children. Abell reasoned that “no one, not even the best of nurses, can feel that responsibility, that personal interest, and deep affection, which lies so naturally within a mother’s heart.”

Abell was not alone in describing a mother’s love and affection as “natural.”

Other parental advisers used the same or similar language when discussing mothers, suggesting that they assumed that parents were born, not made. A mother did not need to learn how to love and care for her child; this knowledge came from her “fountain of unfailing love,” as Muzzey argued. Yet this was a point of contradiction within the discourse about parenting, as many of these same authors (Muzzey included) insisted that parenting had to be taught. This demonstrates the messy, often discrepant nature of the discourse surrounding parenthood.

Teaching parents how to parent, after all, was a large part of what parental advisers did. They provided instruction and education on one of the most basic parts of human existence: raising children. Through their work, they articulated a gender of parenting that recognized the differences between mothers and fathers. Mothers had a deeper affection for their children, one that came naturally to them, and that could not be replaced by either a father or a stepmother. Yet while their language suggested that mothers were born with this natural love and tenderness, the very existence of their work suggests otherwise.

Not only did parental advisers work to persuade their audience that women were the more natural parent, many also indicated that they believed women to be the primary parent. Although some prescriptive parenting texts addressed fathers specifically, such as Theodore Dwight’s *The Father’s Book*, many didactic authors assumed that the primary parent was a woman. In some

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13 Abell was also the author of *A Mother’s Book of Traditional Household Skills*, published in 1853. Recently reprinted, the new edition boasts that the book contains “wisdom and know-how from a turn-of-the-century super mom” and that the book “will continue to please generations of mothers to come.” Mrs. L. G. Abell, *A Mother’s Book of Traditional Household Skills*, rev. ed. (1853; repr., New York: Lyons Press, 2001), back cover.

ways this is not surprising; as work increasingly took men outside the household, the assumption seemed to be that men were “at” work and women were keeping house. But it is noteworthy in many other ways, not the least of which was that this tack virtually wrote fathers out of the parenting picture despite, as we shall see, parental advisers’ insistence of their critical importance in children’s lives. Their work seemed to set this notion aside, as they wrote parenting advice about and to women, reflecting their belief that a woman was the primary parent. Furthermore, assuming that women were their primary audience, parental advisers’ insistence on their importance reflected their interest in their growing market.

One way in which they demonstrated their assumption that women would be the primary caretakers of children was that they wrote countless books specifically for women. In the preface to *The Mother at Home*, Rev. John S. C. Abbott explained that his book was “written simply with the view of affording to mothers in the common walks of life, plain and simple instruction in respect to the right discharge of their maternal duties.”\(^{15}\) He went on to note that mothers might benefit their children by reading the book and its companion volume, *The Child at Home*, aloud to them.

If a parent reads and explains *The Mother at Home* to her children, they will derive great benefit from the exercise, as they will thus be taught to realize something of the nature and the weight of the responsibilities, the duties, and the cares which such a trust as that which is committed to a mother necessarily brings…. On the other hand, *The Child at Home* is intended quite as much to afford mothers a practical exemplification of the spirit and manner by which their instructions to their children should be characterized.\(^{16}\)

In Abbott’s mind, women were not the only beneficiaries of his advice for mothers. Children too, themselves future parents, would benefit as well. Clearly Abbott saw his wisdom shaping current


and future generations of parents. Note, also, that Abbott used the female pronoun with the word ‘parent.’

Other parental advisers also addressed women as their primary audience. In the preface to *The Mother’s Medical Guide*, Dr. William Alcott asserted that his purpose in writing the book was “to show the mother how far, in the management of infantile disease, she can safely go, and when she ought to call for medical aid or advice,” and that he sought to distinguish “the line between the mother and the medical and surgical practitioner.”17 At the outset of his book, Alcott was careful to articulate clearly for whom his book was written. Medical men such as Alcott assumed that women, not men, would preside over the sickroom.

Even in books not addressed specifically to women, parental advisers indicated their assumption that mothers would be the primary parent in a child’s life. Physician John Eberle, for example, presumed that women would assume the predominant role regarding a child’s health and well-being. He argued that none but a mother could attend to a sick child, watching over it constantly until its health returns. “The mother alone,” he insisted, “can experience those instinctive and anxious promptings, to administer to the wants and comforts of her offspring, which are necessary to secure the faithful performance of this important duty.”18 Physician Stephen Tracy, too, seemed to think that mothers were the primary parent in the sickroom, noting that mothers who observe symptoms of illness should waste no time in summoning a doctor. He argued that a mother could do much to prevent disease, and detailed the ways in which she might accomplish this. He then noted, “all these measures must be strictly regarded and followed out by the parent. Especially must the condition of the digestive organs be the mother’s special


care.” In this instance, Tracy referred to “the parent” nearly in the same breath as “the mother,” indicating that in his mind, the child’s primary parent and the mother were one and the same. Although the book was essentially written to aid other physicians, *A Practical Treatise on the Diseases of Children*, by Philadelphia physician John Forsyth Meigs (1818-1882), also indicates the assumption of a mother being the primary parent of children. In it, Meigs instructed young physicians to pay careful attention to mothers’ accounts of their children’s symptoms, urging them to consult such mothers when trying to reach a diagnosis. While he warned that doctors had to always bear in mind the character of the person being interviewed (some mothers being intolerably foolish and prone to exaggeration, he noted), he maintained that there was value in such an exchange. A mother, he argued, “when guided by maternal instinct, will detect variations from the healthful condition of a child, which may entirely escape the search of the most acute and rigorous medical observer.” Meigs also described numerous instances in which strict instructions should be left with mothers regarding their sick children. Here again, we see the assumption that a mother and not a father would be present in the nursery, caring for an ailing child.

Assuming that mothers would reign over the sickroom, however, was not the only way in which physicians demonstrated their assumption that women would be their children’s primary parent. In his discussion about crying infants, Dr. Stephen Tracy noted that “the parent” should learn to distinguish between the various types of cries—of hunger, of pain, and more. He argued, “it is important a young mother’s attention should be directed to this subject…”

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19 Tracy, *The Mother and Her Offspring*, 422.


21 Tracy, *The Mother and Her Offspring*, 199.
in the space of two sentences, Tracy shifts from a gender-neutral reference to “the parent” to a specific reference to exactly who this parent is: a mother.

Perhaps the greatest assumption of mothers as the primary parent, though, came from children’s book authors. When authors of children’s literature created parent characters, they were overwhelmingly female; fathers were relegated to supporting roles. In this regard, they upheld and strengthened the prevailing argument that men and women occupied separate spheres: women reigned over all things domestic and private, while men asserted themselves in the public sphere of politics, work, and the like. Children’s book authors created mothers who were active in their children’s lives, presiding over their education, teaching them how to behave, and imparting morals.

Many authors indicated the importance of children’s education through parent characters who were very much engaged and interested in their children’s lessons and in teaching their children. Jacob Abbott’s character of Mrs. Morelle is one good example of this. Mrs. Morelle homeschools her children, Florence and John. She provides them with a good room in which to study, ample supplies, and patiently answers their questions, should they need help. Furthermore, she keeps them to a fixed schedule during which they are to study. If they get up from their lessons, they must make up for it with an extra half hour. The work that Mrs. Morelle pours into educating her children does not go unrewarded, as Florence and John are well behaved and well educated.

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Like Abbott’s Mrs. Morelle character, Samuel Goodrich provided a similar dutiful mother in his book, *Peter Parley’s Little Leaves for Little Readers*. In his story entitled “Mamma’s Lessons,” Goodrich describes how a young mother instructs her children, Dick and Lydia. He notes that the children were very smart for their age, “and yet,” he notes, “they were not taught altogether by books. They had a good mother, who took great pains with their education, and she managed in such a way as to make her lessons very pleasing…. She would get her two children round her, and then would ask them what creatures lived in the air? what lived in the water? what lived on the earth &c. The children would give such answers as they pleased; if they were right, they were told so; if wrong, they were corrected.”24 The character of Mrs. Morelle, then, serves as her children’s primary teacher and her home served as their schoolhouse. Dick and Lydia’s mother, in contrast, provides supplementary knowledge to her children, beyond that which they might have learned in school. In both instances, the mother demonstrates a great interest in educating her children.

In Abbott’s “No Encouragements,” found in *Dialogues for the Amusement and Instruction of Young Persons*, a Mrs. Warner also follows the pattern of authors advocating for mothers to fill the role of teachers. Mrs. Warner helps her daughter Anna in her lessons after school. Anna Warner, all of eight years old, has begun to learn how to spell and as part of her lesson is attempting to practice spelling complicated words such as locomotive. Because she is only just beginning to learn how to spell and write letters, she needs to be able to ask for assistance. Polite Anna, however, does not want to interrupt her mother’s reading. Mrs. Warner explains that it will not interrupt her, “if you manage right. When you want to speak to me, just stand up as usual, and I shall see you; and then when I get to the end of my sentence, I will speak

to you.”

Like Mrs. Morelle of *Florence and John*, Mrs. Warner is patient and provides her daughter with the structure and encouragement needed for learning. She asks to see Anna’s slate, and Anna has already written two words. She praises Anna, and corrects a couple of letters that Anna did not quite get right. Mrs. Warner then tells her daughter, “when I see you trying so patiently and succeeding so well, in learning to write, it is a pleasure to me to help you. I think what a good time I shall have by-and-by in reading the pretty little notes and letters that you will write me.” The image of the kind and patient mother assisting her children with their lessons is a pervasive one in nineteenth-century children’s literature.

Mothers, as conceived by children’s authors, were also charged with teaching their children how to behave. In *Flowers for Children II*, Lydia Maria Child included many stories that fell under this pattern. The mother depicted in “The Unlucky Day,” for example, endeavors to teach her daughter to be obedient. The daughter, Lucia, tells her mother one day that one of her friends gets to do whatever she wants, and Lucia wants to know why her mother will not allow her to do the same. As a way of teaching her daughter to be obedient and to follow what she tells her to do, Lucia’s mother tells her that she can be her own mistress for one week. Needless to say, nothing seems to go well for Lucia. On the first day, she finds two chicks in her hen’s basket, and brings them inside the house to play. After a while she tires of them, puts the basket on the table and goes outside. Upon her return, she finds that the cat has eaten the chicks. She cries to her mother, who tells her, “you should not have brought them into the house. The old hen knew what was good for her little ones, much better than you do.”

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26 Jacob Abbott, *Dialogues for the Amusement and Instruction of Young Persons*, 125.

mishaps, Lucia declares that she no longer wants to be in charge of herself. She has come to the conclusion that, like the hen who knew what was best for her chicks, mothers know what is best for their own children. Through this simple lesson, Child implied, Lucia’s mother is able to teach her daughter the cornerstone of good behavior: obedience to parents. Furthermore, through Lucia’s observation that “mothers know what is best for their little girls,” Child reiterated the mantra that mothers ought to serve as their children’s primary parent.28

Part of knowing how to behave, according to nineteenth-century children’s book authors, is conforming to appropriate gender norms: that is, knowing how to be a lady and how to be a gentleman. This was not something that authors overlooked in their books for children. In Facts and Fancies for School-Day Reading, Catharine Sedgwick was sure to include a lesson in being ladylike, in her story “Gentle Voices.” Here, Ellen Brewster asks her mother if her friend Mary could stay with the family during the holidays, which her mother forbids. When Ellen asks her mother for a reason, Mrs. Brewster explains that Mary’s voice annoys and irritates Mr. Brewster. She goes on to note that although she has attempted to speak to the girl about her flaw, “the habit is either inveterate and cannot be cured, or she takes no pains to cure it.”29 Mrs. Brewster then takes this opportunity to turn the conversation into a lesson, telling her daughter, “pray remember yourself, my dear child, that a low voice, discreetly used, is a grace in all womankind.”30

In the case of young boys, authors did not so much construct mothers as teaching young boys how to be men, but rather as treating them as such so as to help them become men. Jacob Abbott’s character Mrs. Morelle provides a good example here. When her son John decides that

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28 Child, Flowers for Children II, 105.
he wants to sail a boat to West Point, she agrees to his plan. She tells herself that being in charge of such a journey will help him become a man. “Boys, like John,” she observes, who are in good health and are gradually growing up to manhood… feel a great desire to exercise their powers. There is a constant surplus of force which must be expended. This leads them into all sorts of enterprises, and we must do one of three things. We must keep them quiet and still at home, and so let them grow up great babies—or we must let them run loose by themselves, and so get into bad company and fall into evil ways—or lastly, we must join them in their schemes, and take part in them ourselves, and even incur some risk and some hardship occasionally, if it is necessary, in allowing them opportunities to exercise and develop their powers.31

Here, while Mrs. Morelle does not give her son instructions on how to become a man or on how to act in a manly way, she provides him with the space and encouragement that he needs to become a man himself. Rather than actively teaching, she simply acts as his guide. Such was the case with many mother-son interactions written into this body of children’s literature. While mother characters often provided instruction to their daughters in being ladylike, they were more likely to simply treat their sons as men and thereby assist them in finding their way to manhood.32

Finally, in the minds and words of children’s authors, mothers—not fathers—were the ones trusted to instill in their children appropriate morals. Samuel Goodrich wrote of the importance of obedience, for example, in *What to Do and How to Do It*, a collection of short stories for children. In one story, appropriately titled “Obedience,” two sons see a rose bush in their mother’s garden. The roses are very pretty, and they each pick one for their mother. She thanks them, but tells them each not to pick any more. They obey for two days or so, but then Ben (the eldest) simply cannot help himself; he picks a rose for his mother and his brother Tim


32 Many scholars have tackled the obvious opportunities for gender analysis in children’s literature. See, for example, Beverly Lyon Clark, *Regendering the School Story: Sassy Sissies and Tattling Tomboys* (New York: Garland Pub, 1996.)
follows suit. The next day Ben tells his mother that Tim broke his promise not to pick any more roses. Tim denies it, but then accuses Ben of doing the same. “I see how it is,” their mother says. “It is too often so, my dear Ben; it is too often so. You remember very well what I tell Tim, but you forget what I tell you. …. But what is worse than all, your love of telling tales induced you to tell of Tim, when you were more to blame yourself. This is very wrong; for as you are the elder you ought rather to shield your little brother from blame than to bring it upon him.”33 Here, the mother gives a dual lesson, first a lesson in behavior on the importance of obedience, and second a moral lesson in the vice of lying and in the treatment of siblings.

Published in 1838, Catharine Sedgwick’s *A Love Token for Children* provides perhaps the best example of an author demonstrating through a character that mothers should teach their children morals. In her story “Overcome Evil with Good,” Sedgwick introduced Widow Ellis and her son Willie. One day, when Willie’s four beloved ducks got into the neighbor’s garden, the neighbor killed them. Willie tells his mother, and she advises him to pray for the neighbor, Captain Stout. But because he wishes so much evil on the captain, Willie tells her that he does not know if he can. His mother encourages him, however, telling him to ‘overcome evil with good.’ When a fire breaks out in Captain Stout’s stable, Willie comes to the rescue and raises the alarm. Stout thanks the boy and offers for Willie to come live with him, to learn how to be a farmer. Mrs. Ellis agrees to Captain Stout’s offer to teach her son farming, but she insists that Willie live at home. Sedgwick praised Mrs. Ellis and observed that she “was not one of those who expect their children will be taught morals and manners away from home; this she knew was home work.”34 Though she provided Captain Stout as the pseudo-father who will teach

33 Samuel Griswold Goodrich, *What to Do and How to Do It; or, Morals and Manners Taught by Examples* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1844), 112.

Willie a trade, Sedgwick did not go so far as to entrust him with the boy’s moral education; this task she preferred to bestow upon his mother.

Sedgwick kept to the theme of mothers providing their children’s moral education in “The Bantem,” another story from *A Love Token for Children*. In “The Bantem,” Willie’s mother (not the same as above) read the Bible to her son before he could read and explained whatever he did not understand. One of the first maxims he learned was to “do unto others what you would have others do to you.” Willie thinks this rule was an easy one to follow, but soon learns otherwise. His neighbor, Mrs. Bemis, gives him two small chickens: one for himself and one for his cousin George. She puts them in a basket with a cover on it and instructs him not to lift the cover. On his way home, Willie cannot resist taking out one of the chicks to show a friend of his, and he places it in his apron for the remainder of the journey. Unfortunately for Willie (but more unfortunately for the chick), he falls before he gets home. The chick in the basket survives, but the chick in his apron does not. No matter to Willie; he simply says that George can have the dead chick. His mother asks if Mrs. Bemis wanted George to have that particular chick. “No, mother,” says Willie, “but she said it was no matter which.” Willie’s mother points out that now it is a great deal of matter which, and asks her son, if the roles were reversed and George had killed one of the chickens, what should he do? At that, Willie knows the proper course of action and has learned full well that he should do unto others as he would have them do unto him. While there was a father present in this situation, Sedgwick deliberately placed the mother in charge of her son’s moral education, thereby reinforcing the notion that this was women’s duty.

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Both didactic and children’s authors tapped into the empire of the mother in their prescriptive literature by assuming a female parent, detailing her various duties, and by suggesting that her role was irreplaceable. In this task, however, they were not alone. Mothers, as conceived by didactic authors and physicians, played a natural role in their children’s lives. While fathers were an important component of parenting, they did not have a clear place in the empire of the mother.

“Harmonious and Efficient Government”

At the same time, the ‘empire of the mother’ was not infallible, nor did mothers have a monopoly on parenting. While it is true, as historian Stephen Frank says, that a “new and insistently maternal note” entered the parenting conversation in the nineteenth century, this is only part of the story. What is perhaps more interesting is that parental advisers believed that mothers and fathers imparted different things to their children, had different duties with regard to their children, and that children needed both in order to be raised properly.

In making this claim, parental advisers first had to impress upon parents that fathers could not exempt themselves from their duties. This may have been an uphill battle, considering the amount of real estate they devoted to the importance of mothers. Many of them emphasized that fathers had much to contribute to a child’s upbringing, and lamented that men were not inclined to be so involved. William Potts Dewees, for example, noted that it was unfortunate that “at present, everything connected with the nursery and education, is ‘voted a bore,’ by the modern fine gentleman; and the physical treatment of his children is a duty he would feel almost disgraced to perform.”

Like Dewees, other parental advisers insisted on the importance of fathers’ active involvement in parenting, though they noted that some fathers perhaps wished it

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37 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, xi.
not to be true. “Judging from their indifference, it would not be an inappropriate question for them to ask, ‘Is there anything for me to do?’ … we cannot look about us anywhere, without meeting the painful conviction, that practically, this question is constantly put by fathers.”³⁸ Parental advisers were dismayed at the rampant disregard fathers seemed to have for their obligations.

The responsibility of correctly rearing up a family equally devolves upon both father and mother. And yet it is to be apprehended that many fathers leave nearly the whole burden with the mother. There is a sentiment, perhaps unexpressed in words, yet constantly acted upon, that it is the duty of the father to provide the needful support for the family, while it is the duty of the mother to guide and govern the children. This sentiment has been the ruin of many families, and has brought down the gray hairs of many a father with sorrow to the grave. It is very rare that a family can be well regulated, unless there be cooperation of both parents in watching over and governing the children.³⁹

Parental advisers, then, had stern words (and predicted a grim future) for men who were so disinclined to be involved in their children’s upbringing. Perhaps sensing that logic would get him only so far, physician George Ackerley was prepared to shame men into being involved fathers. Sympathy was due, he argued, to a woman married to such an unfeeling man. “She needs no appeal, for the strongest feeling implanted in the human breast is the love of the mother for her offspring. Observe how she watches her sick infant, night after night, day after day, without a complaint. See how untiring her efforts, how assiduous her cares, to relieve every source of uneasiness; and when dark clouds encompass her, and danger threatens her child, who would say she needs no partner in her cares, no husband to share her responsibilities?”⁴⁰

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³⁸ William C. Brown, “Co-Operation of Fathers,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) (July 1852 to January 1853): 122.

³⁹ John S. C. Abbott, “Paternal Neglect,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 2 no. 1 (1842): 1.

Yet for as much as they chided men for their lack of involvement, others recognized that parental advisers themselves may have had a hand in this negligence. That is, by their insistence on a mother’s influence within the home, they may have inadvertently signaled that fathers were of little consequence. Mary G. Halpine, an editor of *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend*, illustrated the dilemma parental advisers faced. “We cannot overrate the importance of a mother’s influence, and a mother’s example; yet, in seeking to impress these, we are sometimes in danger of underrating the responsibility and obligations which rest upon the father, as head of the family.”

Certainly parental advisers had gone to great lengths to emphasize the importance of a mother’s influence and in doing so, perhaps they had unwittingly indicated that fathers were less critical in parenting. Yet at least one of their numbers had, at one point, advocated that fathers be excused from parental duties. In *The Young Mother*, published in 1836, Dr. William Alcott observed that fathers ought not be expected to play an integral role in childrearing. “Let it be left to fathers to study the improvement of hounds and horses and cattle, and at the same time to think themselves above the concerns of the nursery…. All, or nearly all, must devolve on the mother. The father has no time to attend to his children!” Several years later, however, he recanted these views, emphasizing instead the importance of a father’s involvement. Addressing other parental advisers, he wrote, “let me admonish you, I would say, not to urge less the responsibility of mothers, but more the responsibility of fathers. Do not leave them to despise the nursery, or the little beings there, whom God has given to their charge to rear for himself.”

