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**Child Management in Middle-Class
Families in the Early Twentieth Century:
Reconsidering Fatherhood in a New Context**

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Abstract

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the role of the father in middle-class families was in a period of transition. In the nineteenth century, fathers were expected to concentrate their energies on earning sufficient income to maintain the class status of their families. The father as the head of the household was responsible for making major decisions regarding his family's welfare and for punishing the serious misdeeds of his children. My research shows that as the nineteenth century came to an end, however, this construction of fatherhood began to change. This paper examines child-rearing advice literature between approximately 1900 and 1920, which increasingly called for fathers to take an active role in the everyday decisions of child management. Many experts expressed concern about the priority given to breadwinning and business success by fathers, discussing the need for involved fathers who gave serious consideration to the development of their children. In order to encourage warm relations between fathers and children, experts contended that the father's role should not be limited to that of disciplinarian, arguing that fathers should not be left responsible for doling out all punishment, nor should their role be limited to punishing misdeeds. Although fathers were still considered the heads of their households, child-rearing advice literature encouraged them to accept the guidance of the nascent group of child-rearing experts and the advice of the more experienced parents closer to home, their wives.

At the turn of the last century, many social reformers and commentators felt that the middle-class family was in crisis. The middle-class birthrate was dropping, the nation's divorce rate increased fifteenfold between 1870 and 1920, and many women were delaying marriage in order to pursue educational or career goals.¹ In the political and economic realms, women increasingly impinged on male privilege. By the 1890s, the separate spheres doctrine, which called for middle-class men and women to live in largely separate social and economic worlds, was losing power. Women had gained political strength through the temperance and abolitionist movements by arguing that their special position as the more "moral" sex entitled, even obligated, them to fight for social change. The suffrage movement posed an even greater challenge to the doctrine of separate spheres as women argued for their rights, not only as women, but as citizens. Increasingly, women took over white-collar occupations that had once been the preserve of middle-class men, such as clerking and secretarial work.

Furthermore, the nation faced an unprecedented wave of immigration—in the first decade of the twentieth century, nine million foreigners landed on the shores of the United States; almost three-quarters of these immigrants claimed eastern and southern European heritage.² The changing face of the nation deeply concerned many political leaders who looked to middle-class families to preserve "traditional" American values. Some, including Theodore Roosevelt, began to speak of "race suicide," urging middle-class white women to accept having and raising large families as their duty to the nation.

In the nineteenth century, middle-class fathers were expected to concentrate their energies on earning sufficient income to maintain the class status of their families. These fathers were expected to provide for the education of their children, to advise them on educational and career choices, and to oversee the big decisions of the family. Fathers were also the head of the household in regards to discipline. Any large infraction of the rules would land the middle-class child in trouble with his father, but the day-to-day decisions of child management rested almost entirely with the mother. As the nineteenth century came to an end, however, this construction of fatherhood began to change. According to child-rearing advice literature, fathers were increasingly expected to take an active role in the everyday decisions of child management. Fathers were encouraged to wake up to their duties as parents, duties that were being

reconfigured to include forging strong personal relationships with their children and studying the developmental progress of each child. Moreover, fathers were expected to seek education for fatherhood from the nascent group of child-rearing experts and were asked to give serious reflection to their responsibilities as fathers. Far from a distant, authoritarian head of the family, child-rearing advice authors envisioned a middle-class father who was respectful of his wife's opinions, willing to learn about the proper techniques of child management from her and from child-rearing experts. This new father was friend to his children and gave the role of father careful, conscious consideration. Many experts expressed concern about the priority given to breadwinning and business success by fathers, discussing the need for involved fathers who would teach their children, particularly sons, moral lessons.

If the family was deemed by some to be in crisis, many historians, starting with John Hingham, have argued that there was also a "crisis of masculinity" in this period. Historian Anthony Rotundo has identified the 1880s and 1890s as the "moment of greatest change" in the development of a new standard of masculinity, a "passionate manhood" that celebrated bold and decisive action over reflection.³ Reformers at the turn of the twentieth century increasingly judged vital social institutions feminized, and to an extent they were. Women were the majority of churchgoers, and girls outnumbered boys in Sunday school classes, which were usually taught by women. Women had largely taken over the teaching profession, and girls both outperformed and outnumbered boys in the public schools. The mother had been elevated to a new position of prominence in the household during the Victorian era and held much of the responsibility of child rearing in her hands. In the nineteenth century, the importance of fathers in the family declined as the mother's role became increasingly central in child rearing.⁴ The shift of the middle-class father's place of work from the home to an office in town greatly decreased the amount of time he was able to spend with his family. Historian Robert L. Griswold argues that while this shift in the early 1800s to "breadwinning" as the foremost of the father's duties to his children affected all segments of society, it affected the middle class in a particular way: "Breadwinning became ever more important to a class increasingly wedded to consumption."⁵

Griswold argues that the crisis of masculinity was answered through a "redefined conception of fatherhood, breadwinning and consumption. Middle-class men would become

increasingly concerned about the quality of their lives as fathers, ironically at a time when work took them outside the home for most of the day.”⁶ Fathers of the early twentieth century spent more time with their children and cultivated friendlier, more affectionate, relationships with them than their mid-century counterparts. After 1880, a new vision of domestic life that emphasized “fatherly nurture” was increasingly articulated and enacted.⁷ Historian Margaret Marsh contends that we must temper our understanding of the cult of masculinity with the image of the contented suburban father who had increased leisure and professional security starting in the 1890s.⁸ In the early twentieth century, middle-class men were taking a greater interest in the details of homemaking as well as the daily chores of child rearing.

