

FOR MOST PEOPLE IN OUR SOCIETY, infants and children are small people to whom we should try to offer aid and comfort whenever possible. This attitude is new. A search of historical sources shows that until the last century children were instead offered beatings and whippings, with instruments usually associated with torture chambers. In fact, the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken.

The newness of the ability to feel empathy toward children is clear from a five-year study that my colleagues and I have just completed. The further back in history we went, the lower the level of child care we found, and the more likely children were to have been killed, abandoned, whipped, sexually abused and terrorized by their caretakers.

A child's life prior to modern times was uniformly bleak. Virtually every child-rearing tract from antiquity to the 18th century recommended the beating of children. We found no examples from this period in which a child wasn't beaten, and hundreds of instances of not only beating, but battering, beginning in infancy.

One 19th-century German schoolmaster who kept score reported administering 911,527 strokes with a stick, 124,000 lashes with a whip, 136,715 slaps with his hand and 1,115,800 boxes on the ear. The beatings described in most historical sources began at an early age, continued regularly throughout childhood, and were severe enough to cause bruising and bloodying. It took centuries of progress in parent-child relations before the West could begin to overcome its apparent need to abuse its children.

Personality, Not Technology. I believe that the major dynamic in historical change is ultimately neither technology nor economics. More important are the changes in personality that grow from differences between generations in the quality of the relationship between parent and child. Good parenting is something that has been achieved only after centuries as generation after generation of parents tried to overcome the abuse of their own childhoods by reaching out to their children on more mature levels of relating.

Throughout history, an adult has had three major reactions to a child who needs its care. The projective reaction consists of using the child as a receptacle for the adult's unconscious feelings. The reversal reaction occurs when the adult uses the child as a substitute for an adult figure who was important in his own childhood. The empathic reaction, a late historical acquisition, occurs if the adult is able to



Empathy for Children

Our Forebears Made Childhood a Nightmare

From antiquity's infanticide to 19th-century manipulation, the human track record on child-raising is bloody, dirty and mean. Only lately, and only now in small numbers, do parents feel that children need aid and comfort, not brutality.

by Lloyd DeMause

empathize with and satisfy the child's needs.

The first two reactions occurred simultaneously in parents in the past, producing a strange double image of the child in which it was at once both bad (projective) and needed (reversal). The further back in history you look, the more evident are these reactions and the more bizarre the prevailing attitudes toward children.

Century after century of battered children grew up and battered their own children in turn. John Milton's wife complained that she hated to hear the cries of his nephews as he beat them. Beethoven whipped his piano pupils with a knitting needle. Even royalty was not exempt—little Louis XIII was whipped upon awakening for his previous day's misdemeanors.

Even infants were often beaten. John Wesley's wife Susannah said of her babies, "When turned a year old (and some before), they were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly." Rousseau reported that young babies were often beaten to keep them quiet. An early American mother wrote of her battle with her four-month-old infant: "I whipped him 'til he was actually black and blue, and until I *could not* whip him any more, and he never gave up one single inch."

Salted and Swaddled. If the newborn was allowed to live, parents would salt it and then bathe it in ice water to "harden" it. The baby was tied up tightly in swaddling bands for its first year, supposedly to prevent it from tearing off its ears, breaking its legs, touching its genitals or crawling around like an animal. Traditional swaddling, as one American doctor described it, "consists in entirely depriving the child of the use of its limbs by enveloping them in an endless bandage, so as to not unaptly resemble billets of wood, and by which the skin is sometimes excoriated, the flesh compressed, almost to gangrene . . ."

Swaddled infants were not only more convenient to care for, since they withdrew into themselves in sleep most of the day, but they were also more easily laid for hours behind hot ovens, hung on pegs on the wall, and, wrote one doctor, "left, like a parcel, in every convenient corner." In addition, they were often thrown around like a ball for amusement. In 16th-century France, a brother of Henri IV, while being tossed from one window to another, was dropped and killed. Doctors complained of parents who broke the bones of their children in the "customary" tossing of infants. Nurses often said that the stays that encased children beneath their swaddling

bands were necessary because they could not "be tossed about without them."