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Whatever his past opinions, Alcott sought to underscore the idea that fathers owed it to their children—as well as to their wives—to be active participants in childrearing.

Not only did fathers have a moral obligation to be involved in their children’s lives, but they also had a duty to ensure the health of their offspring. With regard to a child’s physical well-being, author A. E. Porter observed that if it was true, “as the majority of medical writers affirm, that a child is more likely to inherit the diseases of the father than the mother, fathers should certainly understand enough of physiology to enable them to regard and practice the laws of health, and by self-discipline and proper regimen, make themselves worthy to be fathers.”

Porter further admonished fathers to take special care in selecting housing for their families. “The father selects the abode of his family, and should know the influence of impure air, stagnant water, ill-ventilated rooms, and shady spots where the healthy sunlight cannot be sufficiently felt.” Ignorance on the part of fathers with regard to their children’s well-being was not an acceptable excuse. Fathers, just as much as mothers, needed to be engaged parents. They needed to embrace this obligation and, if they did, they might find that they enjoyed being attentive fathers. Those who “shrink almost instinctively from an infant, and even tell us gravely that they know not how to take care of it, might, in a little time, find themselves not merely reconciled to the employment, but for the sake of relieving a dear and valued companion, delighted to do it.”

Parental advisers thus insisted on the necessity of both mothers and fathers to be involved in parenting. They demonstrated the need for this basic necessity by asserting that mothers and

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44 A. E. Porter, “Hints to Mothers: Physical Education,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) (1854 Part II): 118.
45 Porter, “Hints to Mothers,” 118.
fathers had fundamentally different natures, that they imparted different things to their children, and that children needed both parents in order to be raised successfully. Mothers, as they thoroughly established, were more nurturing, more innately caring, and exerted an incredible influence over their children. Fathers, for their part, brought structure to a child’s life, in the form of authority and strict government. With these basic natures, individually a mother or father might fail in parenting. Mothers, naturally tender and mild, might raise their children to be selfish. Fathers, on the other hand, might be overly dominant and raise cowardly children. Taken together, however, each balanced out the other’s fundamental character.

Providence has wisely designed that the prevailing and almost opposite mental characteristics of the two sexes should, by reacting on each other, produce that harmonious and efficient government so necessary for the happiness and well-being of their offspring. The mother’s gentleness modifying the somewhat stern and rugged disposition of the father, and his strong will and resolute temper correcting her too yielding tenderness, which shrinks from inflicting pain on a beloved child, even when most required. And, thus united, they arrive at that perfection of discipline which neither could attain alone.  

Together, a mother and father provided the proper balance of discipline and tenderness that parenting required. Therefore, it was imperative that both parents be active participants in childrearing. Not to do so, parental advisers insisted, would be detrimental. “I would likewise most earnestly caution you against a very pernicious error into which I have known some parents fall. The error to which I allude is that of one parent’s resigning the government of the children to the other… Let both parents pursue the same course: they would, provided they knew that by the death of one the whole charge would soon devolve upon the other.”  

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What arose out of these fundamental claims was a belief in sex-segregated parenting: the idea that mothers and fathers filled specific and different roles in their children’s lives. This notion is reflected clearly in custody cases and didactic literature.

In rendering their decisions on child custody, justices reinforced the belief in the value of sex-segregated parenting. Women were presumed to be more nurturing than men, and young children (particularly infants and toddlers) were presumed to need the care and attention of their mothers more than their fathers. Over the course of the century justices crafted a “tender years doctrine” that reflected these assumptions, awarding mothers of young children—especially girls—custody. Children not of “tender years,” and especially boys, tended to be awarded to their fathers. Cases involving *filius nullius*, or bastardy, represented yet another permutation in child custody law. In these cases, justices tended to award custody to the mother rather than the putative father.  

In 1846 the Supreme Court of Illinois rendered its decision in *Cowls v. Cowls*, an appeal brought by Thomas Cowls over a lower court’s decision regarding the custody and maintenance of his two young children, Thomas (Jr.) and Mary Jane. A year earlier, the circuit court had granted custody to their mother, Ann Cowls, and had charged Thomas Cowls with their maintenance. The decision was based on the fact that the children were very young, that Mr. Cowls was vulgar, neglectful, and frequently drunk, and furthermore that he had lived with his lover before marrying her. The lover was described as “a woman of notoriously bad character, and not in any way qualified for the care and education of the children.”  

The Illinois Supreme Court upheld the lower court’s ruling. The justices censured Thomas Cowls’ behavior and

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50 *Cowls v. Cowls*, 3 Gilm. 435 (Ill. 1846).
argued that the lower court had the right to remove children from such a father. “Here we have grouped together into one disgusting and revolting picture, those features of a father’s character who has become unworthy of the charge of his own offspring, and any one of which… will authorize the court in its discretion, to interfere and remove the child without the influence of such a polluted atmosphere.” In reaching the decision, the Illinois Supreme Court made a judgment as to Cowls’ fitness as a father, which they determined was abysmal. Furthermore, the court took into consideration whether or not the children’s new stepmother (whom they referred to as a “prostitute”) could be entrusted with their upkeep. Finally, the justices considered the ages of the children, both under ten. In the end, the court decided that neither Cowls nor his paramour were fit to be parents of such young and impressionable children. Rather than denying the father custody based solely on his behavior, the court first took into consideration the parental fitness of the stepmother. In part, the case hinged not only on the biological mother to whom the children could be sent, but also on their nonbiological stepmother in whose care the children already were. Finding both the father and the stepmother unfit to be parents, the court awarded the mother custody. The court made it clear that “it is not the rights of the mother that we are to enforce,” but rather those of the children. In doing so, they reinforced the notion that young children required the care and attention of their mothers. Fathers simply did not measure up.

Perhaps, though, the justices in the Cowls case were swayed by Thomas Cowls’ detestable behavior: drinking, swearing, living in sin, all in the presence of his children. How would the court decide a custody case if the father’s character was above reproach? Three years

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51 Cowls, 3 Gilm. 435.
52 Cowls, 3 Gilm. 435.
after the *Cowls* decision, the Illinois Supreme Court rendered its decision in the custody case *Miner v. Miner*. The justices remarked on the serious nature of their task, “not only to interfere with the interests of suitors, but to sound the deepest feelings of the human heart—the love of parents for their children.”

Despite the fact that both parents seemed to love their daughter equally, the court granted sole custody to the mother. The justices cited the tender years doctrine, noting that it must be considered “even when the father is without blame, merely because of his inability to bestow upon it that tender care which nature requires, and which it is the peculiar province of a mother to supply.”

While they acknowledged that Martin Miner’s behavior as a father had been exemplary, they nonetheless felt he would be an unsuitable parent to his young daughter, due to the perceived differences between mothers and fathers. They noted,

> it can not be expected that he would bestow that personal care and attention upon a girl seven or eight years old, which may be expected from a mother…. If left with the father, the child must, to a great extent, be entrusted to the superintendence of others; her nature will lead her to associate with her own sex, by whom her manners will be formed, her thoughts and tastes directed, and, in truth, her character mainly moulded. His occupations will doubtless prevent that constant watchfulness over her, so essential to her proper cultivation, and which could be better contributed by a vigilant and tender mother.

In order to be raised properly, then, the young girl needed the attention of a mother. Barring that, if left in the custody of her father, the child would require a woman who could take the place of a mother. Though her father may have loved her as dearly as a parent could love a child, his gender prevented him from being able to raise her properly.

Justices deciding custody cases did not always have the option of deciding between a male and female parent; oftentimes other relations were involved. In the 1842 case *Foster v.*

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53 *Miner v. Miner*, 11 Ill. 43 (1849).

54 *Miner*, 11 Ill. 43.

55 *Miner*, 11 Ill. 43.
Alston, the Supreme Court of Mississippi had to decide whether to leave a deceased father’s children with his brother, as he had desired, or with his widow. As A.S.J. Alston lay dying in Tennessee in 1834, he instructed his brother James to take custody of his children. “You have been a father to me, and you will be a father to them,” he said. According to his dying wishes, his wife was to remain with the children at James Alston’s house and should she remarry, leave the children with him. After several years, the widow remarried and, after a turn of events, decided to take her children with her to her new home in Mississippi. James Alston took his former sister-in-law to court, claiming guardianship of his brother’s children. The Mississippi trial court agreed, and granted him custody. On the mother’s appeal, the Mississippi Supreme Court reversed the trial court’s decision, arguing that the children ought to remain with their mother, “the proper place for all female children.” In rendering their decision, the court suggested that James Alston’s claim of guardianship, as an uncle, was preposterous. “But what are we called on to do with these children, by the petitioner, the testamentary guardian? To tear these tender female children, aged nine and ten years, from the care and custody of a fond, devoted and capable mother, and place them under the care of a bachelor uncle, residing some seventy-five miles from their mother. To state the proposition would seem to decide it. Let every mother, let every father, answer this question.” Even if he were granted custody, they argued, he would need to seek the assistance of a female relation or friend to fill the role of a mother. As in the case of Martin Miner, James Alston’s gender was a barrier to him being an acceptable guardian of young girls.

56 Foster and Wife v. Alston, 6 Howard 406 (Miss. 1842).
57 Foster, 6 Howard 406.
58 Foster, 6 Howard 406.
While women were presumed to be more natural caretakers for young children and girls, older boys seemed not to fall within their expertise. Justices preferred to award the custody of these boys to fathers rather than mothers, reflecting another distinct gender bias. As the case *Paine v. Paine* demonstrates, even fathers who were accused of ill treatment still were awarded custody of boys. In 1843, the Supreme Court of Tennessee lamented that they were charged with divvying up young children between the divorced Paines. In his majority opinion, Justice Turney wrote, “among the multiplied duties of a court, there are none the discharge of which is attended with more pain and regret than those which interfere with the domestic relations of husband and wife, parent and child. These relations are of so sacred a character, and involve to so great an extent the peace and happiness of mankind in general, that it cannot be otherwise than a source of deep mortification to a well-regulated and humane mind to be compelled publicly to investigate and determine conflicting rights arising out of feuds existing between them.”

Having lived with a verbally abusive and neglectful husband for a number of years, Eliza Paine made the decision to leave her husband’s house and take their three children with her. In the initial trial, she argued that the children’s tender years necessitated her care. The circuit court agreed and awarded Eliza Paine custody of all three children. On appeal, the Supreme Court of Tennessee was not as convinced. The eldest child, Henry, was now nearly eight years old. Not only was he a boy, but his age meant that he was growing into a young man, requiring the attention of a father. Henry, the court decided, “can be better raised by the father than the mother,” while the others “are of too tender an age to be removed at present from the fostering care of the mother…” Just as men like Martin Miner and James Alston were prevented by

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60 *Paine*, 4 Hum. 523.
their gender from raising girls properly, women like Eliza Paine were seen as unacceptable single parents for boys entering young manhood.

Justices were not alone in thinking that mothers and fathers served different roles in their children’s lives. Didactic authors, too, articulated this gendered difference in their books for parents and children. Perhaps the most impressive example comes from Catharine Sedgwick’s children’s novel *Home*.

In *Home*, Sedgwick appears to break the trend of absent fathers in her creation of the character William Barclay, a man who appears very interested in raising his children. Mr. Barclay is a printer with a wife and seven children. His wife’s sister lives with them, as well as his mother. Despite the fact that his income is stretched given his large family, Mr. Barclay is determined that his children’s education will not suffer. One evening, a visitor drops by for dinner and remarks that it seems that the Barclays are very inconsistent; they dress plainly and have plain furniture, but they pay to send their children to lectures and to lessons. Here, Mr. Barclay embarks on a soliloquy on the importance of his children’s education:

> I am a prosperous man in my business, but my income is limited, and I must select those objects of expenditure that appear to me wisest. Now I had rather Alice should learn to draw, than she should wear the prettiest ear-rings in New York, or any hard-ware of that description. I would rather my boys should learn from Professor Griscom something of the nature and riches of the world they live in, than to have a mirror the whole length of my mantel-piece…. I can spare money elsewhere, but, till I am compelled, I’ll not spare it in the education of my children.61

It is obvious that Sedgwick’s character of William Barclay exhibited a keen interest in his children’s lives and upbringing, which might seem to cast him as an outlier, as someone who does not fit the trend of women as the primary parent. However, Sedgwick was quick to point

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out that it was his mother who instilled in him this belief. When little William was growing up, Sedgwick noted, his mother “directed all her energies to one object, —the sine qua non of a New-England mother, —a good education for her son.” Thus, Sedgwick implied, the character of Barclay must be seen as the product of his mother’s attention to him, and his ideas attributed to her.

Mr. Barclay’s character also serves to elucidate a key difference in the way mothers and fathers interacted with their children’s education. Mothers, as conceived by children’s authors, demonstrate their devotion to their children’s education by being active agents, for example by teaching them directly or by assisting in their lessons. Fathers, on the other hand, are more indirectly involved. In the case of Mr. Barclay, he opted to spend his money on educating his children (by paying someone else to do it) rather than spending his time. Not only did this tactic help to reinforce the overriding discourse of women as natural educators, it also helped to promote the notion that men were the natural breadwinners of a family.

“The True Head of the House”

For all the valorization of mothers and for all the talk about their “natural” abilities, parental advisers made it clear mothers were not infallible. Their natural affection for their children, if left unchecked, could lead their children to ruin. Because a father’s authority provided the antidote to unrestrained indulgence, parental advisers accorded fathers dominance over mothers with regard to childrearing. Fathers were thus granted latitude to supervise their spouses’ childrearing decisions. (Revealingly, parental advisers did not seem concerned that a father’s authority would cause any harm if left similarly unchecked. Mothers, then, were not granted the veto that fathers had.) This trope, while present, does not appear frequently in the

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literature. Perhaps because they worked so hard to emphasize the ‘empire of the mother,’ parental advisers spent less time on mothers’ weaknesses. Nonetheless, across parental advisers’ work, fathers were cast as the ultimate heads of households, having control not only over their children but also over their wives. Wives and mothers, in these instances, were depicted as well-intentioned but simple-minded, and very much in need of the kind of assistance that could only be provided by men. Here, fathers appear to extend their parenting to include wives as well as children.

In *Motherly Talks with Young Housekeepers*, Mrs. H. W. Beecher (1812-1897), wife of Henry Ward Beecher, acknowledged that a mother was capable of understanding her children better than a father because of the sheer amount of time she dedicated to them. While a father could devote “only a few moments at a time” to his children, “the mother must watch over them hourly, providing for all their constantly recurring wants.”63 Far from being an impediment to a father’s parenting, Beecher believed that this gave him an advantage (or, perhaps, that the great amount of time a mother spent with her children left her at a disadvantage). During the time he is at home with his wife and children, Beecher explained, he can quickly see the weaknesses in his wife’s parenting skills. “He may see plainly how, at times, she weakly yields to their caprices, allowing herself to become a slave to them…”64 While parental advisers were, on the one hand, quick to acknowledge the benefits of a mother’s solicitude and devotion, they were equally quick to demonstrate the ways in which these strengths could become a detriment. Her devotion to her children might make her overlook their faults, while her solicitude might turn them into tyrants.

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Rev. John S. C. Abbott agreed that this was a danger, noting that, “the mother cannot generally see the defects of the children so clearly as can the father.”

Furthermore, this chink in a mother’s armor could lead her to sabotage her husband’s attempts to raise his children properly. Her devotion to them could turn into an inability to govern them properly and discipline them. A man married to such a woman might try to correct her course, but to no avail.

Sometimes, when a father is anxious to do his duty, the mother is a weak and foolish woman, who thinks that every punishment and deprivation of indulgence is cruelty to her children. And when any one of them is punished, she will, by her caresses, do away the effect of the discipline and convey to the mind of the child the impression that his father is cruel and unjust. A man who has formed so unhappy a connection is indeed in a deplorable condition. And if his wife is incapable of being convinced of the ruinous consequences of such a course, he must take upon himself the whole duty of government.

A father in such a position—married to a woman who was so blinded by her love for her children that she could not raise them properly—was left without a helpmate in his most important task. Just as they pitied women whose husbands excused themselves from all childrearing tasks, parental advisers empathized with men whose wives were incapable mothers. However, while women saddled with negligent husbands had little recourse, men married to ineffectual wives could take action.

In cases such as this, fathers needed to assert themselves as heads of households and demonstrate to their wives the error of their ways. Mrs. H. W. Beecher, for example, argued that once a husband became aware of his wife’s deficiencies in parenting, he ought to point them out to her once he could speak to her privately. This was a time, Beecher argued, in which the husband could “prove which is the stronger, which better fitted to be the true head of the

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Furthermore, should his wife be unreceptive to his helpful parenting suggestions, the husband should be prepared to remove his children from her care immediately, “and place them in some school where health and morals may be carefully watched over…” Like nineteenth-century courts, Beecher’s solution to an incapable mother was simply to take her children away from her. This way, she implied, the damage to the children would be minimized.

Parental advisers were convinced of a mother’s devotion to her children, and they were aware of her powerful influence over them. Yet they recognized that both, if unchecked, could go horribly wrong. At the point at which a mother’s affection threatened to undermine her children’s best interests, it was up to the father to assert his authority and teach his wife proper parenting methods.

In *The Young Husband*, William Alcott spoke to the importance of men educating their wives for parenthood. He related a story in which an acquaintance of his bemoaned the fact that his wife was incapable of educating their children. “Her mind,” the friend said, “is uncultivated, and though she attends to the bodily wants of my children, in a very becoming manner, she is wholly unprepared to educate them. So utterly unfit is she for the task, that my eldest daughter, now old enough to go into company, is quite unprepared for it.” Yet Alcott, rather than siding with his friend, found sympathy for the wife and noted his friend’s failure as head of the household. “If he was sensible of her deficiencies, why did not the husband seek for a remedy by enlightening her? Why spend all his leisure hours in reading or writing by himself, as he was accustomed to do, and leave his wife uninformed, and then complain of it to others?”

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like Beecher and others, believed it to be a father’s duty to compensate for his wife’s failings by educating her properly. Just as it was a mother’s obligation to educate her children properly, so too was it a father’s obligation to do the same for his wife.

Other parental advisers cast mothers in a similarly child-like way, needing the unwavering help of fathers when parenting became too difficult. Jacob Abbott’s *Rollo* series, for example, depicted a rational and firm, yet caring father contrasted against a loving and affectionate, yet foolish mother. Whenever Rollo’s mother acted incorrectly as a parent to her young son, Rollo’s father was always there to fix her errors. Abbott’s book *Rollo’s Travels* provides a good example of this. At the outset of *Rollo’s Travels*, Rollo is preparing to go on a journey with his father and packing his belongings for the trip. He decides that he wants to take his kite, but his mother tries to dissuade him. She begins by telling him that he will not have any one to raise it with him, and therefore it is not worth taking. Rollo, in turn, counters with the fact that he intends to raise it with Horatio, a boy whom he expects to see on his journey. Mother tries again, this time saying that the kite might get lost or broken. At this, Abbott takes his opportunity to interject:

Rollo’s mother made a mistake. She was assigning false reasons. The real reason why Rollo ought not to take his kite was, that it would be an inconvenient and troublesome thing to carry; but instead of assigning this reason, or, what would have been better still, giving no reason at all, but simply telling him that he could not be allowed to carry it, she attempted to persuade him to give it up, by urging arguments which were really not of much weight; and so Rollo was not satisfied with them, but was only the more eager to have the kite go.71

Here, Abbott injected his opinion on the proper course of action for Rollo’s mother to have taken. She comes across as being not as rational as Rollo’s father, who tells him that it is not best for Rollo to take his kite, and furthermore makes Rollo feel badly for having asked to take it in the first place. According to Abbott, Rollo’s sensible father needed to be there to correct the

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failings of Rollo’s mother. However, the character of Rollo’s father is not the only way Abbott makes up for the mother’s deficiencies; by injecting his own voice into the story, Abbott himself acted to correct her error.

Fathers needed to be aware of the different circumstances in which they might need to intervene. Certainly, a mother’s ineptitude with regard to childrearing would require him to take the lead. But his unflinching hand, his assured confidence might also be necessary if she were to succumb to her emotional weaknesses as well. In *On the Management of Children*, for example, physician George Ackerley argued that it was imperative for a father to be involved in childrearing, as such knowledge could help prevent the death of his child. A sick child, he opined, needed the care of its loving mother, “who by her tenderness was evidently ordained to perform this important duty.”72 In this regard, he agreed with other parental advisers who articulated similar beliefs about a woman’s ‘natural’ abilities. However, Ackerley argued, if a sickness should take a turn for the worse, leaving the mother distraught, it was important for a father to be able to step in. “It is during those hours of doubt and difficulty, while the female is, perhaps, almost overcome with anxiety and watching, that the sustaining influence of the father is frequently required, not only to see carried into effect those measures which, perhaps, alone can save his child, but, by his own knowledge, prevent fuel being added to the flame, by glaring mismanagement.”73

While most parental advisers did not stray from valorizing a woman’s influence over her children and took it for granted that mothers were superior parents to fathers, others—like Beecher, Alcott, and the Abbotts—took a different approach. According to them, while a mother

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may spend more time with her children, that did not necessarily mean that she was a better parent than her husband. Rather, it may have made her a worse parent, prone to overindulgence on account of constantly being worn down by her children’s demands. In such a case, as their comments demonstrate, it was left to the father to step in and educate the mother about proper parenting.

