HUCK'S RAFT

A History of American Childhood

tivated as some hoped and others feared. Voters in their teens and early twenties had a much lower rate of registration and voting than the middle-aged or the elderly, and little influence on the political agenda.

It became part of the conventional wisdom that the student radicalism of the 1960s was largely a by-product of the military draft and that when the draft was replaced by a lottery and later a volunteer army, student militancy quickly dissipated. There can be no doubt that ending military conscription, combined with a stagnating economy and a conservative backlash against student radicalism and the rights revolution, did produce a decline in overt student activism. But eras of reform and social upheaval do not conform to neat chronological divisions, and many of the most far-reaching changes in values and behavior that we associate with the 1960s actually took place in the 1970s, including increased use of drugs in secondary schools and a sharp drop in the age at which many adolescents became sexually active. Major social issues such as minors' access to contraception and abortion emerged as contentious social issues only during the 1970s. Most of the important reforms related to special education, bilingual education, and equal rights for female students also took place in that decade "when nothing happened." Studies of young people's opinions indicate that during the 1960s most students, including most college students, did not consider themselves radicals. In 1970 only 8.5 percent of students identified themselves with the New Left. It was in the 1970s, not the 1960s, that a broad cross-section of young people adopted more favorable attitudes toward drugs and freer sexual expression.[47]

In the mid-1970s several trends converged to mark the start of a new phase in childhood's history. One was demographic, as a rapid increase in the divorce rate, unmarried parenthood, single-parent households, and working mothers that had begun in the mid-1960s produced new configurations of family life. A second trend was attitudinal, as a series of public panics over children's well-being erupted—over teen pregnancy, stranger abductions, child abuse, illicit drugs, juvenile crime, and flagging academic performance—and intensified parental anxieties, harshened the juvenile justice system, and provoked a sharp reaction against the children's rights revolution. A key third trend was economic, as the wages of noncollege graduates fell sharply in real terms, leading many young people to postpone marriage and making it more essential for the young to complete high school and enroll in college. These trends combined to produce a mounting concern that young people's well-being was declining and that only drastic measures could help.

chapter sixteen

Parental Panics and the Reshaping of Childhood

In August 1983 a mother, later diagnosed as mentally ill, complained to police that her two-year-old son had been molested at the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California. To gather evidence, the local police chief distributed a letter to about 200 parents of present or past students, informing them that a school employee might have forced the children to "engage in oral sex, fondling of genitals, buttocks or chest area, and sodomy." He urged the parents to question their children and to come forward if they had any information to offer.[1]

This letter, combined with a local television report about possible links between the preschool and a pornography ring in nearby Los Angeles, touched off a panic. The police referred anxious parents to the Children's Institute International, a private, nonprofit organization specializing in the treatment and prevention of child abuse, where about 400 children who had attended the preschool were interviewed. Initially most children denied having been molested. But after they were shown puppets and told that it was "all right to tell their yucky secrets," some 360 described incidents of abuse.[2]

The children said that their teachers had stuck silverware in their anuses, butchered rabbits on a church altar, and murdered a horse with a baseball bat. The children also described being flushed down toilets into sewers where they had been sexually abused. On the basis of testimony from eighteen children and from doctors about physical evidence of abuse, Virginia McMartin, her son and daughter, and six other daycare workers were indicted for sexually abusing children over a ten-year pe-

riod. The McMartin Preschool charges resulted in the longest and costliest criminal case in American history, involving two trials that lasted seven years, cost at least $15 million, and concluded with no convictions. Initially these trials were seen as examples of ordinary citizens exposing horrible abuses in their midst. Over time, however, the public grew convinced that overzealous prosecutors and poorly trained social workers had bribed and badgered the children until they said they had been abused.