The period 1900 to 1920 was one of transition for middle-class fathers. Older notions of the distant breadwinner and family patriarch certainly remained, yet a more companionate family ideal that emphasized the importance of fathers’ nurturance and friendship with their children grew. Historian Joan Seidl studied the personal papers of Minnesotans and found that fathers of the early twentieth century were far more interested in the home than those of the 1880s, reinforcing the idea that the period around the turn of the century was one of transition for fathers.⁹ This paper explores advice literature from approximately 1900 to 1920, examining this new vision of family life and paternal involvement in child management. This investigation suggests that calls to fathers to spend more time with their children and to become more involved in the choices of child management increased over this period. Fathers remained the head of the household, but were also asked for the first time to act as students to their wives in the context of child rearing. Mothers, who were the more experienced parent and were the primary readers of child-advice literature, were directed by this advice to instruct their husbands on proper child-management techniques. Yet, the father remained the head decision maker of the family, according to this literature, and was expected to bring to child rearing the knowledge of his “sphere” and to add his strength and resolve to child management, in contrast with the mother’s presumably softer and gentler attitude. Fathers had traditionally been in charge of discipline, at least in cases of some severity, but child-rearing advice authors urged parents to reconsider this arrangement both by expanding fathers’ role and by asking mothers not to use the father as a threat against the children.

In using prescriptive literature, I am somewhat limited in my ability to make conclusions about the lived experience of actual families. Certainly, there is a difference between what advice authors advocated and the actual practice of American middle-class families, but there are numerous examples within this literature of families struggling to reconfigure the role of the father and of fathers actively engaging in the management of their children, and this suggests a real change in the way American middle-class families conceived of fatherhood.

The Experts

The early twentieth century saw the rise of the expert. Homemaking and motherhood were increasingly depicted as professions that required training and expert guidance.¹⁰ The 1894 publication of Dr. L. Emmett Holt's *The Care and Feeding of Children* marked a turning point in the transition to scientific child rearing, according to historian Katherine Arnup.¹¹ Experts attracted followers by promoting a modern, scientific mode of housekeeping and child raising, and women in the upper and middle classes responded earliest and most enthusiastically.¹² Robert Griswold argues that, in the early twentieth century, "The language of science and expertise had been appropriated in ways that left fathers ever more irrelevant to the rearing of their own children. Motherhood was increasingly seen as a science, fatherhood a seldom discussed art."¹³ But my research shows that between 1900 and 1920 middle-class fathers were beginning to attract the attention of this burgeoning group of child-rearing experts.

The professionalization of child-rearing experts was by no means complete in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ What I call "child-rearing experts" in this paper were not a solidified professional group, but rather a disparate collection of authors who believed that they had expertise to share with parents. By the 1920s, the professionalization of child-rearing experts had advanced a great deal, but before 1920, professional credentials were not required for those writing with advice to parents on child management. Those who lent their authority to child-rearing advice articles published in magazines and who wrote entire books on the best techniques of child management in the first two decades of the twentieth century were drawn from the professions of teaching and medicine and from G. Stanley Hall's child-study movement. Also among these experts were those claiming the authority of hands-on experience—mothers who

gained work writing articles offering advice to other parents. Many of these authors did not publish book-length works or claim association with academic institutions, evidence that the professionalization of child-rearing advice givers was still in its early stages. Others who wrote advice for parents in this period included ministers, a tradition that dated from the earliest works of parenting advice, and editors, columnists, and journalists, many of whom were particularly interested in women's issues. Political reformers also lent their voices to concerns over child-rearing and paternal involvement.

Hierarchy in the Family

Many advice authors commented on the proper hierarchy of the family, considering the roles that should be played by mothers, fathers, and children. The father was generally agreed to be the head of the household, but the relationship between him and his wife in its ideal form was one of mutual respect and mutual decision making. As head of the household, the father was theoretically the final authority in all family matters, but his total authority was by no means universally accepted by the experts.

The role of the child in the family was likewise contested. Many authors emphasized the importance of maintaining the subservience of children, worrying that the child's newfound centrality in the family and increased value in society were upsetting the proper order of things. Edward Bok, editor of *The Ladies' Home Journal* and a reformer who controversially advocated for sex education, nonetheless worried in 1903 about the American family putting the child first:

A tremendous loss in the deference and respect due from children to their parents has occurred in our generation. The fact can be deplored but not denied.... [T]he child must be trained to consider himself secondary to his parents; not in a spirit of servility or humility, but in a spirit of belief that obedience to his parents and deference to his elders are the first laws of childhood.¹⁵

Another author suggested that obedience must be made a habit: "By being consistent, the mother not only commands submission at the time, but also a habit of obedience, which is the first and most essential lesson in the child's curriculum."¹⁶ Academic writers in educational journals

shared this concern with the presumed tendency of American children to be disobedient and willful. One New York professor translated an article by the German author Friedrich Paulsen for the *Educational Review* in 1908. Paulsen felt that children in the latest generation were too coddled and generally given too high a status in the family: “In the home we find lenity and indulgence to be the rule.”¹⁷ M.V. O’Shea, from the University of Wisconsin, wrote in the same journal in 1907, “The time to establish in the child respect for authority, and a disposition to yield to it readily and contentedly, is just when his expectations and habits are getting set.”¹⁸ Parents should demand full obedience at an early age, according to these authors, in order to avoid trouble later.

This belief in the importance of early and total filial submission was echoed by William Shearer, professional educator and author of many books of advice, who wrote in 1904,

Happy the parent who, before it is too late, realizes the fact that the only parental government which is worthy of the name is that founded on absolute, unquestioned authority. In the training of children the first duty of the parent is the establishment of authority over them.... The parent who fails to govern his child is apt not only to lose the child’s love, but also to earn the child’s contempt.¹⁹

Shearer argued that this submission was of paramount importance in child management: “[N]o parent should hesitate to strive to bring his child under absolute authority by gentle means, if possible, but by some means without fail.”²⁰ Many advice authors expressed similar sentiments, arguing that a habit of quick, unquestioning obedience was necessary for the safety and health of the child.