**Summary**

During the 1840s and 1850s, parental advisers further refined what they expected of parents. Their work reflected the belief in gendered parenting: mothers and fathers were fundamentally different. They firmly believed in what Rev. Artemas Bowers Muzzey referred to as the ‘empire of the mother.’ Women were more naturally tender and nurturing and, according to many parental advisers, were considered the primary parent. Yet this did not mean that fathers were exempt from childrearing obligations (despite how many men, according to parental advisers, wished that to be the case). Rather than permitting men to skirt their duties, parental advisers insisted on fathers’ importance in parenting. Fathers created a sort of partnership with mothers that ensured their children would get what they needed: the stern governance of their fathers and the tender devotion of their mothers. This reflected parental advisers’ belief that fathers’ and mothers’ contributions to parenthood were fundamentally different, and that children needed both parents in order to grow up successfully. In theory, this meant that each parent provided a check on the other, ensuring harmony in the parenting partnership. The mother’s tenderness would counter the father’s authority, and vice versa. Neither would be allowed free reign. In practice, however, parental advisers really only upheld a father’s authority within his household. Here, if his wife clearly needed intervention in her childrearing abilities, he would step in to correct her failings. Having thus more clearly defined what it was to be a parent and
what was expected of mothers and fathers, parental advisers would turn their attention in the next decades to shaping them into highly trained professional parents.
CHAPTER 5
PROFESSIONALIZING PARENTHOOD

The government of the family is more like that of the Almighty than any other, and the prerogatives of the parent are only less than divine.

—Rev. William Barnes, “The Home” 1

By mid-century, Rev. William Barnes and countless other likeminded men and women began to tap into the growing discourse of professionalization to cast parenthood as a profession—something which required education and training, and something for which not all were qualified. As Americans began to place greater trust into trained, educated, and experienced professionals, parental advisers used that to their benefit, both for themselves and their audience. While the parental advisers of previous decades navigated the waters of their own expertise as they were beginning to sort out what it meant to be a parent, by the 1850s and 1860s the successors of these self-styled experts had become convinced that parents needed to be trained by professional advisers in order to fill their roles as professional mothers and fathers. In the hands of the ignorant and unskilled, parenthood could wreak havoc on the hearth and the world beyond. Only the best could steer their families in the right direction. In the hands of parental advisers, through their ever-narrowing definitions of what was appropriate and what was not, parenthood was beginning to resemble an exclusive club.

In order to professionalize parenthood, parental advisers first needed to supply their pupils with good information—expert training—that would prepare mothers and fathers for the treacherous road of parenthood. As they had already established, the stakes were high indeed. And as they were beginning to realize, danger lurked around every corner, in the form of moral

temptation for children, the bad influence of servants, and deplorable advice or unenlightened folklore espoused by nurses and others. Parental advisers drew a distinction between their expertise and the untrained, uninformed and, sometimes, incidental guidance of others. Second, their work in this regard—this parental training—was crucial because, as they argued, parents were the only ones who could fulfill their particular duties. As with any other profession, parents had a distinct niche to fill. Parents had a responsibility that they could not transfer to others. Parental advisers were firm about this because, in their eyes, the family was sacrosanct, and not to be tampered with. At the same time, though, they made an exception for themselves—their very work was an intrusion, illustrated most effectively by physicians and justices. Finally, parental advisers had to contend with what common schools meant for parenting. This was especially important because, at this time, common schools were becoming more prevalent, throwing into question what role institutions outside the family played in raising children. Parental advisers saw public schools as bastions of moral evil, capable only of teaching children how to swear and—perhaps more worrisome—releasing parents from their natural obligations to home and country.

Parental advisers of this period faced tremendous challenges as they worked to further define—for themselves as much as for others—what it meant to be a good parent. In doing so, they continued to restrict their definition of appropriate middle-class parenthood. They were convinced that parenting was a professional occupation, one that required dedication to strict standards. They knew that not everyone could meet these standards. Earlier parental advisers thought they could teach these standards and create good parents. Now, their successors began to believe that not everyone could parent. Only the best—those who had been properly trained—could take on such a task. Now they faced the monumental task of convincing their audience.
“Good Advisers, Good Books, and Much Encouragement”

In the preface to *The Mother at Home*, Rev. John S. C. Abbott observed, “there are many mothers, in every village of our land, who are looking eagerly for information respecting the government of their children.” As women began to consciously limit their pregnancies, and families became smaller, the opportunities for young adults to learn how to raise children dwindled. Furthermore, as couples moved further away from their families, it became harder to pass on childrearing knowledge from generation to generation. In this context, Abbott’s statement is easy to believe. Parents needed “good advisers, good books, and much encouragement. But how few of them have either!” Facing a knowledge vacuum when it came to their most important task, parents appeared desperate for advice.

If parental advisers can be believed, this desperation was born in part out of a struggle simply to keep children alive in such a perilous world. It is not an overstatement to say that nineteenth-century American parents had reason to worry that their children might die; infant mortality rates were high, after all. Rev. Muzzey, perhaps overstating his claim, asserted there was a 50 percent mortality rate among children under the age of five. While such records are difficult to recover, historian Richard Meckel argues that “an informed estimate would be that somewhere between fifteen and twenty percent of all American infants born in the second half of the nineteenth century died before they could celebrate their first birthdays.” Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, too, point out the high rate of infant mortality at this time: “During the nineteenth century as much as 40 percent of the total death rate was comprised of the deaths

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3 James Porter, Letter to the Editor, *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) 14 no. 5 (1849): 103.


Because parents were not born with an innate knowledge of how to raise children, they might well lead them down a path of ruin while thinking they were doing the right thing.

The father loves his son; he would not willingly neglect to train him aright; but he does not know, —he does not know the best means and methods of making him what his heart desires to see him. The mother would not for worlds do any harm to this daughter. No; she is full of affection and full of devotedness to her; but alas! her love is blind. She does not perceive, that, instead of educating her well, preparing her for mental excellence, self-dependence, self-sacrifice, real piety, and an unblemished worth, she is leading her every day in the opposite direction. She is doing what for her right hand she would not do, could she foresee the result of her course.7

Without good information to follow, such a mother is left blind with regard to the management of her children. She raises her children in ignorance, spoiling her chance to raise them properly, and dooming them to repeat her mistakes. “Had she been favored with a copy of ‘The Mother’s Assistant,’ or some similar work… these evils would have been evaded. But this was thought unnecessary, or too expensive. They could not afford to take everything, so they take ‘The Ploughman,’ to learn the art of training pigs and chickens, and left the children to grow up under the discipline of ignorance and inexperience.”8 Parental advisers saw little excuse for such ignorance and inexperience. As their predecessors had established in earlier decades, parents were made and not born. They required training and instruction in order to parent properly and, parental advisers made sure, such training and instruction was available to them. Like the bricklayer who needs the proper tools to do his job, it was up to parents to secure the proper training. Without it, parents might lead their children to ruin or even death.


8 James Porter, Letter to the Editor, The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 14 no. 5 (1849): 103-104.
Parental advisers anxiously fretted over the dangers facing children that might bring them to such harm. To justify their fears in this regard, they pointed to the fact that the world in which children were growing up (and, perhaps more importantly, in which parents were raising children) was perilous. Danger lurked around every corner, in the form of vice and mischief. Children were exposed to innumerable potentially dangerous influences, from friends and schoolmates to nurses and servants. Outsiders to the family, these groups represented the uncontrolled and dangerous environment that existed beyond the walls of the home. Whereas in previous decades, parental advisers primarily concerned themselves with what parents were doing incorrectly in raising their children (internal threats, as it were), they now realized there existed a host of external threats to raising children properly. Parents needed good information in order to raise their children in an environment so treacherous to their children’s moral upbringing.

The influence of childhood friends could not be avoided, to be sure. With regard to these youthful friendships, Lydia Maria Child noted that a child’s friends would have “prodigious influence” thereon, necessitating “extreme caution” on the part of parents. But parental advisers were convinced that the harm these little influencers wrought could be minimized, with just the right amount of parental meddling. “The safest method,” Child advised, “is not to put children in the way of those whom you dare not trust. Do not expressly forbid an acquaintance, (unless great faults of character demand such restrictions,) but endeavor by every possible means to withdraw your child from society you deem improper.” Others argued that parents needed to adopt a more intrusive role in the selection of childhood friends. Dr. William Potts Dewees warned that

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children should be kept from associating with “vulgar characters,” as such friendships and acquaintances would prove “injurious” to a child’s morals. “On this account,” Dewees argued, “a child is seldom safe, either morally or physically, who is permitted to choose its companions, the nature of its game or amusement, from under the parent’s inspection and control.”

The safest route, then, was for parents to hand-pick their children’s friends. Rev. Artemas Bowers Muzzey agreed, noting, “at the risk of offending the nearest relative, or most valued friend on earth, and however painful to himself or his child, he should never permit him to associate intimately with one who he sees and knows is, both by example and persuasion, infusing a daily poison into his mortal lifeblood.” Jacob Abbott put it more simply. When choosing playmates and friends, or making other decisions that “would not be safe” for children to make themselves, he was quite clear on what parents should do: “Decide for them.” In order to be certain that children’s morals remained unscathed, parents had to carefully control the environment around their sons and daughters. This would prove more difficult when it came to domestic help and, later, common schools.

Parental advisers warned that friends and acquaintances could damage a child’s moral upbringing, but so too could domestic servants. Here, the dangers were many: children might pick up bad habits from servants, servants might treat children meanly, and “because we change domestics so frequently in this country” it was difficult to know their principles and nature. While in the past, servants would have been intimately known to the family, perhaps considered family members themselves, servants to the urban middle-class at this time were tantamount to

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strangers. Furthermore, such domestics were even more removed from the families they served because they were of a different social class and often a different ethnicity, if not a different race. Faye Dudden, for example, notes that nineteenth-century servants were composed overwhelmingly of immigrants, predominately Irish, as well as African Americans. For all of these reasons, they were a threat to parenting. “One most fertile source of injury to children is found in servants” who, according to Theodore Dwight, transfer to children “the habits and sentiments of some of the most degraded, and too often vicious states of society.” Jacob Abbott warned that domestics might terrorize children with threats of hobgoblins or “the black man,” and so “infect” their minds with irrational fear. And Lydia Maria Child argued that while she would not forbid children to speak to servants, lest they interpret that as a sign of their superiority, she nonetheless “would withdraw them from the influence of domestics merely because there is a chance that such influence will be impure.” The influence of friends, acquaintances, and domestics was something of which parents had to be constantly mindful. Such people could have an adverse effect on a child’s moral upbringing. But an even greater threat to parents trying to raise their children properly was the threat of bodily injury, and even death.

Not only could friends, domestics, and others negatively influence a child’s moral upbringing, but they could also teach him destructive habits that could lead to injury and worse. Certainly at the top of this list was “self-pollution,” or masturbation. In Solitary Vice, written

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17 Jacob Abbott, Gentle Measures in the Management and Training of the Young, 18-20, 129.

18 Child, The Mother’s Book, 118
with the express intent of helping parents talk to their children about “self-pollution,” health reformer and author Mary Gove Nichols (1810-1884) cautioned parents that children often learned this ‘solitary vice’ from acquaintances, friends, and even schoolmates. She described meeting two young women, “ladies of the first respectability,” who confessed that they learned the practice from acquaintances at their boarding school. “Generally speaking,” Gove Nichols asserted, “schools are nurseries of vice.”\textsuperscript{19} Sylvester Graham (1794-1851), minister and dietary reformer, agreed and observed that childhood friends—more often than other influences—were the perpetrators behind teaching one another the dirty habit. “Servants, and other laboring people of loose morals, often become the secret preceptors of children in this dreadful vice. It is, however, more frequently communicated from one boy to another; and sometimes a single boy will corrupt many others.”\textsuperscript{20} Not only could self-pollution turn children into weak, sickly beings, ill-fit for life in the New Republic, but continued practice could ultimately kill them. Unless parents could monitor every interaction their children had in the environment outside home and hearth, the dangers their children would encounter were treacherous. Parental advisers insisted that parents had to be aware of these dangers and do what they could to manage that which seemed to be out of their control.

While servants and childhood friends bore some of the blame for leading children to injury, more bile was reserved for nurses. Unlike threats outside the household, this was something parents could theoretically control. The threat that the “mismanagement of the nurse may inflict a disease which will be the curse of a child during its earthly existence, and even

\textsuperscript{19} Mary Gove Nichols, \textit{Solitary Vice: An Address to Parents and Those Who Have the Care of Children} (Portland, ME: Journal Office, 1839), 16.

\textsuperscript{20} Sylvester Graham, \textit{A Lecture to Young Men} (Providence, RI: Weeden and Cory, 1834), 42.
terminate that existence prematurely” weighed heavily. In a letter to the editor of The Mother’s Assistant, for example, one woman wrote in to decry the grave mismanagement of children at the hands of nurses. She had recently paid a visit to a house with a four-month-old baby whose nurse, “thinking that his ‘mother’s milk was not enough for him, now that he had become so old,’ carried him to the table at meal time, and gave him coffee and tea of the same strength as the family drank, and then, for fear he might suffer by hunger, fed him with high-seasoned meat; and the mother supposing the ‘nurse must know,’ allowed it to be done!” Even well-intentioned nurses, then, could do irreparable damage to unsuspecting infants. Similarly, A. E. Porter wrote, “not a mile from my own door, a poor infant was made blind by the ignorance of its nurse,” and recounted the case of a child “born with a healthy organization, but whose brain was diseased for life by the ignorant officiousness of a neighbor present at its birth. She used a large quantity of rum, a cup full if I remember correctly, upon the head of the child in dressing it for the first time.”

Across the country, nurses’ hands were stained with the blood of innumerable children, to the dismay and grief of countless families. According to Dr. William Potts Dewees, parents’ reliance on nurses had resulted in the deaths of innumerable children—so many, he claimed, that doctors “should be suspected of indulging in hyperbole” if they revealed it. William Alcott, too, peppered his Mother’s Medical Guide with examples of similar blunders by nurses. One common error of nurses, Alcott argued, was to administer “some filthy substance or other” to the

21 James Porter, Letter to the Editor, The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 14 no. 5 (1849): 102.
22 Letter to the Editor, The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 1, no. 3 (March 1841): 55. Emphasis original.
24 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, 139.
Time and again, parental advisers reiterated the dangers of trusting nurses, whose untutored guidance (they claimed) could only serve to bring heartbreak to families.

The tremendous criticism they leveled at nurses mirrored a similar attack against midwives. Though midwives’ education was far different than that of trained physicians (it being based in experience rather than formal training), midwives represented a threat to physicians in terms of the clientele both groups sought. Physicians had a vested interest in cornering the market and hindering their competition. In order to do so, they cast midwives as outdated and ill-informed, a dangerous combination for a mother-to-be.26

Perhaps the harshest claim against midwives came from Dr. Hugh Hodge (1796-1873), forceps inventor and professor of obstetrics at the University of Pennsylvania. Speaking at a ceremony in honor of the late Dr. William Potts Dewees in 1842, Hodge turned his eulogy, in part, into a justification for why midwives were not appropriate attendants in childbirth. As he spoke, Hodge reminded his audience of a dark period, when “the science of Obstetrics was hardly known in America” and a midwife was the only option for a woman seeking a childbirth attendant.27 Calling the midwife an “aged and imbecile nurse,” Hodge went on to describe how dangerous it was for women to give birth in her care.28 “Experience lamentably demonstrated that the attentions of the nurse, however experienced, were unavailing; yea, that the officious interference of ignorant practitioners in a process so wonderful and so abstruse as that of parturition, was too often productive of the most fatal consequences to the child and its mother,

26 See Mohr, Abortion in America.
27 Hugh Hodge, Eulogium on William P. Dewees, M.D. (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1842), 12.
28 Hodge, Eulogium on William P. Dewees, M.D., 12.
thus destroying the comfort and happiness of families.”

The savior of these poor families, Hodge argued, came in the form of Dr. Dewees, who removed childbirth from the hands of “ignorant” midwives and brought it instead into the medical school. Here, educated and learned men could methodically train budding physicians in the art and science of obstetrics. According to Hodge, this development in obstetrics was unequivocally positive, a fact that quickly became known to all. As fewer and fewer women, according to Hodge, were allowed to practice, pregnant women no longer had to rely on this “‘meddlesome midwifery,’ continually doing mischief through their ignorance and rashness.”

Instead, mothers-to-be could turn to trained men, educated in the latest obstetric techniques, and trust that they had made the right choice for themselves and their families. While Hodge’s eulogy provided the most virulent attack on female attendants, his colleagues echoed his sentiments in their writings.

Naturally, it is possible that male physicians were simply prejudiced and did not think that women should be allowed to practice midwifery. There is, however, a more intriguing possibility. As James Mohr and others have argued, by denigrating midwives and casting them as inept, outdated, and possibly dangerous, physicians who were parental advisers hoped to draw business away from their competition, allowing them to profit economically. Furthermore, by focusing on their training and expertise in obstetrics and medical arts, physicians contributed to the professionalization of their ranks.

Even if parents could keep their children safe from intrusive hands that might cause more harm than good, however, there was still the risk that even the information they received from such sources would be tainted. “The kindest of parents, the wisest of guardians, are sometimes

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31 See Mohr, *Abortion in America*. 
sadly perplexed.”32 And how could they not be perplexed, parental advisers seemed to ask? They contended that parents were exposed daily to a wealth of bad information, which could lead to misinformed parenting, which could lead to infant death. In order to quell the flow of this bad information, parental advisers targeted knowledge that was passed from one mother to another, or within families, for generations: folklore. Childrearing wisdom, passed from parent to parent and generation to generation, could be dangerous to children. Such folklore led nurses to shake infants after they were born, to ply them with alcohol, coffee, and tea, and led meddlesome neighbors and friends to suggest questionable remedies for use ‘in just such a case as this.’ This knowledge did not mesh well with the type of professional parenting that parental advisers advocated. Furthermore, because it had withstood the test of time, it was difficult to convince parents to abandon their reliance on folklore. “There are certain feelings of self-sufficiency, and a confidence in the old maxims which have been handed down from mother to daughter, through successive generations, as ‘heir-looms,’ that are difficult to eradicate.”33 In the minds of parental advisers, professional parents needed to abandon their reliance on such sketchy knowledge. They launched an attack on folklore. Here, physicians took the lead, attacking folklore especially as it pertained to the child in utero.

One thing that greatly concerned physicians was a woman’s state of mind during her pregnancy, and how that might affect the fetus. They were particularly concerned with the effect of the mother’s imagination on her unborn child. Popular folklore still held that if a pregnant woman were to become frightened by a snake, for example, that scare would leave an imprint on the child. At the same time that (most) physicians worked to disprove that notion and

32 Morris, Courtship and Matrimony, 436.

33 Letter to the Editor, The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 1, no. 3 (1841): 55.
marginalize those who perpetuated the idea, they also tried to impress upon women the importance of maintaining a tranquil state of mind throughout pregnancy. Women who became too excitable, they warned, risked unintentionally harming their unborn children. While they were much more vague about what sort of harm this was, it is clear that they wanted to differentiate their ideas about a pregnant woman’s state of mind from folkloric beliefs about the power of a pregnant woman’s imagination.

Through their medical treatises, it is clear that physicians struggled to decide what sort of advice to administer with regard to a pregnant woman’s mind. Even as they launched an attack on folklore, they seemed unsure themselves. The folkloric idea that a woman’s imagination could physically affect her child was difficult to counter and widely prevalent. Doctors themselves cited historical examples of this phenomenon. John Eberle, for example, recounted the frequently cited case of a French child born with an iris that looked exactly like the face of a watch for the simple reason that its mother wanted a watch during her pregnancy. John Stockton Hough (1845-1900), sarcastically or not, noted, “we not unfrequently [sic] read of cases in which the female produces offspring resembling a male of whom she may have been enamored but who was not the father of the product.”34 Physicians like Eberle and Hough worked to discount such tales, chalking them up to nothing more than elaborate fabrications propagated by “nurses, and gossiping old women.”35

Yet while some physicians seemed determined not to believe the folklore (and to castigate those who perpetuated it), others were not as convinced. Dr. Caleb Ticknor, for example, took a modified approach. While he was careful to say that he did not necessarily

believe in a woman’s power to mark her child in utero, he nonetheless urged women to avoid agitating their imaginations. Women who believed their imaginations to be capable of marking their children “must sedulously avoid all causes likely to affect their imagination; and if they happen to have been surprised by an unexpected sight, not to allow their minds to dwell upon it, but strive to eradicate the impression made, and substitute another in its place; for the power ought to act both ways; so that if it can mark it ought also to unmark.”