Adults in the past, like contemporary child batterers, regularly succumbed to urges to mutilate, burn, freeze and drown infants. The Huns used to cut the cheeks of newborn males, Italian Renaissance parents would "burn in the neck with a hot iron, or else drop a burning wax candle" on newborn babies, and it was common to cut the string under the newborn's tongue, often with the midwife's fingernail. In every age, the deliberate mutilation of children's bones and faces prepared them for a lifetime of begging.

As late as the 19th century in Eastern Europe, baptism was not a matter of simple sprinkling, but an ice-water ordeal that often lasted for hours and sometimes caused the death of the infant. The regular practice of the plunge bath involved nearly drowning the infant over and over again in ice-cold water "with its mouth open and gasping for breath." The dipping of infants in cold rivers has been considered therapeutic since Roman times and, as late as the 19th century, children were often put to bed wrapped in cold wet towels to make them hardy. With such beginnings, it is not surprising that 18th century pediatrician William Buchan said "almost one half of the human species perish in infancy by improper management or neglect."

Although there were many exceptions to the general pattern, the average child of parents with some wealth spent his earliest years in the home of a wet nurse, returned home at age three or four to the care of other servants, and was sent out to service, apprenticeship, or school by age seven, so that the amount of time parents of means actually spent raising their children was minimal.

Since antiquity, wet nurses have been acknowledged to have been thoroughly unreliable—Jacques Guillimeau described how the child at nurse might be "stifled, overlaid, be let fall, and so come to an untimely death, or else may be devoured, spoiled, or disfigured by some wild beast." A clergyman told one British doctor about his parish which was "filled with suckling infants from London, and yet, in the space of one year, he buried them all except two." Of 21,000 children born in Paris in 1780, 17,000 were sent into the country to be wet-nursed, 3,000 were placed in nursery homes, 700 were wet-nursed at home and only 700 were nursed by their own mothers. Even those mothers who kept their infants at home often did not breast-feed them, giving them pap (water and grain) instead. One 15th-century mother,

who had moved from an area in which nursing infants was common, was called "swinish and filthy" by her Bavarian neighbors for nursing her child herself, and her husband threatened to stop eating if she did not give up this "disgusting habit."

Terrors of the Night. As the child grew out of swaddling clothes, parents found it terribly frightening to care for, having projected their own unconscious needs into the child. As a result, children were always felt to be on the verge of turning into actual demons, or at least to be easily susceptible to "the power of the Devil." To keep their small devils cowed, adults regularly terrorized them with a vast army of ghostlike figures, from the Lamia and Striga of the ancients, who ate children raw, to the witches of Medieval times, who would steal bad children away and suck their blood. One 19th-century tract described in simplified language the tortures God had in store for children in



Hell: "The little child is in this red-hot oven. Hear how it screams to come out . . . It stamps its little feet on the floor." The need to personify punitive figures was so powerful that this terrorizing of children did not stop at imaginary figures. Dummies were actually made up to be used in frightening children. One English writer, in 1748, describes how:

"The nurse takes a fancy to quiet the peevish child, and with this intent, dressed up an uncouth figure, makes it come in, and roar and scream at the child in ugly disagreeable notes, which grate upon the tender organs of the ear, and at the same time, by its gesture and near approach, makes as if it would swallow the infant up."

Another method that parents used to terrorize their children employed corpses. A common moral lesson involved taking children to visit the gibbet, where they were forced to inspect rotting corpses hanging there as an example of what happens to bad children when they grow up. Whole classes were taken out of school to

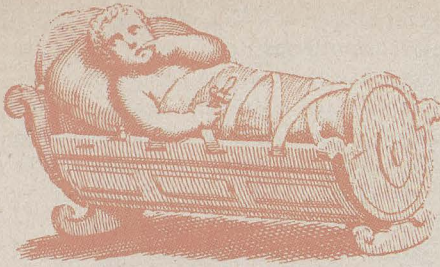
witness hangings, and parents would often whip their children afterwards to make them remember what they had seen.

Sexual Abuse. The sexual abuse of children was also far more prevalent in the past than it is today. Growing up in Greece and Rome often included being used sexually by older men. Boy brothels flourished in every city in antiquity, and slave boys were commonly kept for homosexual use. Sexual abuse by pedagogues and teachers of small children was a common complaint, and even Aristotle thought that adult homosexuality must be a result of "those who are abused from childhood."