The father was regarded as the head of the household, a role that some authors emphasized more than others. Several authors used biblical support to explain and defend the father’s authority over his family. Shearer clarified his support of the sharing of parental duties by both parents:

Each parent should be considerate of the other, but the father is the husband or houseband. He is the head of the family. This is the teaching of the Bible, which is accepted by all men and by most women. It may be argued that in some families, because of peculiar temperament, the mother is better fitted to

be at the head than the father. The fact remains, however, she is the queen of the house, not the king.²¹

Such authors envisioned respectful relations between spouses but asserted strongly the father's position as the family head.

The father's role was sometimes conceived as that of a wise leader, the savior of the mother-as-manager, who could become easily overworked when she took too much on herself. In one story, written by a returning veteran in 1921, the officer came home to his family of five boys to find his wife frazzled and overworked by what her husband perceived as a lack of "discipline and efficiency." He wrote,

I soon decided that something must be done at once, if my wife was to retain any vestige of her youth, good looks, and composure; and it was principally with the idea of conserving these desirable wifely qualities that I called a family council of war to decide upon ways and means of promoting family efficiency.²²

The husband designed a system of discipline based on his experience at the naval academy, but arranged all the particulars of the system of demerits and classes with his wife's assistance. He then deemed himself the commanding officer and his wife the "top-kicker." Although he and his wife gave out the demerits and derived the system's specifics together, the father was clearly in the role of head of the family. In fact, in the illustration accompanying the article, the mother stands at attention with her five sons, saluting the father.

Nonetheless, authors saw the parents' roles as complementary, if not equal. Jane Dearborn Mills, whose book of advice to mothers was introduced by the president of the National Congress of Mothers, sought to explain to her young son the complementary nature of husband and wife, of business and home: "[G]radually [she] instilled into his mind the mutual dependence of the man and the woman; the intertwining into one of the masculinity of business and the femininity of home."²³ She later explained to the boy, "[M]en can do housekeeping, but not homemaking."²⁴ Each parent was imagined to have a specific role in the family, and the more intensive child-rearing role was clearly the mother's. Charlotte Reeve Conover, who claimed authority simply as the "mother of eight," wrote in a 1910 *Ladies' Home Journal* article, "No

part of the responsibility [of motherhood] can be delegated to another.... Even a father, useful as he sometimes is, makes but a poor sort of a deputy in emergencies.”²⁵ The father may have been the titular head of the household, but in the minds of advice givers, he was clearly the less important parent.

Historian Joseph H. Pleck describes the father’s role in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as that of a chairman rather than a manager, contending that fathers, according to a 1920s study of Middletown, had lost touch with what was going on in their own families. Pleck writes, “The father continued to set the official standard of morality and to be the final arbiter of family discipline, but he did so at more of a remove than before: He stepped in only when the mother’s delegated authority failed.”²⁶ Historian Marilyn L. Brady echoes this idea, writing that after 1815 middle-class fathers “played a declining role” in the daily interaction of child rearing and existed as an increasingly distant figurehead: “They might step in to punish or to act as the ultimate authority, but some sons and daughters were being raised in almost exclusively female, domestic worlds.”²⁷ Historian Anthony Rotundo contends that the nineteenth-century father remained the head of the household, as chief decision maker and financial supporter, and that he remained chief disciplinarian of his children, but was responsible for correcting only major offenses.²⁸ It is certainly true that, compared with fathers of the eighteenth century, turn-of-the-century fathers were less intimately involved in child rearing, but it would be easy to exaggerate paternal absence. Advice literature reveals numerous examples of fathers who were involved in the daily decisions of child management and shows real concern on the part of child-rearing advice authors about the perceived lack of father involvement. By the early 1900s, the role of the father was being rethought.

Parental Unity in Child Management

Each parent had a unique contribution to make in the rearing of the children, and the parents were expected to work in concert with one another. In 1904, the educator William Shearer described the importance of parental cooperation:

At every point it is the father’s duty to stand ready to co-operate with the mother in her attempts to train the children.... If the father does not take

interest in the training of children it will be exceedingly hard for the mother, and they will not generally be trained as they should be; for there are many things which can be learned only from the father. While the home is the mother's world, the father is the connecting link between the world and the home. Each has a part to perform, the performance of which is necessary for the best results.²⁹

The father's contribution to child rearing was understood as distinct from the mother's and as supportive of her efforts.

Child-rearing experts asserted that a happy home depended upon the unity of the parents in all decisions regarding their children, or at the very least, the appearance of unity.³⁰ The author of one 1907 article felt that the reason many young girls left home before marriage was because of domestic unrest and spelled out her own commitment to governing her child with her husband as one.³¹ Ernest Hamlin Abbott, a seminary graduate and editor of *The Outlook Magazine*, insisted in 1908 that a husband and wife must not criticize each other or contradict each other in front of the children.³² Dr. Emelyn Lincoln Coolidge, writing in 1914, agreed: "In training children the father and the mother must agree absolutely."³³ Not only did experts worry that parental disharmony could subject children to emotional conflict, they warned that children could learn to take advantage of such parental division. Gustav Pollak, who authored several books for mothers, wrote in 1902,

Where the discipline of a child is concerned there are very apt to be conflicting opinions between the father and mother, which often lead the one to interfere with a method of punishment which is being carried out by the other. This should never be done in the presence of the child, who will quickly appreciate the situation and take advantage of it, for our children are often wiser than we realize.³⁴

Rather than supporting the absolute authority of the father, child-rearing experts described the father's role as supportive and emphasized the necessity that parents respect each other's authority in matters of child management in front of the children. The most important issue in child management according to these authors was consistency, and this meant that parents needed to cooperate in determining the proper course of child management, in choosing the

specific punishments used and what behaviors were to be punished, and in respecting and upholding the discipline choices of the other parent.

Jane Dearborn Mills expressed concern that mothers, in their role as center of the home, “fail[ed] many times to recognize the man’s true wisdom.” By doing this, a wife “prevents and discourages in him the conscious growing of his fatherhood,” according to Mills.