Ticknor opted for a compromise. Instead of flatly denying the possibility of a woman’s power to mark, he simply suggested the idea that if they did possess that power, they also had the power to reverse it. Stephen Tracy, too, had conflicting ideas about the power of the pregnant mind. While he dismissed the notion that a woman’s imagination had the ability to mark her child, he also argued that a woman could mentally impair her child. Anger, jealousy, and other powerful emotions “descend to the infant,” permanently altering the child’s disposition and mental abilities. Not willing to take a clear stand on the power of a woman’s imagination with regard to her unborn child, physicians like Caleb Ticknor and Stephen Tracy found their own ways to work around longstanding folklore.

Still further along the spectrum of belief, other doctors firmly accepted the idea that a woman’s imagination was powerful enough to mark the fetus. In an article entitled “On the Influence of the Maternal Mind,” physician William Hammond began by arguing that if an emotion like fear could cause a child’s heart to race, or that if embarrassment could cause a

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37 Tracy, *The Mother and Her Offspring*, 50. Emphasis original.
maiden to blush, it naturally followed that emotions could cause any number of physical and mental alterations. He pointed out that even though nobody had yet explained exactly why these things took place, it was clear that they did happen. And of the countless examples of newborn infants bearing marks resembling something that had affected their mothers during pregnancy, Hammond argued that they needed to be treated as fact; they were simply too numerous to disregard. 38 Hammond distanced himself from some of his colleagues, then, by opting to believe anecdotes about a woman’s power to mark her unborn child.

Clearly, physicians were divided on the issue of whether or not to accept longstanding folk beliefs about the power of a woman’s imagination. Although they differed on this, they agreed that keeping a woman in a tranquil state of mind during pregnancy was paramount. Here, physicians crafted their own version of folklore, albeit one with a professional stamp of approval. This type of wisdom, they agreed, was appropriate for professional parents to observe. Any mental excitement or anguish, they argued, could adversely affect not only the mother, but also the fetus. William Potts Dewees warned that pregnant women should “scrupulously avoid… all such as shall take her mind by surprise” 39 Caleb Ticknor urged that all “shows, theatrical representations, and excitements on religious subjects should be avoided,” 40 and physician Richard Kissam (1806/08-1861) implored women to avoid not only “disagreeable subjects” and “any duty which requires much effort of the mind,” but also “persons and things that produce disagreeable sensations, not that they will mark your offspring, but that they tend to disturb the

mind.” A woman with a disturbed mind, or whose emotions were out of control, could expect the worst. “Not more than ten months ago,” noted John Eberle, “I witnessed the occurrence of hysteric convulsions followed, in the course of a few hours by abortion, in consequence of a fit of vehement rage from jealousy.”

On the subject of the pregnant mind, physicians executed an intricate dance: some believing certain folk wisdom, others disavowing it, and all contributing to the creation of doctor-approved folklore. It is clear that physicians agreed that maintaining a tranquil state of mind was paramount, and that the effects of not doing so could be fatal. What is not clear is how these men reconciled their belief on this subject with their disbelief (in some cases) on the ability of a woman, through her mind, to adversely affect her unborn child.

Throughout medical advice tracts, the message to pregnant women was clear: physicians considered pregnancy to be fraught with danger. Women who became pregnant put themselves at risk for mental distress and its accompanying dangers and (perhaps worst of all) unreliable sources of information. Any of these, physicians repeatedly warned, could lead to the worst outcome: miscarriage of the child or death of the mother.

As a group, parental advisers took it upon themselves to put in the hands of mothers and fathers good, reliable information. Without it, they worried, “we may hurt where we wish to help—we may kill where we wish to cure. At every step we need better counsel than any instinctive fondness, or childish caprice, or worldly fashion.” Parents, they felt, needed good information in order to parent, and to counter all of the bad information (often folklore) that was

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available to them otherwise. Only certain instruction—certain training—was acceptable, as parental advisers worked to professionalize parenthood. Like other professions, only parents who had received proper training could succeed—not everyone could parent. Parenthood was increasingly being cast as a profession: one which not only required the training and good information provided by parental advisers, but also one which nobody but parents could undertake.

“Committed by Divine Providence”

Parental advisers went to great lengths to impress upon their readers that parents alone were responsible for parenting. This was their great task, appointed to them by God, and not transferable to anybody else. This idea was a direct extension of the high expectations they began to articulate for parents in the 1830s and 1840s. At that time, they had emphasized that parents needed to understand the power they held, to feel the weight of the task at hand. By the 1850s, they also had to instill in parents that in this great task, they were alone. Parental advisers provided parents with reams of advice, stressing the importance of what parents were doing and preparing them for their task, but ultimately it was up to parents. Although parents needed help from professional advisers, nobody could complete this duty for them.

In 1851, an editorial appeared in *The Mother’s Assistant, Young Lady’s Friend and Family Manual* about parental responsibility. The author observed that while others “may have a general concern for the welfare of the young immortal,” none but the parents shouldered “the particular interest in such welfare, reason, revelation and civil enactment.”44 Lest readers fail to fully comprehend whose responsibility this was, the author clarified that this responsibility lay at

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the feet “of every parent—not only of every mother, but of every father and mother.”

Parental advisers insisted that just as a chimney sweep performed certain specific duties in his job, and just as a seamstress executed the tasks particular to her occupation, so too were parents (and parents alone) required to fulfill the obligations of their profession. Mrs. E. B. Marcy elaborated:

In the child is the germ of the man, comparatively tender, beautiful and fair; and in his heart are the soil and seed for a future harvest. In a few years the tree will spread abroad its branches, the fruit will appear, and the effects of the culture will be seen. Who will prune, guard, and keep the valuable plant? Who will nip the buds of error by wholesome restrictions? Who will water, with the gentle dews of love and sympathy, the feeble shoots of goodness? This is the province of the parent.

Though the number of people involved in a child’s life were numerous, and though the parental home was but one stop on a child’s journey to adulthood, parental advisers insisted that parents and families provided for children something which could not be found anywhere else. James Buffum, as noted previously, observed that “families are the first schools in the great discipline of life, that lessons are to be learnt there which can be learnt no where else.”

Rev. Muzzey contended that even institutions whose structure was set up to, in part, mimic that of the family, could not replace true parents. “We have Reform Schools and Farm Schools in this country, and how many other institutions to take the place of parental care and education! These are blessed institutions; they pick up the vagrant boy, and save many a sinking soul. But they cannot, by the utmost vigilance and faithfulness of their overseers and teachers, no, never can they supply

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46 Mrs. E. B. Marcy, “Parental Qualifications,” The Mother's Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) XIXth half-year, no. 2 (1850): 25.

47 Buffum, preface to Hints for the Improvement of Early Education and Nursery Discipline, 4.
perfectly the place of a pure and devoted mother, and a temperate, judicious, and exemplary father.”

Theirs was a station, in short, that no others could fill. While parental advisers recognized that a child had other influences in its life—from teachers to siblings to pastors—they insisted that a mother and a father, together, held the greatest control over their child’s ‘voyage of life.’ Parents could not shrink in the face of this task, nor could parents transfer this responsibility to another—not even, as noted earlier, to stepparents. No one could relieve parents of this burden. According to Artemas Bowers Muzzey,

The labor to be performed is personal; no foreign hand can perform it. We can hire no substitute, we can employ no agent. Here we stand, and here we must work. The influence of the parent is the mightiest on earth, at it must be used,—used every day while his child is beneath his roof,—used early and late, with prayer and with trust. We have other talents which we may misemploy, and recover, in part at least, our loss; but this, if we waste it or let it be idle, involves an irreparable loss.

No ‘foreign hand’ could stand in for parents, and neither could parents cast their responsibilities elsewhere. If parents attempted to pass their duties on to others, the result would be disastrous. Rev. William Thayer wrote of a mother who carefully tended to her treasured rose bush, but neglected her responsibilities to her children, opting instead to let her “irresponsible servants” perform her duties “while she was gadding abroad, or killing time at her toilet.” This mother put her own selfish needs before those of her daughters, casting them instead to the hands of others. “Imprudent mother! Thou wilt rue the day that a rose-bush was tended with a closer watch than the development of a daughter’s moral nature!” Raising children was a task only

48 Muzzey, The Fireside, 36.


50 William Thayer, “A Thought for Mothers,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) (1853 Part I): 120.

51 Thayer, “A Thought for Mothers,” 120.
parents could undertake successfully. Again, while other people in a child’s life may have been interested in the child’s welfare, they were not endowed with the proper equipment that would enable them to parent successfully. Free from the real responsibility of parenting, how could servants or others be trusted to do it well? None but parents could parent properly. “When parents give this duty, or privilege perhaps I should say, up to their pastor or teacher, they afford them an opportunity to secure their children’s best affections. But what reason have they to think that another will be faithful with them, if they are not? God has imposed responsibilities upon parents which they cannot transfer to another, if they would; and it would not be for their interest to do so, if they could.”

Mrs. Howe’s observation that God imposed child-rearing responsibilities on parents was not unique. Rather, the idea that God gave parents, and nobody else, this responsibility was prevalent among parental advisers. At the outset of The Parent’s Friend, Rev. Daniel Smith noted that his reason for writing the book was that “while performing his pastoral visits,” he “often felt the need of something to put into the hands of parents, which would remind them of their responsibilities and duties in relation to those immortal souls committed by divine Providence to their care.” Parental responsibilities were “the holiest responsibilities,” bestowed specifically upon parents by God. Even the home was sanctified by parental advisers, who saw it not as a “voluntary compact, but an express and specific ordinance and power of God.”

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52 Mrs. I. A. G. Howe, “Formation of Character,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) (May 1850): 103.
54 Bushnell, Christian Nurture, 255.
notion that parenting was ordained by God served to further emphasize the idea that parents were to be the only entity involved in parenting.

Parental advisers who were physicians also agreed that parenting was a divinely ordained duty. In particular, they used this language to emphasize that it was “a duty incumbent upon every mother to nourish her own infant.”56 This was a task that no foreign breast could perform. According to William Potts Dewees, this duty was ordained by God, who “has given her double means to furnish nourishment for her helpless young… and he has so arranged their powers as to yield the wanted supply, as soon as that supply may be necessary.”57 John Eberle also considered breastfeeding to be a religious mandate, saying that a woman’s “sacred office” is an “irremissible duty, which can never be neglected or put off, without contravening the wise and benevolent arrangements of Providence.”58 Rather than focusing on the medical benefits of nursing, physicians instead cast opinions of a moral nature. Perhaps because they saw it as a moral duty, grounded in religion, physicians were exceedingly sharp-tongued towards those women who voluntarily shirked their “sacred duty” of breastfeeding their own children. According to Dr. William Alcott, for example, women who shirked their duty to nurse their own children were “unnatural,” “unchristian,” and even “savage.”59 He argued, “there are some mothers who seem to have a perfect hatred of children; and if they can find any plausible apology for neglecting to

57 Dewees, *Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children*, 52.
nurse them, they will.”⁶⁰ According to these men, a woman who delegated the nursing of her child to another was nothing short of a monster.⁶¹

Only if a woman was utterly unable to breastfeed—a “very rare occurrence,” according to Dr. David Condie—should a suitable wet nurse be summoned.⁶² Like parenting itself, the nourishment of infants was a task that nobody else could fill. While physicians held nursing women to high standards (and chastised them when they fell short), the standards they reserved for wet nurses were even more stringent. An acceptable wet nurse had to meet exacting physical standards: because she would be nursing the child and providing its sole nourishment, her health was of utmost importance. In Condie’s opinion, an ideal nurse should be “in the prime of life; between twenty and thirty years… Her breasts should be full, firm, and well formed, the nipples sufficiently salient, and yielding the milk upon the slightest pressure.”⁶³ Dr. James Stewart agreed, noting that “the best nurses are those who possess all the evidences of good health. The tongue clean, teeth and gums sound, indicating healthy digestion. The breath free from any unpleasant odor. The surface of her body free from eruptions, and the insensible perspiration inoffensive. Her breasts smooth, firm, and prominent; the nipples well developed, rosy colored, 

⁶⁰ Alcott, _The Young Mother_, 117.

⁶¹ Breastfeeding and wet nursing have gone in and out of fashion over time. Paula Treckel argues that in eighteenth-century England and America, breastfeeding immediately after birth was presumed to be dangerous for both mother and child. Women who could afford it were more likely to utilize the services of a wet nurse. Not until the late 1700s was “the custom of maternal nursing adopted.” Paula Treckel, “Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America,” _Journal of Interdisciplinary History_ 20, no. 1 (Summer, 1989): 27. Yet Janet Golden notes that Cotton Mather, in 1710, castigated women who did not breastfeed their children. She highlights, though, “the breach between cultural prescription and biological need” in Mather’s life: at least one of Mather’s children was nourished by a wet nurse. Janet Golden, _A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle_ (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 11. Valerie Fildes corroborates this argument, noting that while mothers were urged to breastfeed their own children, “by the eighteenth century, breast milk was the most common commodity advertized [sic] in colonial newspapers.” Valerie Fildes, _Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present_ (Oxford: Basil Blackwater Ltd., 1988), 130.

⁶² Condie, _A Practical Treatise on the Diseases of Children_, 29.

⁶³ Condie, _A Practical Treatise on the Diseases of Children_, 34.
and easily swelling when excited.”64 A healthy appearance was vital. Nurses who fell short could harm nursing infants. According to Eberle, “a nurse who has but one good breast should never be selected. A child suckled by one breast only, is apt to contract the habit of squinting, from having its eyes constantly directed to one side; and there is also some risk of its head and shoulders acquiring an oblique or crooked form.”65 Exact who was to perform the examinations to test these various physical requirements, doctors did not say. They were certain, however, that if a family had no recourse but to find a wet nurse, that woman had to possess very specific physical characteristics.

In addition to these physical requirements, physicians insisted that wet nurses needed to be mentally and morally fit. While it would be hazardous to choose a wet nurse with only one good breast, it was equally dangerous to choose one who was ill-tempered or immoral. Physicians agreed that cantankerous and debauched women—even those who had reformed themselves—were to be avoided at all costs. The great danger, according to physicians, was that a wet nurse’s mental and moral condition affected the quality of her milk. Anxiety, mental distress, or a bad disposition could contaminate a wet nurse’s milk and harm the nursing child. Yet the greatest danger associated with using a wet nurse, doctors warned, was the likelihood that she would abandon her new charge in favor of nourishing her own child. Physicians were so convinced of this probability that they urged parents not to send their children out to suckle, and instead require the wet nurse to work from their own home. That way, they could keep a close eye on her. Even removing the danger that their own child would be neglected, though, posed a problem. Dewees pointed out that if a wet nurse paid utmost attention to her new charge, her own


child would then suffer. “The avowed object in employing a wet-nurse is to benefit the child for whom she is employed. To do this she must generally abandon her own child, either to a mercenary as selfish as herself, or allow it to be brought up by ill-conducted or worse adapted means; for the mother who abandons her own child to suckle that of another must do it from the expectation of gain…”⁶⁶ Thus, while it might be possible (however unlikely) to find a wet nurse who met all the qualifications outlined by physicians, wet nursing itself presented an insurmountable problem: either the wet nurse had to neglect her own child, or she had to neglect her new charge.⁶⁷ According to physicians, both were unpardonable. In this regard, they reiterated and upheld parental advisers’ arguments against relying on nurses.

Just as parental advisers impressed upon parents the idea that their task was a sacred responsibility, to be undertaken by parents alone (and if not, only under the most dire circumstances), they also advocated the idea that parenting and the family itself were not to be tampered with. Into the family, John S. C. Abbott argued, the “arm of the state cannot be thrust.”⁶⁸ At least, the arm of the state could not penetrate the family without doing some damage. “Man may revolutionize governments and public opinion, and even the social state, but,” argued Rev. William Barnes, “he cannot touch the household without harm.”⁶⁹ Neither could man nor government attempt to take on parenting responsibilities to which they had no right. Again, such responsibilities had been ordained by God to parents specifically. Heman Humphrey (clergyman, 1779-1861) noted, “it would be impossible for any government in the


⁶⁷ Dewees articulated only one instance in which wet nursing could be acceptable: if a wet nurse were to be unmarried (so that she need not neglect her husband) and were to lose her child. He went on, though, to point out that this might lead to women purposefully neglecting their children to the point of death, and ultimately reinforced his idea that wet nurses were bad and women should nurse their own children.


world, to take upon itself parental authority and discharge parental duties; and if it were possible, such an innovation would soon derange and destroy the whole system.”

Some parental advisers, however, warned that the country was already seeing the results of this subversion of parental authority and responsibility. Rev. J. C. Webster, for example, argued that “God made the family before the community. He constituted domestic before he did public society. Such was the order of nature as well of time. … The family was at once the germ and the pattern of what general society ought to be.” Yet, he lamented, times had changed. “The family is not the isolated institution, the sacred enclosure it was designed to be, and which it has been in some former times.” Society had invaded and perverted family government, resulting in an “unnatural state of society.” In this unnatural state, he observed, the child

is torn away and placed beyond the control of the parent in the flood of popular opinion. Where as, in the order of nature, and according to divine teaching, society has no right to the child, till, after his natural detention and parental training, he is voluntarily yielded up, like the little rivulet, to go trickling down the hill-side to keep the large streams of popular influence at their proper level and within their banks, so as to fertilize and not deluge the land.

Time and again, parental advisers maintained that parents held a distinct responsibility, one that no other person or entity could fill. Parents, they insisted, were the only entities capable of parenting. Here, they aimed at professionalizing parenting. Other occupations required training and adherence to strict standards. Likewise, only certain people, with particular training, could attempt the great task of childrearing. In this regard, these two professions—parents and

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70 Heman Humphrey, *Domestic Education* (Amherst: J.S. & C. Adams, 1840), 17.

71 J. C. Webster, “The Family and the Public,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) (1854 Part II): 75.

72 Webster, “The Family and the Public,” 75.

73 Webster, “The Family and the Public,” 77.

74 Webster, “The Family and the Public,” 77. Emphasis original.
parental advisers—were mutually supported. They grew up together. Parental advisers derived their expertise and their status from the parents they trained, and vice versa.

“Proper Attendants”

Yet for all their talk of parenting being sacred and inviolable, they reserved a special stipulation for themselves. They, parental advisers, were allowed to permeate and penetrate parenting and family. Their guidance was an intrusion. Perhaps the most illustrative examples of this come from physicians, who believed children would die without their expert interference, and jurists, whose decisions in custody battles determined which parents (if any) were worthy to raise their own children.

Because of the risks associated with parenting—which they took to mean pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing—physicians insisted that families seek professional advice. Not from ‘ignorant nurses’ and ‘meddlesome midwifery,’ though, but from trained physicians. Doctors established themselves as professionals whose advice could be trusted. Through the advice they gave, and the manner in which they presented themselves, they asserted power over issues of life and death, and led parents to believe that “careful nurturing could ensure the well-being” of their children.75

In order for parents to become parents in the first place, they needed to have on hand a judicious and properly educated (male) attendant; female practitioners were unacceptable. Echoing their attack on midwives, physicians insisted that theirs was the only acceptable interference. William Potts Dewees reassured his readers that “death, or even an untoward accident, is of extremely rare occurrence, when the case is under the direction of a judicious

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practitioner.” Likewise, Stephen Tracy urged women to understand the importance of securing “proper attendants,” and went on to compare the duties of such a “skillful accoucheur” to that of a ship pilot. Both the accoucheur and the pilot needed a skilled and decisive hand in order to guide their charges safely through any dangers. During childbirth, he noted, “at almost any period during the progress of labor, events may occur calling for immediate interference, and such interference as none but a well-educated and qualified medical attendant can afford. A delay of five minutes, or even of one minute, in some cases, may prove fatal.” As with their advice administered to women regarding pregnancy, physicians were careful to warn that the risk of not securing an appropriately trained physician could well be deadly to mother, child, or both.