The McMartin Preschool case was the most sensational of forty cases involving charges of mass molestation in daycare centers. At least 100 daycare workers were convicted of abuse, but in virtually every case the prosecution claims were eventually overturned. A 1994 federal investigation of more than 12,000 accusations of ritual abuse of children at daycare centers did not find a single charge that could be physically substantiated. Why did seemingly far-fetched charges of animal mutilation, infant sacrifice, and satanic ritual provoke a wave of criminal prosecutions? In retrospect, one can see how terrified parents displaced their own anxieties and guilt feelings about leaving children with strangers onto daycare workers. Convinced that children would never lie about sexual abuse, psychologists and social workers underestimated children's suggestibility, their susceptibility to adult pressure, and their desire for adult approval. A sensationalist media and opportunistic and ambitious politicians and law enforcement officials stoked public anxiety into a frenzy. The convergence of these and other factors created parental panic.

Since the 1970s the United States has experienced a series of widely publicized panics over children's well-being. In addition to panics over abuse at daycare centers, there was widespread alarm over stranger abductions of children, adult sexual predators preying on teenage girls, and madmen inserting razor blades and poison into Halloween candies. The result was to convince many parents that their children were in deep danger. For a quarter-century adults have used the language of crisis to discuss the young. In her 1996 book *It Takes a Village,* then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote: "Everywhere we look, children are under assault: from violence and neglect, from the breakup of families, from the temptations of alcohol, sex, and drug abuse, from greed, materialism and spiritual emptiness. These problems are not new, but in our time they have skyrocketed." In 1996 the bipartisan Council on Families in America claimed that children were worse off "psychologically, socially, economically, and morally—than their parents were at the same age." A grossly inflated and misplaced sense of crisis became widespread in the last quarter of the twentieth century, reflecting genuine worries—for example, over children's well-being in a hypersexualized society—and more generalized

anxieties—over street crime, family instability, and shifts in women's roles.[3]

In the mid-1970s newspaper and magazine headlines began to trumpet a series of crises involving the young. There was a widespread impression that by most measures, young people were faring worse than in the past. On closer examination, however, much of the evidence cited to prove that children were in crisis proved to be exaggerated, misleading, or simply incorrect. An early panic followed the 1976 announcement by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, then a division of Planned Parenthood, that the country was experiencing an "epidemic" of teenage pregnancy. The report that nearly a million teenagers became pregnant each year provoked alarm that this epidemic would ruin the mother's life prospects and impose a heavy financial burden on society as a whole, raising costs for welfare, Medicaid, and food stamps. When looked at more closely, the phenomenon of teen pregnancy was far more complicated than usually portrayed. The overwhelming majority of teen births were among eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, not the thirteen-, fourteen-, or fifteen-year-olds featured in the press. The teenage pregnancy rate had peaked in 1957 and was declining in the last quarter of the century. There were grounds for public concern, especially because a growing proportion of teen births was occurring out of wedlock. But the explanations commonly cited to explain teenage childbearing—immorality, ignorance, or ineptness in the use of contraceptives—were misleading. Teen pregnancy was connected to limited opportunity, poverty, and low self-esteem, as well as an association of childbearing with maturity and love.[4]

Soon afterward a panic over stranger abductions of young children was touched off by the mysterious disappearance of six-year-old Etan Patz in New York's SoHo district in 1979, and the murder of Adam Walsh, also six, in Florida in 1981. Published reports claimed that half a million children were kidnapped each year and as many as 50,000 were murdered annually. Soon pictures of missing children appeared on billboards and milk cartons, and the federal government established a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. A federal investigation subsequently revealed that the actual number of children under twelve abducted by strangers was between 500 and 600 a year and the number murdered by strangers around 50. The overwhelming majority of missing children were runaways or were in the hands of noncustodial parents. It turned out that the gravest threat to children came not from strangers, but from family members or neighbors. About 2,000 children a year were murdered by their parents—400 times as many as were killed by strangers.[5]