Because a man sees general laws and less of detail than a woman, many an ardently devoted mother thrusts aside as of no value the father’s opinion which happens to differ from her own, with never a thought of trying to find if there may not be something of wisdom in it, and if by modifying both his and hers a new one might not be formed, stronger and truer than either his or hers alone can be.³⁵

Under the cult of domesticity, American middle-class women had become dominant figures in the home, even though they were not at the head of its hierarchy. Mills was among those child-rearing advice givers who worried that the power given to women in the home was stripping men of their rights and responsibilities as parents, concerning herself with the “conscious growing” of fatherhood within men. Far from being immune from loving, parental instincts, fathers had to cultivate their paternal instincts with the help of their wives, just as mothers cultivated and refined their maternal instincts with the help of turn-of-the-century advice givers.

Mothers Teaching Fathers

Because women were the primary readers of advice literature, they were responsible for putting that advice to use in the home and, sometimes, for educating their husbands on proper child-management technique. The father being the acknowledged head of the household sometimes put women in a difficult position. On the one hand, they were told by experts that a good parent followed the dictates of the new child-rearing experts, and, on the other hand, they were reminded that the father was “king” of his household. Mothers were not to criticize their husbands’ choices in front of the children, yet they were urged to take action as the “natural guardian” of their children by urging their husbands toward the correct path.³⁶ For advice about marital discord over child management, some mothers turned to child-rearing experts, such as Mrs. Theodore W. Birney (Alice McLellan Birney), a reformer and wife of a prosperous lawyer

who had educated herself on the subject of child rearing, studying the works of G. Stanley Hall, Herbert Spencer, and Friedrich Froebel particularly. Devoting herself to education for motherhood, Birney was instrumental in the foundation of the National Congress of Mothers in 1897. After she retired as president of that organization in 1902, Birney wrote a series of articles on child rearing for *Delineator* magazine. These were later collected in her book, *Childhood*. In one published letter, a mother wrote to Birney wondering whether a mother had the right to interfere with her husband's methods of training when she knew them to be wrong. Birney responded that the mother should never contradict the father in front of the child, but that through the application of tact, patience, and reason, she would probably be able to convince her husband to learn better child-management techniques, adding that "if he can be inveigled into reading a few practical articles on child nature, the chances are that he will in time prove a valuable ally in proper training of the children."³⁷ One wife wondered in 1909 what she could do to curb her husband's habit of keeping the children up too late, explaining that she had "gently remonstrated, but Harry will not listen...when I became more decisive he took offense." The author's response was,

Unfortunately, there is very little that a wife can do where a husband's selfishness is concerned, and more's the pity.... At the same time a mother is the natural guardian of her child, and she has a right – and should exercise that right...– to stand and insist for what she believes to be best for the welfare of her child. If the father cannot see it he must be made to see it. But the child should not suffer.³⁸

This response more firmly reinforced a woman's right, even duty, to see her children raised according to the rules of modern child rearing, even at the cost of angering her husband.

In fact, mothers who failed to curb the dangerous habits of their husbands were regarded as weak and as failures to their children. Martha S. Bensley (later Martha Bensley Bruère), an influential home economist of the Progressive era, wrote a series of articles in 1905 for *Everybody's Magazine* about her "undercover" experiences as a nursery governess in a variety of homes. In one of these placements, the mistress of the house was completely dominated by a mean and profane father. Bensley wrote, "That she was essentially a weak woman, her utter inability to curb her husband or control herself proved clearly enough."³⁹ A *Ladies' Home*

Journal article from 1900 entitled “Mothers’ Mistakes and Fathers’ Failures” warned of the damage inflicted by pretense in the home. It told the story of a mother who tried to protect the love her son had for his abusive father at the expense of the truth:

“He is your father, my son,” she would say. “Therefore he is entitled to your respect, loyalty and love.”

Queer reasoning this, and a very crooked way to start a boy going straight in his life, as she discovered later to her sorrow. [She had taught] him to be loyal to something which did not exist, to respect a man of no character.

In the end, the mother had to seek the protection of the law against her husband, but by then her son was aligned firmly with the father and “lost” to his mother.⁴⁰ Stories such as these served to instruct mothers that, although their husband might be the head of the household, it was up to mothers to protect their children from the father’s abuse or even from his bad habits and incorrect methods of child management.

Clearly, mothers did negotiate and disagree with their husbands over the management and discipline of their children. Some even sought the authority of the child-rearing advice givers in these spousal conflicts. One woman wrote to Marion Sprague, who identified herself only as a mother, in a correspondence published by *The Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1905, explaining, “Jim and I have fallen into a squabble over spanking.... He says [our son] must be spanked for naughtiness. I say no. What do you say?”⁴¹ The author responded in agreement with the wife, excusing her involvement by writing, “Well, I dare say that your husband will not mind much what I think, since I do not know at all clearly what it is that he thinks. He will not take me to be imagining myself as an arbitrator between you.”⁴² In this example, the author’s tone is that of a friendly advisor, a fellow mother who simply has more parenting experience than the advice seeker, rather than that of a scientific or professional expert. As with many advice givers of the first decade of the twentieth century, Sprague’s expertise rests at least partially on experience as a parent rather than on her formal education. Perhaps because of this casual, or uncredentialed, stance, the author is careful to note the authority of the husband and her lack of authority to contradict him, even as she does so.

In many early-twentieth-century books and articles on child management, the relationship between the wife and husband was described as mutually respectful and companionate. One admiring author described a father who, after “talk[ing] it all over with [his] wife,” decided to cut back on his work hours after his son’s twelfth birthday in order to spend more time with his son.⁴³ In another article written by Martha S. Bensley on her time spent as a governess, she described a successful family, commending the father for respecting his wife’s opinion and involving himself in the hiring of the governess and other aspects of his children’s education; “He not only cooperated with her, but interested himself in matters that were out of her province.”⁴⁴ The ideal father respected the opinions of his wife and was involved in the daily lives of his children and in decisions about their upbringing. Bensley and others wanted fathers to contribute to child rearing by complementing the knowledge of the mother, filling in gaps with his own areas of expertise, which were presumed to be in the world outside of the domestic.