Not only did the proper attendant need to be educated and skillful, but the proper attendant also needed to be a man. After repeatedly referring to the “qualified medical attendant” with masculine pronouns, Stephen Tracy acknowledged that a woman could serve in this capacity, but then narrowed that field significantly by arguing that such a woman would need to possess (appropriately vague) “physical and mental characteristics” and would likewise need to be “properly educated.” Dr. Tullio Verdi (1829-1902) took a different approach when making the case against female attendants, arguing that the fact that they were unnecessary was really due to the whims of American women. American women, he claimed, “prefer a male accoucheur to a female. They feel safer in his hands: they rely not only upon his superior knowledge, but upon his courage. They feel he would not flinch before duty, and would assume the greatest

76 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, 42.
77 Tracy, The Mother and Her Offspring, 62. Emphasis original.
78 Tracy, The Mother and Her Offspring, 64.
79 Tracy, The Mother and Her Offspring, 66. Emphasis original.
80 Tracy, The Mother and Her Offspring, 67. Emphasis original.
responsibility to save life. …I know of many cases where the female accoucheur, getting frightened, deserted her patient at the moment she was most needed.”\textsuperscript{81} Regardless of whether or not Verdi’s claims were accurate, it is clear through their writings that physicians assumed and preferred male attendants in childbirth. Furthermore, by advocating that midwifery be wrenched from the hands of female midwives (whose training lay in experience, not schooling), they helped to professionalize their own occupation.\textsuperscript{82}

Physicians agreed that parents were the only entity capable of parenting (which they took to mean pregnancy onward) with one large caveat: in order to be successful, parents needed the aid of trained (male) attendants. This caveat, through, was not limited to medical ranks. After all, success in parenting was determined by parental advisers themselves. Nowhere was this clearer than in courtrooms, where justices determined who was ‘capable’ and who was not. Three custody cases from this period—\textit{Wand v. Wand} (1860), \textit{Adams v. Adams} (1864), and \textit{Cole v. Cole} (1867)—illustrate a key way in which justices determined custody: based on the interest of society. Here, parental advisers on the bench claimed that in addition to parents, society had a vested interest in a child’s future.

Claiming “extreme cruelty on his part,” a Mrs. Wand filed for divorce from her husband, which the Sixth District Court of California granted, though they gave custody of her daughter to her estranged husband. In her appeal to the California Supreme Court, her lawyer argued that after a divorce in which a marriage “is dissolved for [a husband’s] wrongful act,” the wife is entitled to the “society, care, and custody” of their children.\textsuperscript{83} His lawyer, in turn, argued that a

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  \item \textsuperscript{81} Tullio Verdi, \textit{Maternity: A Popular Treatise for Young Wives and Mothers} (New York: J.B. Ford & Co., 1870), 131.
  \item \textsuperscript{82} See Mohr, \textit{Abortion in America}; Borst, \textit{Catching Babies}.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} \textit{Wand v. Wand}, 14 Cal. 512 (1860).
\end{itemize}
father is always entitled to the custody of his children, regardless of any wrongdoing, and even in cases in which both parents are “equally worthy, or equally unworthy.”84 The court disagreed. In rendering their decision, the justices turned to legal scholar Joel Prentiss Bishop, from whose Commentaries on the Law of Marriage and Divorce they quoted liberally. Bishop argued that “children are not born for the benefit of the parents alone, but for the country; and, therefore, that the interests of the public in their morals and education should be protected.”85 In this instance, the court argued that the mother was more qualified to care for the child, given that the father would not have enough time to do so himself.86 What is more noteworthy, in terms of the construction of parenthood, is that the justices grounded their reasoning in the “interests of the public” and “the country.” Parents, they claimed, were not the only ones with a stake in childrearing. Their argument here was not unique to this case.

Unhappy in her marriage to John Adams, Mary Ann Adams took her son with her to live at her father’s house and filed for divorce and custody in 1855. Her husband abducted the child, but the court ordered the boy returned to his mother pending a trial. Eight years after she filed, the court granted Mrs. Adams both divorce and custody, which Mr. Adams subsequently appealed. In rendering his opinion, Justice Robertson observed that courts determining custody needed to ensure that custody be granted “to the parent most trustworthy and capable,” and noted that if neither parent was found suitable, “the interest of the child and of the public may authorize a transfer of the custody to a stranger.”87 In this case, Robertson determined Mary Ann Adams

84 Wand, 14 Cal. 512.

85 Wand, 14 Cal. 512. Emphasis added.

86 As with the decision in State v. Hand, the court was uncomfortable with the fact that Mr. Wand would not be raising his child himself. Because his occupation would keep him from doing so, he would need to “confide her person to some female to care for and keep her.” Wand, 14 Cal. 512.

“well qualified for the trust confided to her,” while John Adams was not as qualified, “or, in the more essential elements, qualified at all.” Adams demonstrates the extent to which parental advisers penetrated the sacred realm of parenthood—determining who was capable and who was not. More importantly, as in Wand, the court articulated that the public had an interest in what happened to children. The following case reveals that, as they had developed a “best interests of the child” doctrine, the courts articulated a doctrine protecting the “best interests of society.”

Martha Cole, unhappy married to a man she claimed was guilty of “inhuman treatment,” filed for divorce and custody of their 13-year-old son, both of which were granted. Mr. Cole subsequently appealed. In rendering his decision, Justice Wright noted that “the command of our law” demanded that his decision with regard to custody satisfy the “best interests of society” by considering the welfare of the child. Wright admitted that his decision was not reached easily—the son, at thirteen, “is of the age to demand the care, discipline and instruction of the father.” Yet, as the court pointed out, the father had proven that he was incapable of being a good parent: he was “addicted to the use of intoxicating drinks,” “profane,” “vulgar,” with a “violent and ungovernable temper.” Perhaps worst of all, Mr. Cole “at one time, at least, took this boy to a saloon and asked him to drink.” While the boy’s age demanded the presence of a father, and although Martha Cole was (because of a debilitating illness) an invalid, Justice Wright granted custody to the mother. The best interests of society demanded it.

88 Adams, 1 Duv. 167.
89 Cole v. Cole, 23 Iowa 433 (1867).
90 Cole, 23 Iowa 433. Emphasis added.
91 Cole, 23 Iowa 433.
92 Cole, 23 Iowa 433.
93 Cole, 23 Iowa 433.
In determining parental capability, parental advisers on the bench articulated a tenet that made them a key part of parenting: society and the country had an interest in childrearing. Therefore, their intrusion into parenting was necessary. This argument would be expanded in the following decades, as greater numbers of parental advisers began to agree that the effects of parenting reached far beyond the home, giving the country a stake in its outcome.

Across the board, parental advisers inserted themselves into the family and into parenting. Although they cast parenting as sacrosanct, to be undertaken by parents alone, they exempted themselves. Through their work, they attempted to push past the garden gate and penetrate hearth and home. They cast themselves as indispensable aids to parenting. For most parental advisers, this was their collective reason for writing: to make a living. Capitalizing on new middle-class standards of parenting, which they helped to construct, they established themselves as integral parts of that parenting. Yet in this regard, they found competition in the form of public schools. If parents were to be the only ones involved in raising children, what did that mean for the fledgling public school system?

“Hot-Beds of Moral Evil”

According to scholar B. Edward McClellan, the social upheaval caused by westward expansion, the decline of the family economy, and the weakening of familial authority pushed Americans to take the training of children more seriously. While community-controlled schools certainly dotted the American landscape in the early nineteenth century, a centralized system of mandatory schooling had not yet been realized. In these early decades, though, reformers like Horace Mann (1796-1859), William Seward (1801-1872) and others began to agitate for longer school days and lengthier school terms, graded schools, professionally trained

teachers, and more. These men believed that children could benefit from the more standardized common schools that arose in mid-century.95

Not all, however, were convinced that schools could provide an acceptable alternative to educating children at home. In an article entitled “Home Education,” Abby B. Hyde wrote that “the sorrowful fact that masses of children thrown together, inevitably exert a corrupting influence upon each other… so that our schools are, to some extent, hot-beds of moral evil, has rendered the question one of very grave import to parents, whether there be any method of securing their advantages without incurring their dangers…” 96 Many parental advisers agreed with Hyde, noting that the influences found in schools were not good for children. “In the school-room,” observed Rev. Orin Howard, “the prevailing influences are ambition, ridicule and terror.”97 Rev. Daniel Smith argued that “in most public schools there is a danger of improper associations; and moral and social training is very imperfect. The proper school is home; the proper teacher, the parent; the proper company, the family circle.”98 And Bishop Elliot, of Georgia, decried the fact that schools paid too much attention to the acquisition of knowledge without considering “the poison that our children may be drinking in—the poison of immorality, of licentiousness, of infidelity.”99 Still others wondered whether school was teaching children what they needed to learn. In the article “School Learning,” for example, Mrs. Helen Knight

96 Abby B. Hyde, “Home Education,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 9 (September 1846): 33.
97 Orin R. Howard, “The Mother, an Educator,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) (November 1849): 98.
98 Smith, The Parent’s Friend, 42.
wondered what would become of girls who learned French and Geometry rather than how to bake and sew. She asked, “does it not seem as if school education was assuming an undue importance? Are not the girls of the family drawn too long and too much away from home influence, and domestic duties? Are not the wishes and the requirements of the parent made almost entirely subservient to the demands of the teacher? … This, we cannot but regard as a serious and increasing evil.”100 Rather than viewing schools as a virtue, these and other parental advisers saw schools as, at best, an impediment to children (who would not learn the skills they really needed in life) and, at worst, a grave danger in the poison they spewed.

Furthermore, schools could also impart physical or mental harm on children. Dr. Stephen Tracy urged parents that “the greatest care should be taken that they [children] do not have too much exercise of the mind by study or by reading, not only till after the age of twelve, but until the physical system has attained its growth.”101 Dr. S. B. Woodward, too, warned that children in school should not be required to focus too intensely on one subject at a time, as that “leads directly to disease of the brain.”102 Schools, he argued, pay too much attention to mental and moral improvement without considering the effects on children’s health. Dr. James Jackson agreed, noting that the manner in which children are often “confined” to schools—indoors and sitting upright—can have a deleterious effect on their health. Young children, he argued, “much like young colts, calves, and lambs, are disposed to short, active gambols, and then to lie down, or otherwise to take short rests,” as they “cannot maintain a purpose a long time, nor an effort a

100 Helen C. Knight, “School Learning,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 14, no. 1 (January 1849): 10.

101 Tracy, The Mother and Her Offspring, 276.

102 S. B. Woodward, “Treatment of Children at School,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 7, no. 4 (October 1845): 78.
long time, without fatigue.”¹⁰³ In order to avoid the “evils… produced by too long confinement,” Jackson recommended that children in school should be taught short lessons for an hour, followed by a fifteen minute recess, another hour of short lessons, and so on.

With so little to recommend them, and indeed with so much danger therein, parental advisers wondered that parents ever bothered to send their children to public schools in the first place. It seemed a much better idea to educate children at home, where (ideally) the influences were pure and the dangers none. Dr. William Alcott, for example, extolled the virtues of what he called “the family school.” Alcott remarked that schools are physically uncomfortable to children, are barely furnished, and are boring to children. The family school, he argued, is well furnished, inviting, and seldom boring. Furthermore, he pointed out, in the family school there is a more even ratio of students to teachers. “Some of our schools are crowded almost to suffocation with pupils, while they are but poorly supplied with teachers. Sixty, eighty, or a hundred of the former to one of the latter, and only a single room, of moderate size, are quite common. With the family school, of course, it is otherwise. The number of pupils is never large; and there are, from the nature of the case, usually two teachers.” Truly, he insisted, “there is no school like the Family School.”¹⁰⁴ Charles Holden agreed that the home was much more preferable to the schoolhouse for learning, both in terms of physical comfort and in terms of instruction. “Where is the school to be found—(with only its long benches, and its pupils placed upright upon them, except when they are taken out to puzzle over their letters, or be punished for some childish freak)—like the school-house at home, with the tender mother as the mistress,

¹⁰³ James Jackson, “Confinement of Children in School,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 7, no. 1 (July 1845): 7.

¹⁰⁴ William A. Alcott, “There is No School Like the Family School,” The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend (Boston) 3, no. 1 (January 1846): 1. Emphasis original.
whom the little scholars may question and confide in?”\textsuperscript{105} At every turn, how could schools compete with the family school? In particular, parental advisers hammered home, the school could not rival the home when it came to teachers. As Rev. Artemas Bowers Muzzey noted, “multiply as we may other instructors, they cannot, either or all of them, supply the place of those natural teachers, the father and the mother…. The attempt to substitute any teacher, guardian, or friend for the parent, to put public in the place of private and domestic education, ever has been, and ever will be, disastrous to the young.”\textsuperscript{106}

Nor was Muzzey alone in thinking that public schooling would be terrible for children. In an article entitled “The Home School,” Rev. George Stearns proved just how disastrous public education could be. Stearns, it seemed, had personal experience with the American common school system and its flaws. Observing that his daughters were not learning anything in school, Stearns pulled them out and endeavored to teach them himself. For the first couple days of this experiment, however, his daughters “were listless and uninterested. They had contracted habits of carelessness, which seemed almost impossible to shake off. They appeared only desirous of passing away the time, and felt no anxiety to learn.”\textsuperscript{107} Stearns was determined to penetrate this crust of disinterest, formed by the failings of the common school. After several days of teaching them himself, Stearns was pleased to find that his daughters’ desire to learn had been reawakened. As to why public schools were so deficient in the first place, Stearns pointed to three reasons. Two were obvious reasons: unsatisfactory teachers (too old, too young, or in it for the wrong reason) employing poor methods of teaching that did not force children to think for

\textsuperscript{105} Charles Holden, “The Family School,” \textit{The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend} (Boston) 3, no. 2 (November 1843): 248.

\textsuperscript{106} Muzzey, \textit{The Christian Parent}, 28.

\textsuperscript{107} George Stearns, “The Home School,” \textit{The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend} (Boston) 10, no. 5 (May 1847): 113.
themselves. The third, however, was more covert: the parent, who “acts as though his responsibility had ceased after seeing that a school is opened and his child is placed there.” Stearns argued that such a parent does not send his children to school in order for them to learn, but rather “to get them out of the way.” Stearns, then, found fault not only with the schools themselves, but more importantly with those who availed themselves of public schools. Far better, according to him, for parents to direct their children’s education themselves, thereby ensuring that parents would not shirk their duties and that they would have greater control over how and what their children were taught.

In this regard, Stearns pointed to what parental advisers saw as the greatest danger of public schools: the opportunity for parents to shirk their duties. It had already happened, argued Rev. Albert Barnes (1798-1870), in the case of Sunday schools. Believing that it absolved them of any obligation, Barnes noted, parents had exploited the Sunday-school system, leaving the system “misunderstood, abused, and perverted.” So too, he claimed, would they exploit the common-school system. Barnes argued that if common schools did not exist, a parent would feel obligated to educate his children on his own. “But the public has provided a teacher better qualified than himself, and he feels that the work can be better done than he could perform it. He dismisses his child, therefore, from his door, with the not unnatural feeling that his wishes in this respect are gratified, and that his responsibility is discharged.”

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111 Barnes, Christianity as Applied to the Mind of a Child, 30.
children to be raised, in part, by someone else. They would shirk their duties if another entity—the school—would raise their children for them, for at least part of the day. In the minds of such parents, when children are sent to school “their instruction is considered the business of the teacher; and it seems hardly to enter the minds of the parents that they have any thing to do in the matter. The polishing of the priceless gem is committed to hands comparatively uninterested in the result of the labor bestowed; while those to whom the treasure appertains, content themselves with the care of its perishable casket.”

To the horror of Barnes and others, such parents willingly and willfully cast aside their God-given responsibilities, preferring instead to lay them at the feet of someone else. They eagerly wait for any opportunity to relieve their burden of childrearing. The common school, these parental advisers argued, provided just such an opportunity.

Many, it is feared, think that when the school is once put in operation their work is done. They are anxious to reside near the school-room, they exert themselves to procure a teacher, and perhaps take a warm interest in the election of the school committee; but when the school begins, and they send their children supplied with books, all their solicitude suddenly departs. They remind one of the good deacon, who said that when his own minister was preaching he fell asleep, for he knew then that everything would go on well.

It seemed that the case against common schools was great. Not only were they themselves corrupting and unwelcoming to children but, more importantly, they were vehicles for parental neglect. What was the response, though, of those committed to the cause of public education? In the face of such criticism, educational reformers such as Horace Mann and Amos Bronson Alcott, for example, saw much good in common schools. Mann argued that common schools were a public good, even a necessity, rather than a danger or a threat. To those who would ask,

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112 Abby B. Hyde, “Parental Education,” *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston) 10, no. 2 (February 1847): 33.

“What interest have I in the education of the multitude?” Horace Mann responded, “you have at least this interest, that, unless their minds are enlightened by knowledge and controlled by virtuous principle, there is not, between their appetites and all you hold dear on earth, so much as the defence [sic] of a spider’s web.”¹¹⁴ For the survival of the republic, as well as of self interests, then, universal education through common schools was not only desirous but imperative. Like Mann, Alcott saw the positive good of common schools, and indeed felt that parents ought to do more to improve their children’s desire for education. Children, he argued, are disinclined to like school, and parents do little at home to stimulate their minds. “Children are sent to school, depraved by parental neglect, and require corrective management. Their intellectual being is morbid and inert. It needs resuscitation. Degrading habits are superinduced; and an internal change is necessary to break through the outward incrustations, and send the renovating influence through the mental principle.”¹¹⁵ Instead of viewing parents as a positive force, Alcott argued that parents hindered the education of their children. They took no interest in it and, it seemed, merely sent them to school to get them out of the way. In this regard, Alcott and his critics at least agreed on one thing: parents, if given the chance, would cast their duties off to someone else.

Alcott continued to lament parental involvement in common school education in his reports as superintendent of schools in Concord, Massachusetts (a position he held from 1859-1865). In his report ending the school year of 1860, Alcott bemoaned the fact that so few parents took the time to visit their children’s school. Such parents, he argued, forfeited the ability to complain about the school or the management of their children therein. He continued to deplore

¹¹⁴ Horace Mann, Lectures on Education (Boston: Wm. B. Fowle and N. Capen, 1845), 171-172.

parents’ involvement in his report the following year, noting “The school stands nearest the family of all our institutions, is indeed an extension and image of it, and claims its fostering interest and sympathy. It should enlist the parents’ affection, and get some of their freshest hours. Its teachers deserve to be taken into their hearts as friends, the friends of their children, and their assistants in the work of training them in the ways of learning and virtue.”\textsuperscript{116} Yet parental negligence, he argued, prevented this from happening.\textsuperscript{117}

**Summary**

Over the course of the nineteenth century, parental advisers increasingly saw parenthood as a profession. Because parents were raising children in a fraught and perilous world they required good information in order to combat detrimental influences and bad advice (however well-intentioned). And because parenthood was becoming professionalized, only certain (trained, qualified) people could undertake it successfully. Not all who sought to be good parents would meet the requirements. Furthermore, if other people or entities (such as schools) tried to parent, disaster for family and society was inevitable. That said, parental advisers considered themselves instrumental actors in the parenting profession, enabling them to reap a profit as long as they kept parents convinced of their need for advice. At the same time as they were building their empire of advice, though, public schools were on the rise. While opponents of common schools found them to be bastions of moral evil, and others worried that parents would use the common school system to shirk their own duties, proponents of universal education like Amos Bronson


\textsuperscript{117} Even Alcott’s school committee observed and lamented parental neglect. In 1862, a rule had to be instated that said that any pupil found to be frequenting a “saloon or bowling alley” would be expelled. They noted, a “greater watchfulness on the part of parents will make this rule almost useless, but the necessity for it is obvious.” In “Reports of the School Committee, and Superintendent of the Schools, of the Town of Concord, Mass.,” reprinted in Harding, *Essays on Education, 1830-1862, by Amos Bronson Alcott*, 234.
Alcott and Horace Mann insisted that common schools were necessary and good. With a wary eye, parental advisers looked to the future of the parenting profession, and to shaping future generations. In the coming decades, they began to believe in an even more restrictive parenthood than previously, arguing ultimately that only certain people should be allowed to become parents in the first place.
This Community, in which ‘special love’ was reckoned a sin and breadth of sexual experiment the desideratum, offered opportunity for an experiment in eugenics on a scale never before attempted in the history of the world. John Humphrey Noyes seized that opportunity.

—Pierrepont Noyes, *My Father’s House*¹

Pierrepont Noyes (1870-1959) was born at the Oneida community in 1870 to a woman who was not his father’s wife. Not that this was unusual at Oneida; rather, it was acceptable and even encouraged. Harriet Worden (1840-1891) was raised at the Oneida community as a girl, and was later selected by John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1886) to join with him in his stirpiculture experiment in which only certain people were allowed to procreate. The resulting child was Pierrepont Noyes. Worden, then, knew life at Oneida as a child, an adult, and a mother. She experienced first-hand the complex familial inner workings of Oneida communal life. When she became a mother, her contact with her son was strictly limited, as it was for all Oneida mothers, to ensure that they did not show favoritism over other children. Everything at Oneida was held communally, including its sons and daughters.

The messages about communal parenting came early and often for those in the community. Worden’s experience as a child signaled important principles about parenting in this ideologically-shaped family. She wrote in her memoirs of a time when the community purchased for the Oneida girls a large number of dolls “to be shared by all of us—‘Community dolls,’—as we used to call them.”² The girls each became quite attached to their dolls, and the Oneida elders recognized their favoritism. The elders condemned the dolls, “as the means of cultivating

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² Harriet Worden, *Old Mansion House Memories: By One Brought up in It* (Kenwood, Oneida, NY, 1950), 80.
Their solution was to rid the community of the dolls, by having each girl cast her doll into a fire. Worden remembered, “we all formed a circle round the large stove, each girl carrying on her arm her long-cherished favorite, and marched in time to a song; as we came opposite the stove-door, we threw our dolls into the angry-looking flames, and saw them perish before our eyes. We were all hearty and enthusiastic in making the sacrifice, and yet it was some time before we could think of this wholesale slaughter without a slight emotion.”