Another panic, over youth gangs, erupted in the early 1990s, sparked

by claims that gangs, armed with military-style assault weapons, were the primary agents in a crack cocaine epidemic plaguing the nation's inner cities. It was certainly the case that in particular cities during the 1980s and early 1990s, gangs accounted for a growing proportion of youth violence and that some gang members were actively involved in drug trafficking. It was also true that the easy availability of automatic and semiautomatic weapons made gang violence more lethal than in the past. But the popular image of youth gangs dominating the drug trade and spreading their tentacles across the country was grossly exaggerated. For the most part, drug trafficking was dominated by adults.[6]

Also during the 1990s a panic arose over youthful superpredators who killed without remorse. An incident in New York in 1989 and another in Chicago in 1998 seemed to confirm the existence of "kids without a conscience." In the New York case, five youths, between fourteen and sixteen years old, were accused of attacking joggers and bicyclists in Central Park and were convicted of beating a white female investment banker so badly that she was not expected to survive, but did. In 2002 their convictions were reversed after a prison inmate confessed to being the jogger's sole attacker and DNA evidence proved that he had raped the woman. In the Chicago incident, two boys, ages seven and eight, confessed to murdering eleven-year-old Ryan Harris. Further investigation revealed semen on the victim, and police eventually charged a thirty-year-old man with the crime. In both cases, confessions from the accused juveniles had been obtained by the police after prolonged interrogation.[7]

During the last quarter of the twentieth century there was a tendency to generalize about young people's well-being on the basis of certain horrific but isolated events. The literary term *synecdoche*—confusing a part for a whole—is helpful in understanding how late twentieth-century Americans constructed an image of youth in crisis, as shocking episodes reinforced an impression that childhood was disintegrating. Two cases from the 1990s seemed symptomatic of moral decay. In 1993, in Lakewood, California, near Los Angeles, a group of current and former high school students, known as the "Spur Posse," gained notoriety when members were arrested in connection with a "sex for points" competition. The winner had had intercourse with sixty-six girls, some as young as ten. In 1997 a New Jersey eighteen-year-old, attending her high school prom, gave birth to a baby boy in a bathroom stall, left the newborn in a garbage can, and returned to the dance floor.

These incidents were easily integrated into a popular narrative of moral decline, but in fact the lessons were more complex. The Spur Posse was connected to the downward economic mobility among families previously

employed in southern California's defense industry. These circumstances contributed to unstable family lives, frequent divorces, a lack of adult supervision, and declining economic prospects for Lakewood youth. In the case of the young New Jersey woman, child psychologists spoke about the denial that some teens feel after discovering they are pregnant, their fear of disappointing their parents, and the difficulties they encounter in trying to obtain an abortion. Her decision to return to the prom and act as if nothing had happened is as pathetic as it is tragic.[8]

The late twentieth-century panics left a lasting imprint on public policy. In 1993, after twelve-year-old Polly Klaas was kidnapped during a slumber party and strangled by a California state prison parolee, states across the country enacted "three strikes" laws under which repeat offenders convicted of three felonies were sentenced to prison without possibility of parole. After the 1994 rape and murder of seven-year-old Megan Nicole Kanka of Hamilton, New Jersey, by a paroled sex offender, many states adopted "Megan's Laws," requiring the police to notify a community when a convicted sex offender lived nearby. Reports that men over the age of twenty-one were responsible for two-thirds of teen pregnancies led states to revive dormant statutory rape laws. A spate of murders by youths in their early teens led every state to make it easier to try juveniles as adults and commit them to adult prisons.[9]

Over the past quarter-century, the trumpeting of a dire crisis among the young proved to be a highly effective way to gain public attention. Whenever adults sensed that their children were in danger, they responded with passion. Sociologists use the term *moral panic* to describe the highly exaggerated and misplaced public fears that periodically arise within a society. Eras of ethical conflict and confusion are especially prone to outbreaks of moral panic as particular incidents crystallize generalized anxieties and provoke moral crusades. In recent decades, panics have arisen about Internet pornography; pedophiles; and the purported link between grunge, hip hop, and youth violence. These panics arose from legitimate worries for the safety of the young in a violent and hypersexualized society, but they were also fueled by interest groups that exploit parental fears, well-meaning social service providers, child advocacy groups, national commissions, and government agencies desperate to sustain funding and influence. If panics arise out of a genuine desire to arouse an apathetic public to serious problems, the effect of scare stories is not benign. They frighten parents, intensify generational estrangement, and encourage schools and legislatures to impose regulations to protect young people from themselves.[10]