Wake-Up Calls to Fathers

Although there are numerous examples of fathers and mothers working together to solve child-management problems in the child-rearing advice literature, most articles and books were directed toward a female audience and clearly expected mothers to do the vast majority of the labor of child rearing. Not all writers accepted this situation as ideal, however earnestly they praised the role of mother. A good number of authors called out to men to rethink their role as fathers and to begin to study fatherhood as women had begun to examine motherhood.⁴⁵

Edward Howard Griggs, who was a popular lecturer and well-regarded professor of humanities and chair of ethics at Stanford, wrote a series of articles on the moral training of children for *The Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1903. He wrote,

Mothers, it is true, are awakening to the fact that motherhood is a profession demanding a high degree of special and liberal culture for its right fulfillment, but the profession of fatherhood (even the words sound strange) is almost undiscovered. Most fathers feel that they have done quite well by their children if they won for them food, clothing and shelter, failing to see that the very heart of the parent’s duty to the child is the moral influence that can come only through daily companionship.⁴⁶

Griggs's emphasis on the importance of "daily companionship" represents a new way of thinking about fatherhood. Early-twentieth-century authors touted the value of friendship between fathers and their children in a new way. Griggs also emphasized the importance of giving fatherhood as a "profession" full consideration, an idea shared by the anonymous author of one article published in *Good Housekeeping* in 1919. The author introduced his autobiographical story this way:

Probably you have always taken it for granted that your son has a father – but has he? No doubt, there is some one about the house who pays the bills and gives orders, but does he fill more than a legal relationship? Is your son growing up 'independent of him except for the accident of birth'? We have, here, the true story of a boy who had a loving–and useless–father. He was, we fear, typical of many fathers today. The story can not fail to teach you the new meanings of the little understood word, "fatherhood."⁴⁷

The author wrote about his father: "He made mistakes, and this was one of them, that he never took time to examine the nature of his obligation to his children, never thought about it, and so never understood it." This problem had its roots in past generations, for the ideas of this unreflective father were "simply what had been passed on to him from preceding generations when social problems were less complex."⁴⁸ The modern father, suggests the author, needed to become more thoughtful and involved in order to help his offspring negotiate the complex terrain of the modern world. These authors envisioned a father-child relationship that was close and friendly, with fathers involved not only in the big decisions of their children's lives, such as choices about education, marriage, and occupation, but in the daily games and activities of youth.

Fathers should not consider their role as limited to breadwinning, these authors averred. One 1915 article posed an even more demanding call to fathers; the author suggested that they should form fathers' clubs to look after the wellbeing of all the children of the community in the same manner as some women were doing in their mothers' groups. The article offered its readers "suggestions which will help you to get the fathers in your town waked up to a sense of their responsibilities and opportunities." The article asked, "What's the matter with father? Is he all right? The fathers in one town at least were not, and when one of them put it up to the rest, they came to the conclusion that they all had been lying down on their jobs." The author reflected,

“The motherhood of women has been dwelt on, publicly and privately, until women, in any rôle except that of mothers, have had to assume a sort of defensive attitude; but it is a new thing to find anybody not an avowed reformer considering the fatherhood of men.” Mr. Stevenson, the hero of the article and founder of the first fathers’ club, chastised men:

“As fathers we are failures, and worse than failures. Men don’t *think* of themselves as fathers. They think of themselves as workers, as business men, as voters, but almost never as fathers. We put too much responsibility on mothers.... [T]hey ought not to be required to bring up children alone, and you know perfectly well that in nine families out of ten that is just what they do. “Now, what sort of fathers are you, and what are you going to do about it? Leave the whole responsibility of family life to the women, as most men have been doing since Adam, or will you try something new and original? Will you get together with me and tackle the job of learning how to be an intelligent, efficient father of children?”

Although the author of the article noted that Stevenson had perhaps “overstated the case against fathers,” the general tone of the piece confirmed that fathers indeed needed to reconsider their responsibilities to their children and the community.⁴⁹ As with the anonymous author of the autobiographical *Good Housekeeping* story “Will Fathers Never Learn”, Stevenson regards the notion of involved fathers as distinctly modern, attributing the limited involvement of many contemporary fathers in their children’s lives to the customs of the past. Yet, the desire that fathers parent as actively as mothers and that they be as involved in civic clubs as their wives belied the fact that most middle-class men worked outside the home six days a week.

The extent to which middle-class fathers were kept away from home by work is somewhat debated by historians, though all concur that the average middle-class father spent much of his time away from his family. Anthony Rotundo writes that through the nineteenth century “long work hours and lengthy commutes from the new middle-class suburbs” kept men out of the home, although he also describes a countertrend in the last decades of the century in which men began to value spending time at home more highly.⁵⁰ Robert Griswold also notes the increased nineteenth-century burden of work on middle-class men, who were expected to commute to work and to support children for a longer period of time.⁵¹ Margaret Marsh tempers this picture by noting that, by the 1890s, middle-class fathers enjoyed significant job security and

greater leisure than those of the early and mid-1800s. She cites another scholar's study that showed commuting times to be generally less than half an hour.⁵² Nonetheless, although between 1890 and 1910, the workweek declined by about seven hours, the average nonagricultural worker still worked approximately fifty hours each week, and, according to historian Peter Filene, white-collar workers probably worked more than that.⁵³ If we add fifteen-minute to half-hour one-way commuting times to this estimate, assuming middle-class workers labored six days a week, we can estimate that middle-class men were away from home for the purposes of work at least fifty-three to fifty-six hours per week.

Work and Fatherhood

Authors called for a change in values with the new emphasis to be on the success of fathers in rearing upstanding children, rather than on a man's success in his business. In a 1914 article published in *The Outlook Magazine*, Bruce Barton rallied his readers:

It is time, it seems to me, for a little shifting of emphasis in this question of what constitutes success; time to recognize seriously that there is no service to the world like the rearing in it of sons and daughters competent to carry righteousness a step forward; no treason to the moral order like contributing to the next generation men and women who are a burden to its progress instead of a help.