When Harriet’s real child was born, years after she’d cast her beloved doll into the fire, community leaders similarly admonished her not to become too attached to him. Since the early nineteenth century, social observers and commentators—parental advisers, as I have described them—had debated and shaped what parenthood was or should be. Their ideal of parenthood, crafted over the course of the century, emphasized devotion, duty, love, control, and the importance of the unique connection between parents and children. The Oneida vision of parenthood—detached, aloof, and communal—contradicted the type of parenthood parental advisers advocated and that had emerged, by the 1870s, as the model for the middle-class family. Yet one aspect of Oneida parenthood—stirpiculture—would resonate with parental advisers by the time of Pierrepont’s birth in 1870.

As mid-century gave way to the postbellum period, and as some parental advisers became increasingly alarmed by what they saw as the decline of society, their ideas about parenthood became even more codified and restrictive. What alarmed them was the preponderance of what they believed were heritable diseases such as scrofula and heritable tendencies such as insanity.

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and crime, both of which they saw as a scourge upon society. They found both the problem and the solution in parenthood. Where earlier advisers once argued that parenting needed to be taught, by the 1860s many advisers placed greater emphasis on an even more restrictive parenthood: perfect parents creating ideal children. They believed that society could be spared from such debilitating ailments if parenthood were so limited. Ultimately they argued that only the best should be allowed to breed. On this point, Noyes and parental advisers were of the same mind. In the hands of parental advisers, parenthood became conceived as a privilege limited to the few, not a right extended to all. In their minds, the fate of the future was at stake, as they advocated a purposeful parenthood that held the solution.

At first glance, this chapter finds parental advisers in a place far from where their predecessors began. Where early parental advisers had focused on providing advice to mothers and fathers, parental advisers of the late nineteenth century sought to restrict parenting to none but the best. Such a black and white comparison, however, fails to capture the nuanced and complicated path parental advisers as a group took during the nineteenth century to pin down appropriate parenthood. In fact, the arc of their views over the course of the century represents an increasingly tighter definition of what appropriate parenthood looked like, beginning with how-to advice and culminating in calls for restricting parenthood. Viewed in this way, the opinions they expressed in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s represent a natural culmination of parental advisers’ work over the course of the century: increasingly narrowing the definition of a “good” parent—of who could parent. In this regard, their ideas near the end of the century mirrored much of what John Humphrey Noyes was attempting at Oneida: controlled human breeding.
A “Stream of Human Depravity”

In *Crime and the Family*, published in 1876, jurist Simeon Nash (1804-1879) noted the widespread tendency for criminality in American society and wondered how it came to be. In his capacity as a judge in Ohio, Nash had sentenced a number of wayward boys, leading him to speculate on the genesis of criminality. Criminals, he observed, “were once innocent babes, drawing their life from a mother’s breast. They were once in the family, and have come forth from it, not to adorn and bless, but to prey upon society. By whose fault and neglect does this take place? And how can it be prevented, if prevented it can be?”

Nash was certainly not alone in believing there was a preponderance of criminals in the late nineteenth century, nor was he alone in searching for the cause. He, and others like him, represented the later generation of nineteenth-century parental advisers: those who took a more radical approach to parental advice than their predecessors. In earlier iterations, their focus had been establishing themselves as people whose advice about parenthood could be trusted. They aimed to teach parents how to parent. Their painstaking work reflected the assumption not only that there was a ‘right’ way and a ‘wrong’ way to parent, but also that the ‘right’ way could be learned. In their hands, good parenthood could, in theory, be extended to all. Now, nearing the end of the century, their voices changed and their tone reached a fever pitch. The parental advisers of the 1870s and 1880s—primarily, though not entirely, men of medicine—focused not on teaching proper parenting skills, but on restricting parenthood to the few, the healthy, the worthy. Only those whose family trees were not rotten, they claimed, ought to be allowed to parent. Parental advisers found the blight attacking family trees in heritable diseases and tendencies, both of which they saw all around them.

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At the time at which Nash was writing, a number of physiological ailments were thought to be hereditary: scrofula, St. Vitus’ Dance\textsuperscript{6}, syphilis, rickets, and consumption, to name just a few. Other non-physiological afflictions were also considered heritable, such as insanity, “hysteria,” degeneracy, moral weakness, criminality, and nervousness. Taken together, such seemingly heritable diseases and heritable tendencies represented a great concern for parental advisers of the late nineteenth century. What concerned them was what evils parents were passing on to their children—what afflictions and appetites would be perpetuated in the next generation. Their understanding of heritability, however, was rudimentary; Gregor Mendel’s work had not yet been rediscovered, and would not be until 1900.\textsuperscript{7} Therefore, people like Simeon Nash did not know about genes and how they worked. Instead, they generally accepted the idea that ‘like begets like’: it seemed only natural that a criminal father would have a criminal son, just as a consumptive mother would give birth to consumptive children. Here, they were aided by the work of Jean-Baptise Lamarck, a nineteenth-century French biologist. In the early nineteenth century, Lamarck argued that humans and animals acquired traits over their lifetime and then passed these traits on to their offspring.\textsuperscript{8} While modern science recognizes a division between acquired and biological traits, no such separation existed during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{9} Instead, the heritability of acquired traits was widely believed to be true. Armed with biological explanations, however flawed, parental advisers began to focus on the threat of acquired

\textsuperscript{6} Sydenham chorea, a symptom of rheumatic fever.

\textsuperscript{7} See, for example, Robin Marantz Henig, \textit{The Monk in the Garden: The Lost and Found Genius of Gregor Mendel, the Father of Genetics} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

\textsuperscript{8} See, for example, Carl Degler, \textit{In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

\textsuperscript{9} Here, though, the emerging field of epigenetics may be rewriting these rules. Researchers in epigenetics examine the ways in which a person’s acquired traits can impact their (and their succeeding generations’) biological traits.
characteristics and diseases that could be inherited by children and that threatened to echo through the generations.

Parental advisers observed that the sheer numbers of Americans exhibiting such tendencies made this threat even greater. According to phrenologist Hester Pendleton,10 “the last Census reports [1860] of the United States exhibit respectively in round numbers, twenty-four thousand insane, eighteen thousand idiotic, fourteen thousand deaf and dumb, and eleven thousand blind among us—a fearful army for a nation of less than thirty millions, claiming to be, all things considered, the most enlightened people on the earth.”11 She noted that these numbers were made all the more distressing when one considered that “in all probability many thousand imbeciles, barely separated by a scarcely appreciable development from idiots, escaped numeration.”12 Both criminals and the diseased filled jails and hospitals, as well as villages and cities, at rates parental advisers found alarming. Phrenologist Lorenzo Niles Fowler (1811-1896) argued that, “in some circles, and those not very limited in extent, every third woman is an invalid, and likewise every sixth male. They are laboring under dyspepsia, particular weaknesses, and many other diseases of the kind—all produced by a violation of physical laws.”13 Kentucky physician Tandy Dix (1829-1902?) agreed, noting that across society, “we find in many of our fellow-beings evidences of mental and physical incapacity. We find many instances of those who perish from diseases, transmitted from generation to generation; and of those diseases we have

10 According to Charles Rosenberg, Pendleton was the “author of the first widely read book on hereditary improvement.” Rosenberg, No Other Gods, 218 n. 44. Maren Lorenz notes that not much is known about Pendleton, though she was “president of the short-lived New York Free Medical School for Women.” Maren Lorenz, “Proto-Eugenic Thought and Breeding Utopias in the United States before 1870,” GHI Bulletin 43 (Fall 2008): 77.

11 Hester Pendleton, Husband and Wife; or, The Science of Human Development through Inherited Tendencies (New York: Carleton, 1863), 16.

12 Pendleton, Husband and Wife, 16.

sad reminders in our midst, in the shape of Asylums, Almshouses, Institutes for Feeble-Minded, and Charity hospitals.”

14 The diseased and lawless seemed to be everywhere parental advisers looked, crowding out everyone else. Their numbers, it seemed to parental advisers, were astounding.

Furthermore, the language parental advisers employed to describe such individuals indicates the revulsion they felt, as if criminals and the ill were spreading pestilence through an otherwise civil society. The “stream of human life,” Dr. Tandy Dix noted, “becomes more and more defiled by individual folly and crime; and its corrupted and poisonous qualities are seen in shortened human lives, in which more sin and misery are crowded than was found in the far longer earthly pilgrimages of the patriarchs.”

15 Prominent phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler (1809-1887) agreed, referring in his writings to “that corrupt and bitter stream of human depravity and wo [sic] now bearing on its dark waters most of the imperfections, sinfulness, and sufferings of mankind…”

16 While modern eyes may see this as somehow melodramatic or overplayed, parental advisers used such language to reflect what they saw as the dire situation surrounding them. When they looked around, parental advisers like Dix and others saw nothing short of a living, breathing scourge moving across the landscape in the form of the diseased and the criminal.

But who was to blame for this wretched state? And what was to be done about it?

Parental advisers pointed to parents themselves as both the cause and the solution. Parents were

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14 Tandy Dix, The Healthy Infant, A Treatise on the Healthy Procreation of the Human Race, Embracing the Obligations To Offspring; the Management of the Pregnant Female; the Management of the Newly Born; the Management of the Infant; and the Infant in Sickness (Cincinnati: Peter G. Thompson, 1880), 5.

15 Dix, The Healthy Infant, 6.

to blame, they argued, for not understanding—or perhaps not heeding—the serious nature of heritable diseases and tendencies. Caleb Ticknor wondered if such people could be forced to see the error of their ways. “To preach reason and common sense to those who believe in the invincibility and uncontrollable power of that passion too often miscalled love, would indeed be chimerical…”

Love blinded them to their diseases, Ticknor claimed, and they forged ahead with marriage. Unschooled or apathetic, they married and bred without taking care to verify the robustness of their beloved’s family history (or their own). “Notwithstanding the number who suffer from debility, and the lives sacrificed by hereditary disease, mankind seems not to be satisfied; but each successive generation magnifies the evils it inherited by adding its proportion of those which arise from human depravity. Against this depravity, civilized society protects itself by the criminal law, prison houses, and the gallows.”

As they bred, they did an unconscionable wrong to society, unleashing the vast army Pendleton and others described. Crowding asylums and prisons, this army could trace its debility not to poor parenting techniques (which parental advisers had long been attempting to influence), but to poor parenting stock. Psychiatrist Isaac Ray (1807-1881) contended, “a complete history of the inmates of our jails and prisons, embracing all their antecedents, would show, in regard to a large potion of them, that the active element was not immoral training, nor extraordinary temptations, but defective cerebral endowment… They enter upon life with a cerebral organization deficient in those qualities necessary for the manifestation of the higher mental functions.”

Parents, then, whose family trees were rotten due to disease and criminal

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17 Ticknor, The Philosophy of Living, 309. Emphasis original.

18 Dix, The Healthy Infant, 5.

19 Isaac Ray, Mental Hygiene (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 21.
tendencies, were to blame for societal ills. In this regard, parental advisers’ argument represented a marked departure from that of their predecessors.

For so long, parental advisers as a group had focused on what parents could do (or were doing incorrectly) in raising their children: things they could alter, if only they were willing. They could be more or less strict, more or less attentive, more or less sympathetic. Parents could be taught, in short, how to calibrate their parenting to achieve the appropriate settings. The result would be enlightened parents raising cheerful sons and dutiful daughters. Years of advice to parents had been grounded on this idea and the tangible results that such a tack was supposed to achieve. Now, however, the threat to parenthood and future generations was more elusive: heritable ills seemed ambiguous, difficult to understand, and not easy to fix. Perhaps, too, they had begun to suspect that their prescriptive approach had failed. If, after half a century of sterling parenting advice, parents showed no improvement, then perhaps the real problem lay with the makeup of parents themselves. Yet parental advisers were unable to provide simple suggestions to solve heritable ills that they did not fully understand. Was there even a solution, as Simeon Nash wondered, to be found for such a problem? Was there a way for parental advisers to prevent pestilence in the next generation when they knew so little about the problem? What they did know—based on what they could observe and what they inferred—was that traits such as criminality and disease were passed on from generation to generation: the sins of the parents were visited on the children.20

Although their grasp of heritability was flawed in many ways, parental advisers such as Hester Pendleton and Tandy Dix nonetheless represented a critical piece of the dialogue that,

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20 In this regard, nineteenth-century ‘science’ in heritability may not have been so far off. Researchers in the emerging field of epigenetics are studying the impact of one’s environment on DNA and proteins and how such changes can have far-reaching implications for generations. See, for example, Ethan Watters, “DNA is Not Destiny: The New Science of Epigenetics Rewrites the Rules of Disease, Heredity, and Identity,” Discover 27, no. 11 (2006).
over the course of the nineteenth century, sought to establish what a parent should be. Their ideas constitute the culmination of an extended conversation—one that began by addressing what was expected of parents, transitioned into training parents how to parent properly, and ultimately culminated in the idea that parenthood ought to be restricted. As they looked around at the army of pestilence upsetting society, they found the root cause in parents themselves. If parents were to blame, then surely parents could also be the cure. With regard to the heritability of traits and diseases, parental advisers looked to what parents could do to ensure that future generations would neither be a burden nor a threat to civil society. Their solution was two-fold. First, men and women—potential parents—had to be selective with regard to their marriage partners. Second, only certain people should be allowed to procreate.

“Free from Constitutional Taint”

In order to prevent the destruction of society at the hands of the diseased and criminal, parental advisers issued advice to couples who had not yet conceived—ideally, in fact, to those who had not yet married. Here, they echoed what was taking place in courtrooms with regard to restrictions on who could marry.21 They hoped to advise women on selecting healthy husbands, and husbands, healthy wives. In some instances, much earlier parental advisers had insisted on this point. The anonymous author of The Young Man’s Own Book (1832), for example, urged men to choose carefully their wives, saying, “let her also be alike free from deformity and hereditary diseases; the one being always, and the other often, entailed on the breed, and witnessing the father’s indiscretion from generation to generation.”22 Lorenzo Niles Fowler, in 1842, agreed: “Getting married is the most responsible act we can do, as connected with our own

21 See Grossberg, Governing the Hearth, on matrimonial limitations.

22 The Young Man’s Own Book: A Manual of Politeness, Intellectual Improvement, and Moral Deportment (Philadelphia: Key, Meilke and Biddle, 1832), 98.
happiness in this life, and through us to those who shall inherit after our death. No individual is
the *proper* subject to become an agent for the transmission of the soul and body to posterity,
unless he or she is free from all hereditary diseases; his or her organization sound and
complete...”  

In order to be considered good parents, prospective parents needed to ensure that they
fulfilled their responsibility with regard to health first, by paying attention to their own as well as
that of their potential partner. It was the first thing would-be parents could do for the children
they hoped to raise.

Where is the parent that can deliberately doom his progeny to idiocy? Imagine
such, if one is to be found, contemplating his own drivelng [sic] idiotic child, with
the consciousness that he himself is the cause—what can be more horrible? If,
therefore, we wish to have the blessing of a healthy child; if there be any delight to
us in contemplating the child of our own loins, in associating its resemblances to
ourselves, or to those fond relatives long laid in the dust-- if there be any pleasure
in daily watching its lively movements and growth, and secretly devoting ourselves
incessantly to toil for its future welfare—in short, do we desire to see this child
live, and live a life of happiness, our lives must be lives of temperance, and our
habits the habits of the good.  

Earlier generations of parental advisers, too, focused on what men and women could do to
become ‘good’ parents. Later generations echoed these aspirations by focusing on physiology.
Health reformer and author Thomas Low Nichols (1815-1901) observed, “the responsibilities of
parents are very serious. Every child has a right to health, nurture, education, a training in some
useful avocation, and a fair start in life; and no man has the right to beget a child without
reasonable prospect of performing these parental duties. No woman has the right to marry
without a reasonable prospect of provision for a family.” While their predecessors may have

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1873), 126-127. The Nichols’s fled to London in 1861, and continued to publish from there.
focused on a child’s right to an education or proper nurture, parental advisers of the 1860s and 1870s felt it more imperative to focus on health and its impact on shaping future generations.

To that end, parental advisers used their tracts as a means of educating potential parents on the elusive subject of inheritance, and guiding them towards healthy partners. Orson Squire Fowler, for example, claimed that he wrote *Hereditary Descent* “to aid prospective parents in making choice of such partners as shall secure a healthy, talented, and virtuous progeny, by expounding, in the light of classified facts, those LAWS which govern this department of nature.” It was imperative that prospective parents carefully consider their own pedigree as well as that of their potential mate, rather than blindly rushing to marry and procreate; their decisions would affect the next generation irreversibly. “Thoughtless mortal!” thundered Fowler, “I conjure you, before you allow the first goings forth of love, to learn what parental conditions in you will confer so great a boon on the prospective bone of your bone, and flesh of your flesh!” Again, although the prose overstates, it signals the importance men like Fowler placed on the health (physical and otherwise) of future generations. Nothing short of the fate of mankind, they argued, hung in the balance. Disaster awaited a parent who did not heed these warnings.

For unhealthy couples who nonetheless insisted on reproducing, the inevitable result was disease, degeneracy, and ruin. Dr. Caleb Ticknor equated the marriage and reproduction of an unhealthy couple with marriage between members of the same family. Families whose members persist in intermarrying, he argued, can expect generations of increasingly feeble offspring.

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resulting in eventual extinction. Similarly, he argued, when two diseased people marry there can be no avoiding the perpetuation of disease.

Suppose a couple, both the branches of a stock affected with an hereditary disease, fall desperately in love, and there can be no objection to their union in respect to the moral worth of either: is a marriage, with their predisposition to disease, justifiable or expedient? or, in other words, will they be excusable for knowingly entailing disease on posterity—and will posterity excuse them for it? Are they excusable for perpetuating a race of madmen? Shall a couple suffer in their feelings, or shall perhaps a numerous progeny suffer disease of body?  

Incapable of reasoning, blinded by love, such couples who insisted on marrying would ruin countless generations with their selfishness. According to Ticknor, though, all was not lost for an unhealthy person who desired children; all they needed to do was to find a healthy spouse. “If a different course were pursued,—if those who inherit predisposition to disease, were to contract matrimonial alliances with the healthy and robust,—the third generation instead of becoming extinct, would have recovered the original health and vigour of their family.”

Ticknor went on to encourage parents to take a vested interest in the health of their blood lines by urging their children to select partners on the basis of health, as well as wealth and social standing. Dr. William Earl went even further than Ticknor, and argued that parents owed it not just to their own families, but also to the nation to create healthy children. Earl urged those who wanted children “to well consider all that pertains to their own health, if they expect healthy issue. There is on this subject not only a moral, but a religious and patriotic point at issue, if we expect our children to take our place in this great and glorious country when we are no more.”

Hester Pendleton agreed, noting that a woman’s greatest duty was healthy procreation and that

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28 Ticknor, The Philosophy of Living, 311.


mothers in particular had an obligation to bestow upon society only the best children. “Every female, from the moment she is liable to become a mother, is solemnly responsible to her Maker, to her future offspring, and society, for the mind she will impart, and the moral and physical qualities she will transmit.”31

Parental advisers such as Ticknor, Earl, and Pendleton assumed an urgent tone when they exhorted readers to choose their spouses wisely; according to them, the very fate of the nation hinged on a good choice. Men and women who hoped to become parents owed it to posterity to be selective with regard to health before marrying and breeding. Their injunctions in this regard echoed arguments their cohort had made decades earlier regarding the importance of parenthood and the idea that parents had a debt to society to raise their children properly. Cyrus Comstock’s observation in 1810 that “matters of everlasting consequence” were dependent upon parents would have resonated with late nineteenth century parental advisers, who worried about the effects of heritable diseases and tendencies on children as well as society at large.32 Just as Comstock and other early parental advisers argued that parents had a duty to society to raise their children properly, so too did parental advisers of the late nineteenth century see a similar obligation. The later generation’s insistence that potential parents find healthy partners was, in many ways, a reincarnation of earlier arguments by Comstock and so many others.

Finding a healthy partner to marry, however, was fraught with complications. It was not simply a matter of looking at a potential spouse and attempting to ascertain whether or not the person looked diseased. As Dr. John Stockton Hough explained, this complication was even more pronounced when it came to finding a potential wife. “Females more frequently transmit


hereditary diseases and defects than males, though they less frequently exhibit them. Males less frequently transmit, and more frequently exhibit, inherited diseases and defects.” According to Hough, even if a woman appeared to be healthy, appearances can be deceiving; she may be harboring a heritable disease that she does not exhibit. The admonishment to find healthy spouses, then, was harder than it seemed at face value.