When panics drive public policy, society tends to fixate on exaggerated

problems rather than on more serious issues. During the late twentieth century there was a widespread impression that children's well-being was declining precipitously and that many of society's worst problems could be attributed to the young. According to surveys in the 1990s, adults believed that young people accounted for 40 percent of the nation's violent crime, three times the actual rate. Adults wrongly assumed that young people were more violent than their parents' generation had been and were more likely to smoke, abuse drugs and alcohol, commit suicide, become pregnant, and bear a child out of wedlock. In fact by most measures young people were healthier and more responsible than their baby-boom parents' generation.[11]

Alarmist myths about youth violence, adolescent sexuality, and declining academic performance led adults to project a variety of moral failings onto the young and bred a mistaken impression that contemporary youth were the worst generation ever. A 1997 poll reported that most adults believed that the young were in steep "moral breakdown." Today many adults assume that smoking, binge drinking, illicit drug use, obesity, and irresponsible sexual behavior are normative among the young and that adolescents are responsible for most crime in American society. Not surprisingly, such mistaken views discourage adults from supporting school bond issues and other public programs for the young.[12]

Children have long served as a lightning rod for America's anxieties about society as a whole. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, as anxiety about the Cold War deepened, many Americans doubted that the young had the moral fiber, intellectual acumen, and physical skills necessary to stand up to Communism. During the 1960s, as the nation underwent unsettling moral and cultural transformations, public worries again centered on the young, around such issues as permissive childrearing, youthful drug and sexual experimentation, and young people's scraggly hair and unkempt clothing. It is not surprising that cultural anxieties are often displaced on the young; unable to control the world around them, adults shift their attention to that which they think they can control: the next generation.

Toward the end of the twentieth century there was widespread fear that the country had entered a period of moral and economic decline as Americans worried about the country's international competitiveness, budget deficits and the national debt, and street crime. As in the past, larger social and economic concerns colored adult perceptions of children. Anxieties about unsafe streets translated into fears about youth gangs and teenage toughs. Anxieties about welfare dependency were reflected in images of teenage mothers and high school dropouts. Many adults worried

that American children lagged far behind their foreign counterparts in their knowledge of science, mathematics, and technology and lacked the discipline and drive necessary to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Frightening media portraits of youthful nihilism supplanted earlier images of childhood innocence and teenage rambunctiousness. Kids provided society's most vivid images of urban disintegration. There was a fixation on crack babies, urban wolf packs, and teenage mothers. Bart Simpson, the irreverent, undisciplined scamp, "an underachiever and proud of it," supplanted Haley Mills as a popular symbol of childhood.

Familial, economic, and cultural shifts contributed to an upsurge in parental anxiety and to a hovering, emotionally intense style of parenting that made it more difficult for children to forge an independent identity and assert their growing maturity and competence. During the 1970s a growing number of Americans came to believe that the "breakdown of the family"—evident in an increasing divorce rate and a growing number of single-parent households and working mothers—had devastating consequences for young people's well-being, manifested in rapidly rising rates of juvenile crime, teen suicide, and substance abuse. In fact family fragility was not nearly as novel as moralists assumed, nor was the impact of changes in family structure on children's well-being as negative as many assumed.

In evaluating familial change, there is a tendency to exaggerate evidence of decline and to ignore conflicting data. Yet any accurate assessment must balance gains against costs. On the positive side of the ledger, families grew smaller, allowing parents to devote more attention and resources to each child. Attendance in preschools shot up, providing young people with opportunities for play and better preparing them for school. While fewer young children could count on a full-time mother than in the 1950s, working mothers are less likely to be depressed than stay-at-home mothers and more likely to provide valuable role models, especially for their daughters.