Erotic drawings often show nude children waiting on adults in sexual embrace, and Quintilian said that even noble children "hear us use such words, they see our mistresses and minions; every dinner party is loud with foul songs, and things are presented to their eyes of which we should blush to speak." Tiberius "taught children of the most tender years, whom he called his *little fishes*, to play between his legs while he was in his bath. Those which had not yet been weaned, but were strong and hearty, he set at fellatio." Castrated children were considered as especially arousing in antiquity, and infants were often castrated in the cradle for use in brothels.

The sexual use of children continued until early modern times. Servants were





commonly known to be child molesters, and even parents would masturbate their children "to make their yards grow longer." Little Louis XIII was often hauled into bed by his parents and others and included in their sexual acts. By the 18th century, however, parents began instituting severe punishments for childhood sensuality, perhaps in an unconscious maneuver to control their own sexual desires. By the 19th century, parents and doctors began waging a frenzied campaign against childhood masturbation, threatening to cut off the child's genitals, performing circumcision and clitoridectomy without anesthesia as punishment, making children wear spiked cages and other restraints, and opening anti-masturbation sanatoria all over Europe.

Good News. Despite the bleakness of this general historical picture of childhood, there is good evidence that childrearing modes have continuously evolved over the past two millennia in the West. An independent source of change lies within the parent-child relationship itself, as each generation of parents attempts anew to go beyond the abuses to which it has been subjected, producing a psychological advance in each period of history.

Consider, for instance, the long struggle against infanticide. In antiquity infanticide was so common that every river, dung-heap and cesspool used to be littered with dead infants. Polybius blamed the

depopulation of Greece on the killing of legitimate children, even by wealthy parents. Ratios of boys to girls in census figures ran four to one, since it was rare for more than one girl in a family to be spared. Christians were considered odd for their opposition to infanticide, although even that opposition was mild, with few penalties. Large-scale infanticide of legitimate babies continued well into Medieval times, with boy-girl ratios in rich as well as poor families often still running two to one. As late as 1527, one priest admitted that "the latrines resound with the cries of children who have been plunged into them." Yet infanticide was increasingly confined to the killing of illegitimate babies, and there is similar evidence of a continuous decrease in beating and other abusive practices through the centuries.

Evolutionary Trends. The following six evolutionary modes seem to describe the major trends of parent-child relations in the more advanced parts of the West:

INFANTICIDAL MODE (ANTIQUITY): The image of Medea hovered over childhood in antiquity, not only because parents resolved their anxieties about taking care of children by infanticidal acts, but also because the lives of those children who were allowed to live were constantly threatened by severe abuse.

ABANDONMENT MODE (MEDIEVAL): The parents who accepted the right of the child to live but whose immaturity made them still unable to care for it, abandoned the child either to a wet nurse, foster family, monastery, nunnery, other home (as servants) or simply through severe emotional neglect by the parents themselves.

AMBIVALENT MODE (RENAISSANCE): A closer relationship with the child produced ambivalent parents, fearful that their child's insides were full of evil so that they had to be purged with continuous enemas, yet close enough to express both love and hate, often in bewildering juxtaposition.

INTRUSIVE MODE (18TH CENTURY): A de-



crease of ambivalence now enabled the parent actually to make the intrusive control of the child's insides part of their own defense system. The child was no longer so full of dangerous projections, and was therefore not swaddled, nor sent out to wet-nurse, nor given enemas, but was instead toilet-trained, prayed with but not yet played with, and disciplined as much through guilt as by beating. As empathy grew, pediatrics could be invented, and the general improvement in child care reduced infant mortality greatly.

SOCIALIZING MODE (19TH CENTURY TO NOW): Still the major mode of parents today, socializing involves thinking of the child as someone who needs continuous training and guidance in order to become

civilized. Most discussions of child care still take place within the socializing mode, and it has been the source of all contemporary models of the psyche from Freud to Skinner. In practice, it involves giving up most of the severe beating and other overt forms of abuse while using covert methods of manipulation, guilt, and a general detached quality of parenting to sustain the long periods of contact with children whose increasing needs are simply too much for the parents.