Although Ticknor, Hough, and others attempted to administer advice before conception, such advance warning was not always possible; therefore parental advisers also included warnings for childless couples, as well as information for diseased couples with babies. Dr. William Potts Dewees argued that while feeble parents may produce a healthy-looking child, diseases often do not alter a person’s outward appearance. “We have many times seen the children of robust appearance from parents of feeble health; but we do not recollect a single instance where such children attained an age much beyond manhood—old age was out of the question…. Like fruit that attains its maturity prematurely, it looks fair to the eye; but cancer is lurking at the core.” Similar to John Stockton Hough, Dewees believed that the naked eye could not necessarily see what lay beneath. Even if both prospective parents were free of disease, however, the risk of contamination was still possible. As William Earl argued, “if the mother and father are both pure at the time conception takes place, and the mother should contact the affection [sic] prior to the eighth month, the child may be born diseased.” This complicates Hester Pendleton’s castigation of parents who ‘magnify the evil,’ for how were even healthy individuals to wholly prevent disease from entering their bodies and polluting the next

34 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, 21.
generation? Becoming a parent, whether one was diseased or not, was clearly a risky proposition that was rife with obstacles.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable challenges, parental advisers like Earl and others insisted that it was possible and desirable for purely healthy people to marry and mate. They advocated that parenthood be restricted so that only those worthy of the office would attain it. Dr. Dan Newcomb (1829-1908), for example, looked forward to the day when only healthy couples would procreate, leaving the diseased to eventually die out. In his book *When and How*, Newcomb depicted his idea of an ideal couple, a husband and wife, who

> are undoubtedly healthy and strong, and whose ancestry far back have been the same; … who have had pure air, good food, and warm clothing; who have kept clean, and have slept enough and not too much; … who have not been idlers, either mentally or physically, but have labored every day with due diligence. Let such a woman become pregnant by such a man, and still keep her steady, even way of living; and in due time a son is born unto them. Such a child is as sure to be a well child as it is to be born. Now, with this healthy starting, what will make him sickly? He will undoubtedly suffer from the usual contagious diseases— as the measles, chicken pox, and scarlatina; but if he is nursed and cared for by his own mother, so that no law of Hygiene is broken, he is as sure to be healthy and strong as the calf or lamb is.

> Parents Should Understand these Things, or Stop Having Children.³⁶

While Newcomb acknowledged that such couples were indeed rare, he argued that Americans did not deserve to have children if they were not willing to recognize the utmost importance of good health and disease-free living.

Newcomb, though, was not alone in his belief that only the best should breed. In Britain, Francis Galton was developing theories of eugenics (even coining the term) while Americans were articulating similar ideas. Galton used as his foundation the work of his cousin, Charles

Darwin. While Darwin recognized the potential in applying his theories to humans, he “cautiously left the subject alone.”

Believing in the potential of Darwin’s theories to improve society, though, Galton forged ahead, creating the science of eugenics. Eugenicists like Galton and others believed “that a person’s hereditary endowment is a major factor in his success and development, and they hoped to breed better people through encouraging propagation by those with desirable traits and through restricting propagation by those with undesirable traits.”

Inspired by Galton’s work, Americans like Newcomb used comparisons to the natural and the man-made worlds to illustrate the benefits of manipulating and controlling the biological imperative to parent. Orson Squire Fowler, for example, observed, “as we can enjoy a house we have planned and built, the fruit of a tree we selected, planted, trimmed, a horse we reared, after prearranging his hereditary qualities, far the better than if we had not; so how much more lovely and precious our darlings are rendered to us by our having flexed them into these and those forms, augmented these virtues and lessened those faults, than if they had been thrust upon us without any fashioning influences from us?” Like Fowler, Tandy Dix relied on comparisons with horticulture and animal husbandry to make his point. He noted, “surely it is not expected to obtain good fruit from bad trees; or a plentiful harvest from impoverished or uncultivated lands. Those who raise cattle and horses pay strict attention to the stock, that it may be of the best and most productive kind. In doing so, they act upon a recognized principle that to have good progeny, the progenitors must likewise be good.” Dr. Tullio Verdi agreed, noting that if parents were to simulate husbandmen in this regard, society would not be overflowing with the diseased.

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38 Haller, _Eugenics_, 3.


40 Dix, _The Healthy Infant_, 9-10.
and the criminal element. “A field covered with the green blades of wheat is of no import to the husbandman, if the pod be diseased or empty: therefore, in the selection of the seed, the husbandman takes care that the healthy, well-grown grain be chosen. Would that it were so in the human family! The rickety specimens of humanity that infest our streets and crowd our hospitals would not exist; the scrofula, the consumption, that fill our early graves, would disappear; and man and woman, in the fulfilment [sic] of the most sublime conception of the Creator, would be beautiful.”41 As with the natural world, so too with parenting. Parental advisers had always maintained that good parents beget good children, and here was their proof.

Yet the belief that certain people should be prohibited from having children certainly did not spring up for the first time in the 1860s and 1870s; parental advisers had made arguments in favor of something very like eugenics since the early part of the century. As early as 1825, William Potts Dewees argued, “we may stop, in a great measure, the hereditary transmission of predisposition, by selecting such subjects as shall be free from constitutional taint; or, at least, we may diminish by this plan the risk of such occurrence, if we cannot insure exemption from it. We may also do much good by preventing altogether the union of such as may have these tendencies…”42 What is noteworthy here is that Dewees articulated an argument in favor of biological selection before the word “eugenics” was even coined.43 At the time at which he was active, however, this assertion was just one in a crowd of other, more insistent arguments about parents and parenthood. His call for restricting parenthood was drowned out by voices advocating, for example, that parenting could be taught. Therefore, although the thread of the eugenic discussion was present quite early on in the century, other arguments took precedence at

41 Verdi, Maternity, 21-22.

42 Dewees, Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children, 22. Emphasis added.

43 The Oxford English Dictionary attributes the first use of the term to Francis Galton in 1883.
the time. Towards the end of the century, as Dan Newcomb and others sought a solution to society’s ills, the case for selective breeding or restrictive parenting—articulated much earlier in the century—became increasingly prevalent.

By discussing heritable diseases and tendencies at such length, parental advisers attempted to influence Americans’ selection of marriage partners and emphasized the ramifications of such selections on future generations. They echoed earlier arguments that parenthood was critically important and had consequences beyond home and hearth. Furthermore, they underscored their case by insisting that only the best should be allowed to breed, and thereby helped give shape to the ideal parent. Such a person had a robust family tree, free from disease and criminality. They chose as their spouse someone of similar stock and good breeding. Under these conditions, the children they would bring into the world would be heritably perfect. Finally, armed with nearly a century’s worth of guidance from parental advisers, they would raise their children properly. If they succeeded, parental advisers could at last pat themselves on the back for a job well done: America would be a country of perfect parents creating ideal children.

“Scientific Human Propagation”

This utopian ideal was, of course, part of John Humphrey Noyes’s vision. At Oneida, he strove to realize this vision through a revolutionary sexual agenda comprised of “complex marriage,” male continence and, ultimately, stirpiculture. Taken together, the trio had far-reaching implications for the way in which the Oneida community parented.

In 1838, before he launched the Oneida community, John Humphrey Noyes’s views on complex marriage became public. He had written, privately, to a friend on the subject in letters which were subsequently published. In these letters, Noyes argued that marriage and monogamy between one man and one woman was unnatural. “In a pure community, there is no more reason why sexual intercourse should be restrained by law, than why eating and drinking should be—
and there is as little occasion for shame in the one case as in the other.”

Men and women, according to Noyes, should not partner off in discrete couples, but should engage in relations freely, “not by pairs, as in the world, but *en masse.*” With a small group of followers, Noyes had begun to practice this “complex marriage” at Putney, Vermont. He bristled at the accusation that he promoted “free love,” however. According to his son, Noyes “always insisted that in the sex relations of the Oneida Community there was less of that licentiousness suggested by the term ‘free love’ than in worldly marriages—also more of responsibility.” In Noyes’s mind, complex marriage was less sinful than either free love or traditional marriage. Regardless of his true intention, aspects of Noyes’s ideas were far too radical for most Americans. He was charged with adultery and fled Vermont for New York, where he would establish his community anew at a farm belonging to one of his followers. Located in Oneida, New York, the farm was further from prying eyes than Noyes’s community at Putney had been.

At Oneida, complex marriage was only part of his program; male continence and stirpiculture rounded out the trio. Male continence—sexual intercourse without ejaculation—was the method by which community members avoided unwanted pregnancies. Community members used an internal third party to arrange sexual encounters, which were then recorded in a ledger.

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49 Muncy, *Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities*, 174.
Older women—those beyond menopause—were paired with younger men in order to teach them male continence.\textsuperscript{50} By judiciously practicing male continence, community members were able to satisfy their physical desires when they did not intend to procreate. A man, according to Noyes, should refrain from ejaculation “except when he intends procreation.”\textsuperscript{51} Although Noyes’s early ideas about marriage and sex were denounced, they ultimately led to ideas he would develop in New York about scientific propagation—ideas that were not so different from what many parental advisers were beginning to believe.\textsuperscript{52}

This focus on intentional procreation illuminates Noyes’s views on what he termed “stirpiculture,” or human husbandry. Noyes and the Oneida community eschewed “random procreation” and favored deliberate, scientific procreation. His ideas in this regard placed him very much in line with contemporary parental advisers, who also advocated intentional parenting by certain exceptional people. Noyes argued, “we believe the time will come when involuntary and random propagation will cease, and when scientific combination will be applied to human generation as freely and successfully as it is to that of other animals.”\textsuperscript{53} To support his ideas, Noyes pointed to animal and plant breeders, who selectively bred their best combinations to create a more perfect offspring. So much time and energy had been devoted to this, he noted, yet why had these techniques not been applied to humans? Here, too, he paralleled that which Galton, Fowler and others claimed and he did so concurrently with them. “Every melting pear,

\textsuperscript{50} Lawrence Foster, \textit{Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 83.


\textsuperscript{52} In researching American parenthood, I wanted to examine fringe parenting—parenting that was not mainstream. The utopian communities of the nineteenth century provided a useful starting point in that they had truly different takes on parenting. The Oneida community is unique even among utopian communities because of the dual ideas of complex marriage and stirpiculture. It is an ideal opportunity to examine parenting as it existed nowhere else.

\textsuperscript{53} Noyes, \textit{Male Continence}, 15.
every red-cheeked apple, every mealy potato that modern skill presents us, bids us go to work on the final task of producing the best possible varieties of human beings. Every race-horse, every straight-backed bull, every premium pig tells us what we can do and what we must do for man. What are all our gay cattle fairs, but eloquent reminders of the long-neglected duty of scientific human propagation?54 Noyes’s ideas with regard to intentional breeding, then, were not so very different than those of Galton, Newcomb, and others. His theory of stirpiculture meshed neatly with their visions of selective breeding. While he was considered an outcast and a deviant for his plan of complex marriage, stirpiculture placed him squarely in the norm with regard to contemporary eugenic debates. When viewed through this lens, Noyes was a natural part of this extended conversation about what it means to be a parent, and who should get to parent.

Noyes instituted stirpiculture at Oneida in 1869. His plan was two-fold: breeding from the best, and breeding “in-and-in” (what we today term inbreeding). For the former, “a committee, headed by Noyes, took charge of the matter, and selected the holiest members who were free from physical defects…. One essential consideration was quite noteworthy. This was the mutual attraction which must exist to at least a slight degree between persons mated.”55 Each member of the community was allowed to have one child. But those at the top of the hierarchy, the “stirps,” were allowed to have more (their potential offspring being deemed the most perfect). John Humphrey Noyes, himself situated at the top of the Oneida hierarchy and presumably having the best blood, fathered several children by different women. Pierrepont Noyes, himself the result of such a stirpicultural union, referenced this in his autobiography. He remembered that boys outside the community referred to him and other Oneida children as ‘bastards.’ When he asked

his mother about this, she responded “we consider you children more legitimate than any children in the world.”

“Complex marriage” at Oneida was complicated, and often involved blood family members coupling with one another. Noyes was known to have had sexual relations with his niece, Tirzah Miller (who was deemed perhaps the highest woman in the Oneida hierarchy), and probably had similar relations with his sister and one of his daughters. His rationale in this regard pointed to the second part of his stirpiculture plan: in-and-in breeding. Along with breeding from the best, Noyes relied on in-and-in breeding to produce more perfect children. According to Noyes, “there can be no doubt that by segregating superior families, and by breeding them in and in, superior varieties of human beings might be produced which would be comparable to the thoroughbreds in all the domestic races.” Just as breeders selected certain animals or plants in order to perpetuate specific traits, Noyes firmly believed that employing the same selective techniques would lead to the perfection of humankind. In this regard, he differentiated himself from accepted conventions. The deleterious effects of inbreeding in both humans and animals had long been observed. An 1862 article in *Popular Science Review*, for example, noted that inbreeding “is for all species a cause of degeneration and decay.” And in 1875, George Darwin published an article on the preponderance of idiocy and lunacy resulting from first-cousin marriages in England. Certainly by the time Noyes was formulating his ideas about the benefits in-and-in breeding, there was plenty of scientific proof demonstrating the

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56 P. Noyes, *My Father’s House*, 149.
57 Fogarty, *Desire and Duty at Oneida*, 20-21.
dangers thereof. Despite evidence to the contrary, Noyes believed that there was some benefit to be gained from breeding within the best families.

While complex marriage earned him the skepticism and outrage of some of his contemporaries, and despite the fact that his theories about inbreeding went against accepted scientific doctrine, in many ways John Humphrey Noyes reflected much of the concern that parental advisers voiced about parenthood—the idea that parenthood was a privilege and not a right, that only certain people should be allowed to breed, and that there was a benefit to be gained by breeding humans based on certain aspects of their parents. In this, he was squarely part of the burgeoning eugenic movement. Like Galton and others, Noyes emphasized deliberate, scientific procreation. His stirpiculture experiment was eugenics, albeit on a small scale. Furthermore, certain outsiders argued that his experiment had indeed produced prized children.

Anita Newcomb McGee (1864-1940), then a medical student at what would become George Washington University, studied the Oneida community in the 1880’s. When she published her findings in 1891, she noted that the community should be justly proud of its stirpiculture results, as the children born from this experiment appeared to be superior on all counts. Among the children “serious sickness was unknown” and “the mortality at birth and to nine years was less than one-third that of the United States at large as given in the census of 1870.” Of the older children, she noted, “the boys are tall—several over six feet—broad-shouldered, and finely proportioned; the girls are robust and well built.” She also observed that, once adults, their occupations were noteworthy.

Of the oldest sixteen boys, ten are in business, chiefly employed as clerks, foremen, etc., in the manufactories of the joint-stock company. The eleventh is a musician of


repute; another a medical student; one has passed through college and is studying law; one is a college senior, and one is entering college after winning state and local scholarships…. Finally, the sixteenth boy is a mechanic, the only one engaged in manual labor. Of the six girls between eighteen and twenty-two years, three are especially intellectual. One is at a female college, another is entering college with Greek as a specialty, and the last is a student of the kindergarten system.63

At least according to McGee, it seemed that intentional breeding between select partners would indeed result in a more perfect child. The children born of the stirpiculture experiment were, as Dan Newcomb predicted in such cases, as ‘healthy and strong as the calf or lamb is.’ Despite these seeming successes, the experiment was short-lived; stirpiculture at Oneida lasted only until Noyes formally ended complex marriage in 1879. In August of that year, outside pressures combined with internal struggles forced him to flee under cover of darkness to Canada.64

“The Interests of Posterity”

At the same time that stirpiculture may have drawn him closer to what many parental advisers espoused, Noyes’s views on communal childrearing would have highlighted his difference with respect to what they believed ‘proper’ parenting to be. Oneida children were not raised by their biological parents and intentionally had very little contact with them. When the Oneida community elders asked its daughters to destroy the dolls to which they had become so intimately attached, they had their reasons; everything in their society was held communally and favoritism—idolatry—was not tolerated. Yet for young girls and their dolls, the line between a real person and a fake doll can be blurry.65 Harriet Worden herself admitted that though the girls


64 P. Noyes, My Father’s House, 159. Pierrepont Noyes notes that the younger Oneida generation began to question his aging father’s authority. This, combined with the fear that a raid by local authorities was imminent, convinced John Humphrey Noyes to disappear. It was from Canada that he urged his remaining followers to abandon complex marriage and enter into conventional marriages.

65 Psychologist Jean Piaget was the first to publish research regarding children and animism—the idea that inanimate objects like dolls are alive. Jean Piaget, The Child’s Conception of the World (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1929). Piaget’s theories continue to be revisited by developmental psychologists. See, for example, Merry Bullock, “Animism in Childhood Thinking: A New Look at an Old Question,” Developmental Psychology
did what was asked of them, and did it without complaint, it was “some time” before they could remember the incident “without a slight emotion.” The ramifications of the doll-burning episode become even clearer when paired with an incident, years later, between Worden and her young son Pierrepont. During one of the occasional visits between mother and son, Pierrepont remembered overhearing an Oneida man say to his mother, “Harriet, that is idolatry.” He wrote that he knew they were speaking of him, but he did not quite understand what idolatry meant. Yet he heard the criticism inherent in the utterance. “What has persisted in my memory—and this rather astonishes me—is the fact that I connected his words with my mother’s less affectionate attitude toward me during the remainder of that visit.” By asking the girls to cast their dolls—pseudo-children—into the fire, the community hoped to train these future Oneida mothers not to become too attached to their little ones. The emphasis at Oneida, after all, was on community rather than individuals.

This emphasis on community extended to childrearing. Just as the community selected only the best members to breed, they also selected according to ability with regard to chores, all for the benefit of the community. To the care of children, they dedicated “those persons who had shown themselves best fitted for the work.” An Oneida mother would nurse her infant for nearly the first year of its life. Afterwards, the child would be transferred to the Children’s House with other Oneida youths and would be raised by community members in charge of that

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66 P. Noyes, My Father’s House, 72.

67 P. Noyes, My Father’s House, 73.

Parents were allowed to see their children for a few hours each week, but otherwise the children remained in their department.\footnote{Initially, the Children’s House was a separate structure. After the Oneida Mansion House was built in the 1860s, the Children’s House became part of it. Though no longer a separate “house,” the name stuck. P. Noyes, \textit{My Father’s House}, 24-25.}

This bureaucratic approach to childrearing ensured that parents could not have too much access to their children. Like the dolls being cast into the fire, the idea was to prevent close attachments between individuals, as such attachments threatened the stability of the community. In his autobiography, Pierrepont Noyes recollected the difficulty with which mothers and children bore the arrangement. He remembered crying “bitterly when the time came to return to the Children’s House” after a visit with his mother, coupled with her fear that someone would hear his sobs and separate them even more.\footnote{Muncy, \textit{Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities}, 190.} Once, as a punishment for something he had done, Pierrepont was forbidden by William Kelly (the head of the children’s department) to see his mother for a week. Upon hearing this, the boy threw a tantrum. “Whereupon Papa Kelly seized me and shook me and commanded in a voice charged with indignation and authority—just such a voice as I imagined Jesus Christ used when casting out devils, ‘Be still, Pip, be still!’ Then, firmly, ‘You have evidently got sticky to your mother. You may stay away from her another week.’”\footnote{P. Noyes, \textit{My Father’s House}, 66.} Just as parental advisers held certain ideas about proper parenting, so too did the Oneida community. Where others sought to reinforce a child’s natural bond with its parents, and vice versa, the Oneidans sought to minimize and even eliminate that “sticky” bond. Like material possessions, children were meant to be held communally, loved equally by all.

\footnote{P. Noyes, \textit{My Father’s House}, 66-67.}
The community’s practice of bureaucratic childrearing (to say nothing of complex marriage) epitomized the antithesis of nearly a century’s worth of work by parental advisers devoted to shaping the ideal parent. As Shaker Stephen Ball discovered, parental advisers did not deem communal childrearing an appropriate style of parenting. Far from having limited contact with their children, ‘proper parents’ formed an unbreakable bond with their children. The bond between parent and child, parental advisers believed, could not be replicated or manufactured elsewhere. It was unique, irreplaceable, and sacred. Furthermore, ‘proper parents’ played an integral part in raising their children. Parental advisers’ focus on mothers and fathers as the ideal childrearers—not extended kin nor spinster aunts nor elder siblings—helped change the discourse about the family and gave shape to what a parent was or should be. The Oneidans, in effect, represented a shift backward, to the pre-industrial mode of childrearing in which it was acceptable and desirable for extended family members (in their case, ideological family members) to raise children. But by the late nineteenth century, that mode of childrearing was no longer in vogue among the urban middle class audience for much of the parental advice literature, as the dominion of parents—shepherded by parental advisers—had taken hold.

Through this lens, the Oneida method of childrearing seemed anomalous, even inhumane. Dr. Ely Van de Warker (1841-1910), for example, wrote that at Oneida, a woman’s “instinctive longings of maternity” became extinguished. Oneida, he claimed, “was a machine that kept its levers in operation to wring out of the heart of woman the emotions that make her all she is to man, love and its tender counterpart, the gentle instinct of maternity.”

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73 See chapter 3.


75 Van de Warker, “A Gynecological Study of the Oneida Community,” 808-809.
Oneida community, it seemed cruel (as opposed to merely outdated) that the community’s children would be raised by committee. For parental advisers, it was inconsistent with their notion of proper parenthood.