Divorce was a major source of concern. The number of divorces doubled between the mid-1960s and the late-1970s, before leveling off. Today nearly half of all children witness the breakup of their parents' marriage, and close to half of these children experience the breakup of a parent's second marriage. But rising divorce rates have not had the profoundly negative consequences that many feared. A substantial body of evidence suggests that conflict-laden, tension-filled marriages have at least as many adverse effects on children as divorce. Children from discordant homes permeated by tension and instability are actually more likely to suffer psychosomatic illnesses, suicide attempts, delinquency, and other social mal-

adjustments than children whose parents divorce. Empirical evidence does not indicate that children from "broken" homes suffer more health or mental problems, personality disorders, or lower school grades than children from "intact" homes.[13]

Without a doubt, divorce is severely disruptive, at least initially, for a majority of children, and a minority continue to suffer from its psychological and economic repercussions for years after the breakup of their parents' marriage. Boys seem to have a harder time coping than girls, and younger children appear to have more trouble adjusting than older children, partly because they have excessive fears of abandonment and exaggerated hopes for reconciliation. Yet most children support their parents' decision to divorce and show resilience and increased maturity and independence in the months following the breakup.[14]

Many of the family-related problems that children confront reflect the country's failure to adjust institutionally to the fact that divorce, unmarried cohabitation, and residence, at least temporarily, in a single-parent household have become the normative experience for a near majority of American children. The American legal system has not built in sufficient safeguards to ensure children's economic well-being or to moderate the disruptions that follow divorce. Divorce is often accompanied by instability in living arrangements, less parental supervision, and loss of contact with the father's network of connections. Frequent movement between residences is a particular source of strain for children, since it complicates the problem of maintaining friendships and adjusting to school. Income decline is a major problem, resulting from the inadequacy of court-ordered child support payments, fathers' failure to pay support, and the fact that many mothers bargain away support payments in exchange for sole custody of children. But despite the stresses and upheavals that accompany divorce, a substantial majority of the young experience the breakup of their parents' marriage without suffering serious problems.[15]

Economics was a driving force behind changing family patterns. During the 1970s, in a period of prolonged inflation and economic stagnation, the maintenance of a middle-class standard of living required mothers to work and to limit births. The influx of married women into the workforce made daycare a necessity, and job opportunities meant that fewer women felt forced to remain in loveless or abusive marriages for economic reasons. Economics also contributed to the rapid increase in the proportion of births to unmarried women as self-supporting single women decided to become mothers. Meanwhile the real wages of young men in their twenties who lacked a college education fell steeply, making them less attractive as marriage partners and less willing to commit to marriage. The result was a return to a pattern common in preindustrial times, in which formal marriage was concentrated among financially secure partners and poorer families had less formal arrangements.[16]

The rising costs of childcare and college contributed to a sharp reduction in the birthrate as many parents chose to have just one child. But the trend to smaller families allowed parents and grandparents to devote more money to each child. Toygiving, which had largely been confined to birthdays and Christmas, became a year-round phenomenon. Meanwhile the service economy became increasingly dependent on part-time teenage labor, and as afterschool jobs became more common, teens had more disposable income than in the past. This income rarely went to pay for family necessities; instead it represented discretionary income that could be used to pay for a car or to purchase clothes, CDs, and snacks.