Barton, who at the time of this article's publication was just beginning his career as a writer of inspirational articles after working in advertising and as editor of some small women's magazines, argued that men should be commended publicly for their fathering success and held responsible for their failures. Obituaries and honorary degrees, he suggested, should note the achievements of men as parents before acknowledging their business successes.⁵⁴ Other authors shared his commitment to a change in values. In a 1921 article titled "Why One Father Succeeded with His Sons," the founder and director of several summer camps who had worked with the YMCA and was the author of more than thirty books and numerous articles in boys' magazines, Frank H. Cheley, explained it this way:

He believed that being a father is the greatest privilege given to any man, and so took his fatherhood seriously.... He would rather be known any time as a successful father than as a successful business or professional man.... These are a few of the reasons why two boys, grown tall and straight and true, declare that they wish to be men just like their dear old Dad. That's better by far than having even a whole column in "Who's Who in America," a cigar named after you, or your statue placed on a pedestal in the city park.⁵⁵

Success in business simply could not compare with the more important contribution of upright children, according to these authors.

Many child-rearing experts criticized fathers for valuing business over fatherhood. One such author argued in 1905 that boys go through periods of hard times in development, some of which are necessary, "but there are trials...which might be entirely obviated, or minimized to a great degree, if fathers gave one-tenth the time and thought to their sons that they bestow upon their business."⁵⁶ The educator William Shearer, in 1904, agreed:

Too many fathers consider that, since it is their duty to provide for the family, they have no duties in connection with the training of children. A moment's consideration will convince every thoughtful father that this is not the case, and that, no matter what success he may gain in his business or profession, he is a complete failure if he has not proven himself a true husband and an interested and devoted father.⁵⁷

This reevaluation called for a new conception of what it meant to be a good middle-class father—no longer was it sufficient to adequately provide for the material wants of the family and the education of the children. These authors called for men to provide as well nurturance, attention, guidance, even companionship to their children. Perhaps part of the reason that middle-class men were able to turn away from business to value their domestic role more highly was because they were enjoying increased stability and prosperity, as historian Margaret Marsh has argued.⁵⁸

Not all authors felt that fathers needed to place less emphasis on their role as breadwinners. Humorist Edward Sandford Martin, founder of *The Harvard Lampoon* and *Life Magazine*, wrote in his book, *The Luxury of Children*:

Fathers sympathize, advise, spoil, and provide, but it is remarkable how much a normal father, who has stood over the raising of several children, can manage not to know the details of it. He may be a fair judge of results, and really an important contributor to the happiness of his family, but, unless he happens to be a doctor, what is his opinion worth about foods and their qualities, times, and amounts, or about what weight of clothing a given child needs every day, and what by night?.... The primary duty of the father of a young family is to go out daily and get an adequate supply of money. When he attends faithfully and successfully to that, it is considered that he has done well, and great, verily, is his reward. The other details of management fall to the mother.⁵⁹

The lighthearted description of the father bewildered by the details of the daily management of children should not be taken too literally, but it does suggest that Martin saw the father as somewhat external to the everyday chores of child rearing. But even Martin allowed that fathers “have their uses in families, besides that of providing.... Undoubtedly it is the duty of every father to do what he can to supplement the school-masters, doctors, ministers, and others.”⁶⁰ Yet, the father is merely a supplement to other, professional caregivers in this image. Martin was writing in 1899, at the beginning of this trend toward more involved fathering, which perhaps helps to explain his comments, which seem to run counter to the larger trend.

More authors in this period argued that breadwinning was of secondary importance to active parenting. In his 1902 article, “What a Father Can Do for His Son,” Harry Thurston Peck, a classical scholar and charismatic professor at Columbia College who was also an accomplished literary editor and children’s stories author and frequent contributor to *Cosmopolitan*, argued:

Now just as a father is in general concerned with leaving to his son material possessions, so should he be much more concerned with leaving to his son this treasure of experience, a thing of infinitely greater worth than money, because it is something which once imparted, can never be taken away.... So many fathers shirk the undertaking; so many of them stand aloof and let the precious years go by, willing to give money, willing to give anything and everything except themselves.⁶¹

In one example, a father gave his little son a \$1000 bond, when really he should have played with him, according to Peck:

[I]f he had told him a story or played a game with him, or sat and entertained him, he would have got far closer to his heart, and therefore would have gained another point in the game of destiny. But most fathers, in the hurry of their lives take more account of material things, and begin when it is too late to seek an influence which cannot be gained except in childhood.⁶²

Peck argues that not only should fathers bring home money and assist mothers with child management decisions, they should actually play with their children. Far from that of a distant patriarch, this vision of fatherhood, which gained appeal at the turn of the century, called for fathers to sit and play and laugh with their little ones and to develop and maintain a close friendship with their children. This vision of fatherhood was further promoted by President Teddy Roosevelt, who once delayed a state dinner when he had to change his shirt after a particularly rambunctious romp with his children in which he played the role of a bear.⁶³

Father as Disciplinarian

Child experts called for more paternal involvement in child management, and some expressed concern that fathers' role not be limited to disciplinarian. Not only should fathers be more involved in day-to-day interactions with their children and more involved in choosing appropriate courses of child management and discipline, but also mothers should refrain from leaving punishment to the father. As Shearer explained in 1904:

Of necessity, the father must be away from home most of the time. When he returns, wearied by the endless cares and work of the day, he is often not fitted to consider carefully and patiently the cases of management which the mother would gladly place in his hands. So far as possible, these matters will be attended to by the thoughtful mother. Only when absolutely necessary is she apt to call upon the father for assistance. For this, and for other reasons, the management of the younger children, at least, will be almost entirely in the hands of the mother.⁶⁴

Shearer did not want the father to be faced with disciplining his children on his return from work and went so far as to suggest that mothers take over child management almost entirely in order to avoid this.