Furthermore, parental advisers had worked tirelessly to promote and emphasize the critical work parents performed. This, they felt, was crucial. They advocated a purposeful parenthood that the Oneidans seemed to lack. What parents did—not department members or community relations, but biological mothers and fathers—was important. It affected not only home and hearth, but also the rest of society and future generations. Parental advisers argued that individuals did not operate in a vacuum and that their actions had far-reaching ramifications. Parents, in particular, could use this power for good or for ill. For the former, parental advisers hoped that prospective parents would rise to the occasion and do their duty to mankind—the “interests of posterity” depended on it. According to physician Samuel Howe (1801-1876), “it is by the lever of enlightened parental love, more than by any other power, that mankind is to be raised to the highest attainable point of bodily perfection.” The power parents wielded was incredible and the fate of the nation and humankind lay at their feet. One misstep, and parents risked condemning society to ruin. Parental advisers had already seen the effects of such missteps: a ‘fearful army’ of the idiotic and infirm, as Hester Pendleton described them. These mistakes were made all the more frightening by the belief that, once committed, they were irreparable. Tandy Dix, for example, compared the functioning of mankind to the workings of a watch: both delicate in nature, and both susceptible to a small fault disabling the entire apparatus. The watch, however, had the advantage of being fixable. “Deficiencies in the watch may be

76 Dix, The Healthy Infant, 3.

supplied, and imperfectly arranged parts may be re-adjusted; but in man it is sadly the reverse, as
his deficiencies and derangements are not only irreparable, but transmissible through many
generations.78

Here, at the end of the century, their arguments about the importance of parenthood came
to mean even more, as they advocated that only certain people ought to be allowed to become
parents in the first place. Their arguments in favor of a purposeful parenthood, which they had
espoused for nearly a century in various ways, culminated in this final restrictive definition of
proper parents. Ironically, at its core, the Oneida community’s approach represents another
attempt at perfecting parenting and familial relationships. In this regard, the men and women of
the Oneida community were not so very different than other parental advisers; they simply
adopted a different method.

Summary

In the late nineteenth century, parental advisers took a careful look at society around them.
What they saw horrified them: an explosion of heritable diseases and tendencies, manifested in
an army of the diseased and the degenerate. The numbers of these misfits seemed to be
multiplying, making the threat they represented all the more tangible. To explain the
preponderance of individuals exhibiting heritable diseases and tendencies, parental advisers
looked to parents, who insisted on procreating regardless of their fitness or that of their
ancestors. Parents, they argued, bred without being certain that they were not transmitting
injurious predispositions. Alarmed, parental advisers took action and advocated that parenting be
restricted. If it was true that ‘like begets like,’ the only solution to society’s woes was to curb
them at their source. The culmination of nearly a century’s worth of debates about parenthood

78 Dix, The Healthy Infant, 12.
was an increasing emphasis on perfect parents creating ideal children and, even further, a conviction that only the best should be allowed to breed. Parenthood, then, had been reconceived as a privilege limited to the few, not a right extended to all. In this regard, they aligned themselves with one of the century’s most radical utopian experimenters: John Humphrey Noyes. At Oneida, Noyes instituted a sexual agenda that culminated in stirpiculture, or human husbandry. He believed that mankind could be perfected if only certain people bred. While his ideas in this regard resonated with late nineteenth century parental advisers, the bureaucratic childrearing practices that characterized Oneida parenting flew in the face of what parental advisors strove to realize. Parental advisors’ vision of ideal parenthood, crafted over the course of the century, advocated that parents—mothers and father—establish an unbreakable bond with their children, serve as the sole childrearers, and execute the important duties unique to parents. This vision, one of purposeful parenthood, reflected their goal of perfecting parenthood.
To the unfaithfulness of parents must be attributed most of the calamities, which man is bringing upon man, in this sinful, distracted world. The natural consequences of unfaithfulness in parents, are disobedience, obstinacy and unfaithfulness in children.

—Cyrus Comstock, *Essays on the Duty of Parents and Children*¹

Yesterday I received a bunch of emails from people who had seen my latest Redbook column on the MSN homepage. I didn’t know it was there, so I visited the site, where I made the mistake of reading the comments. And I learned that apparently I am the reason civilization is going down the toilet, and my child will grow up to be a serial killer. Ah.

—Alice Bradley, “In the Locker Room”²

In many ways, the ending date for this study—1880—is arbitrary and artificial. The debates that I have traced through this dissertation—what constitutes a parent, who gets to be a parent (and who gets to be involved in parenting), what makes a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ parent—certainly did not end in the nineteenth century; rather, they carry on today. Contemporary debates about parenting range from whether single parents can raise children properly to whether white parents should be allowed to adopt black children, and beyond. Such debates, furthermore, continue to be very charged. Perhaps the most heated debate surrounding parenting today centers around gay men and lesbians as parents. While some scholars, like Gillian Dunne, argue that “lesbian women and gay men are opting into parenthood in increasing numbers,”³ thereby changing what ‘the family’ looks like, others are quick to point out society’s resistance to such


change. Stephen Hicks, Charlotte Patterson, and others have argued that gay men and lesbians are often cast as unnatural parents.\(^4\) Frequently, such opinions emanate from people in positions of authority, such as judges who consistently deny homosexual parents custody of their children, or social workers who prevent gay men and lesbians from adopting. Recently, for example, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee defended an Arkansas law that prohibits gay couples from becoming adoptive parents. “Children are not puppies,” he argued. “This is not a time to see if we can experiment and find out, how does this work?”\(^5\) Rather than viewing this example as an anomaly, I would argue that it represents a continuation of a trend, another manifestation of the desire to limit parenthood to certain groups.

Furthermore, the work of parental advisers continues to grow, demonstrating that what was begun in the early decades of the nineteenth century has remained a contested subject as it continues to elicit anxiety and self-proclaimed experts. Americans continue to turn to parenting “experts” for advice. Stroll down the aisles of almost any bookstore and you’re likely to come across titles such as *The Ten Basic Principles of Good Parenting*, *Parenting with Fire*, *Parenting from the Inside Out*, and—of course—*Parenting for Dummies*, while the magazine rack displays anything from *American Baby* to *Hip Mama*.\(^6\) Though nineteenth-century Americans certainly

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were not turning the pages of *Parenting with Fire*, they undoubtedly were consulting its predecessors.

The early nineteenth century saw changes on an unprecedented scale—quite literally, everything Americans had known was in flux. Industrialization and urbanization was beginning to alter much of their world and gave rise to important social changes, such as the emergence of a self-conscious middle class as well as transformations in familial patterns. Parental advisers took advantage of the transition between the pre-industrial family and its successor by advocating a purposeful parenthood—parenting that looked and acted a certain way—and by establishing themselves as integral to achieving this new conception of parenthood. They began their work in and around the 1820s, arguing that parents were in dire need of advice. Parents, they claimed, were ‘slothful and remiss,’ and in no way capable of raising future generations. In order to do so successfully, they needed expert advice. Parental advisers were only too willing to provide such advice. They identified a problem—parents unprepared to execute their duties properly—and they provided the solution. In doing so, they created a market for their expertise: parents as consumers of advice. This market was aided by their efforts in establishing themselves as people whose advice about parenting could be trusted. Their ‘expert’ credentials ranged from experience in mothering, as was the case with Lydia Howard Sigourney, to more theoretical knowledge, in the manner of Dr. Caleb Ticknor. Even as these experts negotiated their own claims to expertise, they challenged that of others. Not only, then, did they attempt to adjudicate parenthood, they also jostled amongst themselves to make the case for who could best advise parents.

In these early years, they began their work by defining what it meant to be a parent and shaping what this newly-conceived role ought to be. These early efforts laid the foundation for
their work in the 1830s and 1840s, during which they began to assert their belief that parents were made, not born. Parenting, they firmly believed, was a learned art rather than an innate skill. In order to parent properly, parents needed to be educated in their craft. Naturally, this played well into their self-appointed status as experts in parenting, as they were able to wield their expertise to educate parents. They provided that which parents needed in order to parent properly. Part of this education was to convince parents of their awesome responsibility. Not only did parents have a responsibility to their children, but they were also responsible to society to raise good children. Furthermore, their actions as parents—be they good or bad—would have ramifications in the hereafter. Beyond that, parental advisers’ education of parents lay in their careful didactic prescription. They provided exhaustive descriptions and examples of good and bad parents and emphasized the blessings that resulted from proper parenting as well as the consequences of negligent parenting. Yet their contrast of good and bad cannot be reduced to loving versus hateful parents, or dutiful versus abusive parents; it was more complicated than that. Even parents who might have thought that they were “good” parents, who were well-intentioned in their actions, often proved to be “bad” parents because the demands of good parenting were so strict, and the line between good and bad so narrow. Solicitous parents, for example, who were overly attentive risked harming their children. So, too, did dutiful parents who were overly cautious. The expectations that parental advisers outlined for parents were incredibly high, and devilishly hard to meet.

Not only did parental advisers have high expectations of parents, but they also had gendered expectations of mothers and fathers. Mothers and fathers, they believed, were fundamentally different. They cast mothers as more innately nurturing than fathers. Mothers were blessed with a ‘fountain of unfailing love’ for their children, and the care with which they
parented demonstrated their devotion. Some parental advisers were so convinced of this ‘empire of the mother’ that they wrote for a female audience, assuming that mothers would be the ones primarily engaged in childrearing. At the same time, parental advisers believed that because mothers and fathers were different, they imparted different things to their children, and children needed both elements in order to be raised properly. Fathers were equally important to the task of raising children. Parental advisers worked hard to convince apathetic fathers of this fact (and recognized that perhaps their own emphasis on mothers may have caused this apathy). Where mothers were innately caring, fathers were more naturally authoritative. Each complemented the other. Fathers’ assertiveness and authority was balanced by mothers’ sympathy and tenderness, and vice versa. While parental advisers firmly believed that both parents were necessary to raising children properly, they also recognized a hierarchy in parenting. Though they lauded her devotion, parental advisers were keenly aware that a mother’s compassion could escape her and that she might do her children harm by being too lenient. (Though, interestingly, parental advisers seemed unconcerned about a father’s authority getting out of hand.) In these and other cases, it became clear that for parental advisers, the father was the ultimate arbiter: though both parents were critical to raising children properly, the will of the father trumped that of the mother.

As they refined the concept of an ideal parent, parental advisers came to think of parenting as a job—a job that required training from experts on the subject, and also a job that nobody but parents could perform. This was increasingly important, according to parental advisers, given the dangerous world in which parents were attempting to raise their children. Childhood acquaintances, servants, and nurses all represented threats to proper parenting. Parental advisers cautioned parents about the influences these non-family members might have on children’s
morals. Furthermore, they might cause children physical harm or even death. This was a particular danger with servants and nurses who, if given the task of childrearing, might not raise the child according to exacting standards. They might neglect or even abuse the child. Even other parenting advice was cast as dangerous. Parental advisers, particularly physicians, sought to end parents’ reliance on the wisdom (often folklore) of untrained others—‘ignorant nurses,’ helpful neighbors, midwives, even relatives. The information gleaned from these sources, however well-intentioned or based in extensive experience, could be harmful to children. Professional parents, therefore, had to be aware of the dangers that threatened their children, both morally and physically. They could not attempt to raise their children without expert advice—the dangers were simply too numerous. Schools, too, could be considered a threat to children. In the hands of teachers who did not have a connection to their students, who could say whether these children were receiving good guidance? Teachers, after all, were paid to care—they did not possess a ‘fountain of unfailing love’ for the children in their classroom. Yet the greatest threat that schools posed was that they manifested replacement parents. Parents, seeing their children taken off their hands for several hours at a time, might jump at the opportunity to shirk their duties. Faced with innumerable threats to parenting, parental advisers worked tirelessly to convince their audience that parents alone were the only entities capable of raising children properly. In order to do so, they needed the trained advice of parental experts. Failing to rely on this expertise would lead parents and children to ruin.

As the century wore on, parental advisers became increasingly wary about the trustworthiness of parents. Though generations of parental advisers had been hard at work for decades, it seemed that their work had not yielded a positive result. Parental advisers of the 1860s and 1870s looked at society with disdain and shock. Around them, they saw an army of
misfits harboring heritable diseases like scrofula and exhibiting heritable tendencies like criminality. This army of pestilence filled jails and almshouses, acting as both a burden and a scourge on society. Parental advisers did not need to look far for the cause or the solution; they found both in parents. Parents, they argued, married and procreated without considering their own health or the health of their spouse. Diseased and deranged family trees, rather than being pruned, were allowed to grow and thrive. In order to prevent society’s certain ruin, drastic action had to be taken. Parental advisers argued that parenthood was a privilege, not a right. For the good of children and of society, prospective parents needed to choose their marriage partners carefully. Ultimately, they argued that only the best should be allowed to breed. If society were to be spared and allowed to thrive once more, only those who met incredibly strict standards ought to be allowed to procreate. For parental advisers of the late nineteenth century, the ideal they envisioned was one in which perfect parents created ideal children. In this regard, they advocated a practice similar to what John Humphrey Noyes undertook at his Oneida community. Stirpiculture at Oneida involved ‘scientific human propagation,’ or pairing the best members of the community in order to create perfect children. In the hands of parental advisers at the end of the century, parenthood had transformed into an exclusive club into which not all were welcomed as members.

The broad change over time that this dissertation charts is that the idea of parenthood becomes much more restrictive over the course of the century. Parental advisers constructed an idea of purposeful parenthood that demanded that parents act a certain way. But over the course of the century, they also sought to limit who could participate.

While this dissertation explores the history of the concept of a parent in the United States, it is far from exhaustive. There are a number of areas that ought to be addressed with regard to
this rich topic: the ways in which parental advisers navigated non-biological families and parenthood, how slaveholding families negotiated their own conceptions of parenthood, and how nineteenth-century reformers implemented middle-class notions of parenthood. For example, as parental advisers laid the ideological groundwork for parental expectations, others did more tangible work that reflected changing ideals of parenthood; the thread of this impetus was not unique to parental advisers. It winds throughout the nineteenth century, not only as parental advisers debated and shaped what it meant to be a good parent, but also as others worked to more tangibly shape parenthood. It can be seen in the work of Charles Loring Brace, whose Children’s Aid Society redistributed over 100,000 children to new “parents” over a 75 year period.7 It can be seen in the ideas of Richard Henry Pratt, whose Carlisle Indian School removed Native American children from their homes and displaced them to a remote school where they would learn to shed their heritage. Pratt’s idea of ‘killing the Indian to save the man’ and Brace’s plan to transfer children from the slums to more respectable homes both relied on the same solution: removing children from parents who could not—or would not—raise them according to professed (white, middle-class) ideals. Furthermore, the thread of restricting parenthood can be found in forced sterilization of the “unfit.” Although sterilization laws were not enacted until the twentieth century, there is evidence that doctors performed sterilizations prior to this period.8 According to Mark Haller, “during the 1880’s several physicians experimented with removal of the ovaries as a method of alleviating certain forms of insanity among women.”9 As Haller notes,


regardless of the original intent, the result was prevention of procreation by those deemed “inferior.”

In short, these are all fruitful topics in need of further exploration as historians and scholars begin to flesh out Americans’ complex conception of parenthood. This dissertation is just the tip of the iceberg.
APPENDIX
NOTE ON METHOD AND SOURCES

My interest in the topic of parenthood started with my master’s research and this dissertation is a natural outgrowth of that work. At the time, I was researching nineteenth-century American children’s literature and it struck me that the didactic stories that comprised my primary sources were intended to instruct parents as much as their sons and daughters. Reading the secondary literature in the field demonstrated that scholars had not examined this. Furthermore, the literature in family history spoke extensively about mothers and fathers as discrete groups, but had not addressed parents and parenthood. What was expected of parents? What made a ‘good’ parent or a ‘bad’ parent? What factors could be influenced in parenting? What happens when parents fail? Who can be trusted to parent ‘properly’? Is there any agreement on what ‘good’ parenting looks like? All of these questions represented fertile ground for research. My interest was (and is) influenced by contemporary debates about parenting and parenthood—found on blogs, Twitter, online forums, as well as magazines and newspapers—and how these questions continue to crop up today. This is a rich debate, in short, and one in which we have not reached a consensus.

Because it touches on so many areas, though, I had to make tough decisions; I had to limit my scope. I decided to look at published sources, because my intent was to get at society’s concept of a parent: what people thought a parent should be. I narrowed my sources to include three broad categories: legal, prescriptive, and scientific. These fields would allow me to access a wide range of ideas and ideals about parenting.

For legal sources, I focused on court cases because they would help me to understand how emerging notions of parenthood played out in custody battles. Starting with legal databases, I searched for a number of relevant terms (custody, mother, father, parent, divorce, etc.) and came
up with numerous court cases between 1820 and 1880. I sifted through those and discarded the ones that were not a good fit (where, for example, the mother was a prostitute) or for which there simply were not enough details to construct a strong argument. Of the remaining cases, many were very similar to one another. I chose a representative sample, as well as a few unique cases (such as *State v. Hand*, dealing with a Shaker father), that provided a good indication of how justices interpreted ideal notions of parenthood.

For prescriptive sources, I already had a good database (as it were) of children’s literature, and I knew I wanted to include that. But I also wanted more traditional prescriptive literature, as well as religious sources. I began that research at the Library of Congress, doing endless subject searches, but also searching for authors I knew of (or authors that other authors had mentioned). I also targeted magazines that explicitly dealt with parenting—magazines for which parenting and parenthood was their primary subject. This led me to publications such as *The Mother’s Magazine*, *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend*, and *Babyhood* (which, regrettably, fell outside of my time frame). What I quickly discovered about these particular sources was that the vagaries of the publishing industry had an impact on magazine numbering. This was an especial problem with citing *The Mother’s Assistant and Young Lady’s Friend*, as careful readers will undoubtedly note. That magazine began with volume numbers that matched neatly with years (volume 1 in 1841, volume 2 in 1842, and so on). For whatever reason, this system quickly devolved to the point that volume 8 was published in 1846 and volume fourteen in 1849, shortly after which the magazine abandoned volume numbers entirely. I have, therefore, provided as much information as I could glean in order to cite these magazines properly. Understandably, the citations are not nearly as tidy as I would like.
With regard to scientific sources, I began with the idea that I would research the discourse of heritability and the ways in which that discourse was marshaled in the parenting debate. What I quickly found was that nineteenth-century science was not easily decoupled from nineteenth-century medicine and that there was a large body of literature written by trained physicians who had a great deal to say about parenting. I expanded this part of my research to include medical as well as scientific tracts.

Relying on published materials, however, is problematic: it cannot reveal how it was received or what really took place in American homes. Similarly, court cases can only divulge so much. They tell you little about what is really happening in American life. That is, regardless of what “the law” says, people find ways of subverting it all the time. Certain questions—such as how effective parental advisers were—simply cannot be answered. The best social historians can manage is an educated guess. For example, one could argue that the fact that some of these parental advisers were able to support themselves in their careers over a number of years suggests social uptake. But without other corroborating evidence (diaries and letters, for example), published materials leave us guessing.

Despite these drawbacks, published materials are incredibly useful. They can reveal much about the values American society held at a given time. In the case of this dissertation, such sources can reveal what was expected of families in general and parents in particular; what traits were revered and what habits discouraged; and how parental advisers conceptualized a parent’s relationship to a child.

Sources aside, perhaps the most frustrating aspect of researching parenthood is actually one of its greatest strengths: it is a rich and multifaceted topic that speaks evocatively to a wide variety of themes. What became clear to me as I did my research is that this topic, already
narrowed in scope, still touched on a great many concepts: the rise of the middle class, the development of professionalism, the maturation of notions of manhood and womanhood (and fatherhood and motherhood), the changing ideologies of families (and geographical changes that affected families), the growth of the publishing industry, the push for formal education, and more. In short, it is a vast and complex topic. This presented some difficulties when it came to putting shape on the project. I opted for a chronological framework, one that would demonstrate change over time. That, too, presented challenges, because the voices of parental advisers hardly lend themselves neatly to chronological structure. Some are louder at certain times and quieter (though not always silent) at other times. The dissertation reflects this messy chronology in that some earlier chapters include later sources, and some later chapters include earlier sources. The topic’s richness also meant that many intriguing leads needed to be left on the cutting room floor, for future research (or for other researchers), some of which I have noted in the conclusion. Truly, the number of fascinating directions in which this topic could be taken seems endless.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Emily Munce was born in Manhattan, Kansas in 1977. She received her B.A. in history and political science at Kansas State University in 2000. After graduation, she worked as a secretary and then an accountant before enrolling as a University of Florida graduate student in 2003. Emily specializes in nineteenth-century United States history, particularly women’s history and family history. She also holds a Graduate Certificate in women’s studies. She has presented her work at several conferences and her research has been recognized by receipt of a number of grants and awards. After completing her PhD, Emily hopes to find a job that will enable her to pursue her love of researching and teaching history.

Emily married John Casey in 2003. Together, they look to the future with hope, optimism, and the excitement that accompanies new adventures.