HELPING MODE (JUST BEGINNING): The helping mode starts with the proposition that the child knows better than the parent what it needs at each stage of its life, and involves both parents fully in the child's daily life as they help it with its

expanding needs. The helping mode requires enormous time, energy and emotional maturity on the part of both parents, especially in the first six years of the child's life, as they play with it, tolerate its regressions, and discuss its needs and conflicts in an effort to keep pace with its emotional and intellectual growth.

Studies of contemporary American families show children being cared for by parents included in all six of these modes. In fact, when psychiatrists arrange family types on a scale of decreasing health, they are actually listing historical modes of childrearing, with the lower part of the scale describing parents who behave like evolutionary arrests, psychological fossils stuck in personality modes from a previous historical period when most parents used to batter children. The finding that most child abusers were themselves abused as children supports this picture.

Even though childhood for many is now more humane than at any other time in history, functional equivalents of earlier modes remain with us. Children are not sent out to wet nurses at birth, or to be servants at seven, but we do abandon them to hosts of nurseries, teachers, camps, and baby sitters for major portions of their young lives. Intrusive parents still find ways to restrict their baby's movements, much as swaddling and corsets did, and parents continue to emotionally abandon, betray, manipulate and hurt their children both overtly and covertly.

Because psychic structure is passed from generation to generation through the narrow gap of childhood, the child-rearing practices of a society are more than just another item on a list of cultural traits. The history of childhood in fact determines which elements in all the rest of history will be transmitted and which will be changed. By studying the history of childhood we can gain an understanding of the personality traits on which our adult society rests, and perhaps even alter those historical group fantasies like war that threaten us most.

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No Battered-Baboon Syndrome Infant T.L.C., Simian Style

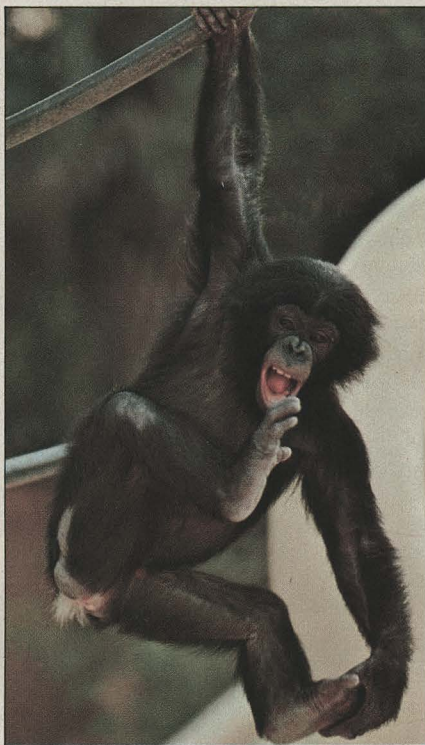
Lunchtime with your local baboons is pretty much a free-for-all. Dominant animals corral and consume their favorite foods while the more submissive ones lose out and display their disgust by threatening and chasing each other. Eventually everyone eats, but often there is more fighting than feeding.

This kind of chaos could be deadly for young baboons, who are at birth almost as dependent as a human infant. But it is not. The battered-baboon syndrome does not exist.

Baby baboons are equipped with built-in protection against adult aggression. Unlike their all-brown parents, they have pink skin and black hair. These characteristics do more than add a little color to baboon life. They are a hands-off sign to all baboons that allows the youngsters to enjoy safety and relative tranquility in a society where violence is the rule.

Chimpanzees are not nearly as violent as baboons. In fact, violence seems too strong a word for their infrequent fights. But, just in case, chimp children are equipped with an aggression inhibitor, a tuft of white hair on each little black bottom. These cotton tails render the infants immune to adult aggression and buy a large chunk of tolerance for childlike behaviors. They get away with murder.

Many primate species have this kind of system. Some physical characteristic of the young animal signals, "I'm a baby; don't hurt me." As the animal matures, dependency decreases and so does the



signal. It disappears when the individual is mature enough to be part of society, subject to all the regular rules and retributions of proper primate existence.

It would be nice if the romantic myths about how human babies make everyone feel kind and loving were true. Unhappily, both DeMause and common knowledge tell us they are not. *Homo sapiens* are among the very few primates who are unable to keep abusive paws off the defenseless young.

According to DeMause, it looks as if we may be catching up with our more civilized relatives. But just think how much easier it would have been if we had kept some of our beastly characteristics in the first place.

—Joyce Dudney Fleming