Advice author Gustav Pollack recommended governing according to a system of natural consequences, which would provide the mother with

a gain also in self-respect and in dignity... and when she has settled upon a reasonable plan for administering justice to the children she will do away entirely with the custom, common in some households, of 'telling your father,' thus relegating the responsibility and authority to him and diminishing her own power to govern.⁶⁵

The doctors William and Lena Sadler bemoaned the custom of mothers' threatening the child with the father's authority, describing its dire consequences:

Most of us live to regret the threats we make. "Your father will thrash you when he comes home tonight," or "You'd better not let your father see you doing that," or "You wouldn't behave that way if your father was here," etc., are common threats which we hear directed at headstrong and willful boys. What is the result? Do such threats cause the love of the child for his father to increase? They make the child actually afraid of his father.⁶⁶

Child-rearing experts believed that calling on the father to hold full responsibility for punishing his children would have multiple undesirable results. Exhausted fathers were ill suited for choosing wise disciplinary measures, leaving punishment to father undermined the mother's authority over the children, and associating the father with punishment would cause the child to fear, rather than love, the father.

The calls of child-rearing experts coupled with the depiction of paternal involvement in child management in advice literature suggests that many parents were concerned with giving father an active role in child rearing and discipline. Stories and illustrations showed patient and affectionate fathers as well as unwise, even abusive, ones. A White House study, though published more than a decade after the period examined in this paper, may suggest a strong class component in paternal involvement in child discipline. According to historian Robert L. Griswold, this 1936 study concluded that, in the lower classes, thirty to forty-five percent of the mothers did all the punishing of children, whereas, in the higher classes, less than twenty percent did so. Moreover, middle-class parents in 1936 were more likely to follow expert advice, and upper- and middle-class fathers were more likely than those of the lower classes to read

magazine and newspaper articles on child care, with one-half to one-third of fathers reading such articles in the highest two classes and only twelve to thirteen percent from the lowest two classes doing so.⁶⁷

The picture painted by child-rearing advice authors in their articles and books is one of involved fathers. Although mothers clearly did most of the labor of child raising and held significant authority over the rearing of children, particularly young children, fathers were also involved in the day-to-day decisions and labor of child management. Mothers were, and remained, the primary consumers of the child-rearing experts' advice, but some advice givers began to seek the attention of a male audience. Experts worried about the values of fathers who directed most of their physical and emotional energy into business rather than child rearing. Without questioning the responsibility of the husband to provide financially for his family, or the long hours the average middle-class man was expected to work outside the home, these experts called on fathers to invest more time and consideration into their role as parents, recommending a fundamental shift in men's values. If the examples and stories of these authors are to be believed, many fathers had already followed this advice or had simply always been more thoughtfully attached to their role as caregivers than some experts realized.

Notes

1. Divorce rate from Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 8.
2. Paul W. McBride, *Culture Clash: Immigrants and Reformers, 1880-1920*, (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975), p. 1.
3. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 222, 225.
4. Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 13.
13. Marilyn Dell Brady, "The New Model Middle-Class Family (1815-1930)," in *American Families: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook*, ed. Joseph M. and Elizabeth I. Nybakken Hawes (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. 93, 99. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, pp. 25-26.
5. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America*, p. 15.
6. Ibid., pp. 90-91.
7. Ibid. Although Griswold acknowledges the growth of a new vision of domestic life between 1880 and 1930 that emphasized fatherly nurture, he also writes that "as the century came to a close, fathers were becoming increasingly marginal within the home itself." Ibid., p. 33.
8. Margaret S. Marsh, "Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915," in *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, ed. Mark C. and Clyde Griffen Carnes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 112.
9. Joan Seidl, "Consumers' Choices: A Study of Household Furnishings, 1880-1920," *Minnesota History* 48 (Spring 1983):183-97, quoted in Ibid., p. 121.
10. On the professionalization of housework by experts, see Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World*. Chap. 1; Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1978), chap. 5.
11. Katherine Arnup, *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 85. See chapter 2 for a discussion of the parental education campaign of the early- to mid-twentieth century in Canada.
12. Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, p. 4. Historians have tended to emphasize the manner in which the rise of these experts stripped parents of power. Christopher Lasch, in his influential book *Haven in a Heartless World*, attributes the weakening of the American family in part to the growth of parents' reliance on "outside technology and the advice of outside experts" (p. 18). Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English also demonstrate the manner in which experts usurped authority from mothers. Katherine Arnup more recently has tried to temper this vision by showing the ways that Canadian mothers used expert advice for their own purposes in *Education for Motherhood*.
13. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America*, p. 32.
14. According to a survey of women's magazines between 1890 and 1900 by Cecilia Stendler, mothers' instincts were trusted and mothers accorded more respect and importance than before or since; mother-blaming, according to this study, did not begin in earnest until the early decades of the twentieth century. Arnup, *Education for Motherhood*, p. 34.
15. Edward Bok, "The American Skeleton," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, May, 1903, p. 14. Bok also helped pass the Food and Drug Act in 1906.