Parental anxieties greatly increased in scope and intensity after 1970 as many parents worried more than in the past about their children's safety, their vulnerability to drugs, and their academic achievement. Middle-class parents, in particular, sought to protect children from harm by baby-proofing their homes, using car seats, and requiring bicycle helmets. At the same time, the market for childrearing advice books became more crowded and confused, and these manuals conveyed a sense of urgency absent in earlier childcare books. Authorities such as Dr. Lee Salk rejected the easygoing approach championed by Dr. Spock and warned that "taking parenthood for granted can have disastrous results." The new childrearing manuals reflected a sharp rise in parents' aspirations for their children. Unlike the parents of the baby boomers, who had wanted their children to be "average," ambitious late twentieth-century parents sought to provide their children with every possible opportunity. The impulse to give children a leg up contributed to the rapid growth of educationally oriented preschools, which not only provided childcare but also sought to enhance children's cognitive, motor, language, and social skills. Meanwhile many middle-class parents filled up older children's afterschool time with lessons, enrichment activities, and organized sports. This led experts such as David Elkind to decry a tendency toward "hyperparenting," in which parents overscheduled and overprogrammed their children's free time, placing excessive pressure on their offspring and depriving them of the opportunity for free play and hanging out.[17]

In the 1970s many parents turned away from an older ideal of a "protected" childhood and began to emphasize a "prepared" childhood. Fearful that their children were surrounded by risks and dangers, parents rejected the notion that it was best to shelter children from adult realities in order to preserve their innocence. Convinced that a naïve child was a vul-

nerable child, a growing number supported drug abuse education programs and sex education courses that would inform their children about the risks of drugs and of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. Independence and resourcefulness became more highly prized values in children as a growing number of children had to learn how to unlock the side door, call their mother after school, and prepare their own snack and sometimes their own dinner.[18]

Romanticized portraits of the normality of childhood during the "golden years" earlier in the twentieth century do not hold up under scrutiny. Take the example of teen drinking. In 1954 *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine surveyed 1,000 New York high school students and found that nearly half of all the students between thirteen and eighteen reported drinking alcohol in the previous week; one in six started drinking before the age of eleven and 79 percent by fourteen. Continuity, not discontinuity, has characterized teen drinking habits. In contrast, the historical trend in teen smoking has been sharply downward, and teen smoking has declined far faster than smoking among adults. Adolescent smoking peaked in 1963, and the proportion of adolescents twelve to seventeen who smoke today is half the rate in 1974. Nor is drug use among juveniles as unprecedented as we sometimes assume. In 1953 a U.S. Senate subcommittee claimed that teenage drug abuse was an "epidemic." Adolescent drug use rose sharply between the early 1970s and early 1980s, but since then the trend has been downward. In 1983, 31 percent of high school seniors reported using an illegal drug in the past month; in 2001 the figure was 22 percent.[19]

Another widespread misimpression is that teen sexuality and delinquent behavior have increased sharply. In 2002 *U.S. News & World Report* announced in sensationalist language: "At younger ages and with greater frequency, teens are having sex—and catching more diseases." In fact the most rapid increase in adolescent sexuality took place in the 1970s, among the parents of today's high schoolers. During the 1990s teen pregnancy and abortion rates fell sharply, and sexual activity among teens declined, especially among boys. Meanwhile violent youth crime has fluctuated over the past four decades, and stands today at low levels unseen since the mid-1960s. Over the past three decades there have been surges in youthful smoking, drug use, and crime rates, but the general trend has been downward. Yet if history can be reassuring, it can also heighten awareness of troubling realities. The child poverty rate in the United States is higher today than it was three decades ago. In 2002 the official child poverty rate stood at 16 percent, about 14 percent above the lows of the early 1970s.[20]

Other problems have also persisted. Half a century ago, sex researcher

Alfred Kinsey reported that one in four women had been "approached sexually" before adolescence. About half the approaches involved exhibitionism, 31 percent involved fondling without genital contact, 29 percent involved genital fondling, and 3 percent involved rape or incest. The overall figures today remain about the same, although exhibitionism has declined and unwanted touching has increased. Yet while the sexual abuse of children has remained fairly constant, public concern has fluctuated widely. In 1986 nearly a third of adults identified abuse as one of the most serious problems facing children and youth; in a survey a decade later abuse went unmentioned.[21]