16. Martha B. Mosher, *Child Culture in the Home. A Book for Mothers* (New York: F. H. Revell, 1898), pp. 60-61.
17. Friedrich Paulsen, "Old and New Fashioned Notions about Education," *Education Review* 35 (1908): 478.
18. M. V. O'Shea, "Notes on Ethical Training," *Education Review* 33 (1907): 370-371.
19. William J. Shearer, *The Management and Training of Children* (New York: Richardson Smith, 1904), pp. 44-45.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
22. Major John H. Earle, "Discipline in the Home," *Good Housekeeping* 73 (July, 1921), p. 47.
23. Jane Dearborn Mills, *The Mother-Artist* (Boston: Palmer Company, 1904), p. 55.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
25. Charlotte Reeve Conover, "The Secret Society of Mothers," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, February, 1910, p. 26.
26. Joseph H. Pleck, "American Fathering in Historical Perspective," in *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1987), pp. 89-90.
27. Brady, "The New Model Middle-Class Family (1815-1930)," p. 100.
28. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, p. 26, see also fn. 49 on daughters.
29. Shearer, *The Management and Training of Children*, pp. 119-120.
30. This caution appears to both predate and outlast this period. In 1874, Hiram Orcutt, manager of the New England Bureau of Education and the author of numerous books of advice to parents and teachers, warned that parents must get along reasonably well in order to ensure the proper management of their children. He wrote of parents who did not: "Their little differences are permitted to ripen into open rupture; and their home, which should be the very paradise of earthly bliss, where affection and harmony always dwell, becomes a scene of perpetual strife and turmoil. And how fearful the influence of such example over the immediate and more distant future of these children!" Hiram Orcutt, LL.D., *The Parents' Manual; or, Home and School Training* (Boston: Thompson, Brown, 1874), pp. 28-29. Writing in the mid-1920s, Josephine C. Foster and John E. Anderson, director and professor of the Institute of Child Welfare, adopted the language of psychology, telling parents that children would be "emotionally disturbed also by any heated argument of difference between adults.... Acknowledged incompatibility between parents subjects the child to a continuous emotional conflict which many times accounts for his later unstable conduct" Josephine C. Foster and John E. Anderson, *The Young Child and His Parents: A Study of One Hundred Cases*, University of Minnesota, Institute of Child Welfare, Monograph Series No. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1927), p. 10.
31. "The Autobiography of a Child with Two Parents," *Everybody's Magazine*, January, 1907, p. 120.
32. Ernest Hamlin Abbott, *On the Training of Parents* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), p. 62.
33. Emelyn Lincoln Coolidge, "The Young Mothers' Guide," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, September, 1914, p. 53.
34. Gustav Pollak, *Our Success in Child-Training; Practical Experiences of Many Mothers* (New York: Contemporary Publishing, 1902), p. 39.
35. Mills, *The Mother-Artist*, pp. vi-viii.

36. "What Are a Father's Rights?," *Ladies' Home Journal* (October, 1909), p. 5.
37. Mrs. Theodore W. Birney, *Childhood*, 2nd ed. (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1905), p. 238.
38. "What Are a Father's Rights?," *Ladies' Home Journal* (October, 1909), p. 5.
39. Martha S. Bensley, "Experiences of a Nursery Governess," *Everybody's Magazine*, 1905, p. 321.
40. Barnetta Brown, "Mothers' Mistakes and Fathers' Failures," *The Ladies Home Journal*, January, 1900, p. 30.
41. Marion Sprague, "The Letters of Two Mothers," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, December, 1905, p. 36.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
43. Bruce Barton, "When Your Son Is a Fool," *Outlook* (May 2, 1914), p. 40.
44. Bensley, "Experiences of a Nursery Governess," p. 752.
45. In 1895, the English minister and Eton headmaster from 1905 to 1916, Edward Lyttelton, explained his choice to direct his advice explicitly toward mothers by writing in his preface, "There is nothing that England is more in need of than a clear recognition of home duties on the part of fathers in all ranks of society; but in the meantime my readers will pardon me for having spoken to those who have shown themselves ready and eager to listen" Edward Lyttelton, *Mothers and sons; or, Problems in the Home Training of Boys* (London: Macmillan, 1895). Martha Bensley Bruère commented in 1914, "We are just beginning to realize that leaving the training of young children almost exclusively to women, as we Americans do, is not altogether a good thing." Martha Bensley Bruère, "Equal Rights for Parent and Child," *Good Housekeeping*, 1914, p. 73. Bruère, writing under the name Bensley, had commented in her series on working as a governess a decade earlier on the importance of fathers in the family as well, but she emphasized the role of the mother most. This suggests the growth of the idea of the importance of the father in child rearing in the first two decades of the twentieth century.
46. Edward Howard Griggs, "Edward Howard Griggs's Talks: The Moral Training of a Child, Fourth Paper-- The Influence of the Personal World," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, February, 1903, p. 17.
47. "Will Fathers *Never Learn*," *Good Housekeeping*, April 1919, p. 19.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
49. Rheta Childe Dorr, "Putting It Up to the Fathers," *Good Housekeeping*, May, 1915, pp. 497-499.
50. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, p. 27.
51. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America*, p. 15.
52. Marsh, "Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915," pp. 112, 244-245, fn. 3.
53. Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 78. Further supporting the notion that work posed a severe burden in both time and on the minds of middle-class men of the turn of the century is the rash of men suffering from male neurasthenia in the northern United States in the 1880s. Most of these men attributed their breakdown at least in part to overwork. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, p. 187. Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, p. 73.
54. Barton, "When Your Son Is a Fool," p. 39. Barton, as a devout Christian, often wrote on religious themes and in 1925 wrote the bestseller *The Man Nobody Knows*, which portrayed

- Jesus as the “world’s greatest salesman.” American National Biography Online, <http://www.anb.org/articles/10/10-00105-article.html>.
55. Frank H. Cheley, “Why One Father Succeeded With His Sons,” *Good Housekeeping*, February, 1921, p. 48.
 56. Birney, *Childhood*, p. 99.
 57. Shearer, *The Management and Training of Children*, p. 119.
 58. Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915,” pp. 112-113.
 59. Edward Sanford Martin, *The Luxury of Children & Some Other Luxuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1904), pp. 66-67.
 60. Ibid., pp. 69-70.
 61. Harry Thurston Peck, “What a Father Can Do for His Son,” *Cosmopolitan*, October, 1902, pp. 705, 707.
 62. Ibid., p. 707.
 63. Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, p. 79.
 64. Shearer, *The Management and Training of Children*, p. 124.
 65. Pollak, *Our Success in Child-Training*, p. 39.
 66. William S. and Lena K. Sadler, “Making a Child What We Want Him to Be,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, November, 1911, p. 21. On the increased concern with childhood fears and the shift away from using fear to discipline children in the late nineteenth century, see Peter N. Stearns and Timothy Haggerty, “The Role of Fear: Transitions in American Emotional Standards for Children, 1850-1950,” *American Historical Review* 96 (February 1991): 63-94.
 67. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America*, pp. 104, 278, fn. 28.