By most measures, the well-being of the young improved markedly between the early 1970s and the late 1990s, despite the sharp increase in divorce rates, working mothers, and out-of-wedlock births. Binge drinking among teenagers dropped 25 percent; smoking declined between 20 and 50 percent, depending on the measure; youth homicide and crime rates are now at their lowest level in thirty years. Today's teenagers miss fewer days of school, do about as well on aptitude and achievement tests as did their baby-boom counterparts, and are much more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college. Surveys suggest that young people today feel far less alienation and anomie than their counterparts a quarter-century earlier. Far fewer report that they have seriously considered suicide or participated in a fight.[22]

Our society tends to treat young people's problems separately from those of adults, as if they were not interconnected phenomena. We hold youth to perfectionist standards that adults are not expected to meet. In fact young people's behavior tends to parallel that of adults. Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, trends in child obesity, teenage drug use, smoking, drinking, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and violence track closely with adults'. This result should not be surprising. Young people tend to behave much like the adults around them, and if those adults smoke or drink to excess or behave violently, their children are likely to do the same.[23]

In the late twentieth century, American society projected its fears and anxieties onto the young and instituted desperate measures to protect them from exaggerated menaces. The effect of these restrictive policies was to delay the transition to adult behavior and make that transition much more abrupt than in the past. Thus it seems likely that the problem with binge drinking among college students is related to the fact that the young did not learn to drink responsibly before college. Efforts to protect the young from the consequences of misbehavior tend to create problems of their own.

Media images of the young proliferated wildly in the last quarter of the

century. There were "stoners," like Bill and Ted, whose *Excellent Adventures* mocked schooling and academic authority; bright but mischievous rebels like Ferris Bueller; and girls with special powers like Sabrina the teenage witch, a popular symbol of girls' empowerment. There were precocious miniadults, wiser than their parents, modeled on Michael J. Fox in the situation comedy *Family Ties;* symbols of juvenile self-sufficiency like Macauley Caulkin in the *Home Alone* films; and comic nerds like the Steve Erkel character played by Jaleel White. But one image of childhood that didn't conform to the media's penchant for the lighthearted comedy was an image of deeply alienated and disconnected youth.

Many of the most influential cinematic portraits of youth during the 1980s and 1990s painted a bleak picture of young people's lives, depicting them as "a tribe apart." Teen angst, youthful alienation, and generational estrangement have been common themes in film since *The Wild One* (1954), but more recent movies offered a grimmer vision. The 1987 film *River's Edge* was based loosely on a 1981 murder in Milpitas, California, where a sixteen-year-old raped and murdered his fourteen-year-old girlfriend, bragged about the killing to his friends, and took them to see the corpse. As in *Lord of the Flies,* the kids were presented as zombielike in the face of a blood-chilling crime. A depressing portrait of youthful nihilism in the Reagan era, the film depicts the teens' emotional numbness as a product of drugs, alcohol, television violence, deafening rock music, violent video games, and neglectful parents.

The 1995 film *Kids* followed a group of vacuous New York street children over a twenty-four-hour period, hanging out, skateboarding, stealing, brawling, gay-baiting, and getting high. Like *River's Edge,* it presented a picture of young people turning to drugs and sex not as a form of rebellion, but as a way to fill a void in otherwise empty and meaningless lives. *Kids* depicted young people living in a world of insecurity and risk from unprotected sex, sexually transmitted diseases, and violence. *Basketball Diaries,* also from 1995, based loosely on poet and musician Jim Carroll's cult memoir, chronicled the descent of a Catholic high school basketball star into a heroin addict who turns tricks for drugs. With its stark portraits of a sadistic priest and a sexually predatory basketball coach, this film stressed the allure of drugs and sex and the absence of supportive adults. Crude, stereotyped, and exploitative, these films reinforced a variety of caricatures about young people's lives. They supported the popular impression that young people were caught between two trends: an increasingly risky, violent, sex-saturated, drug-infested social environment, and a lack of adult guidance and support.

What, then, has changed in young people's lives? How did childhood in the late twentieth century differ from that in earlier years? Books with such titles as *The Disappearance of Childhood, The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon,* and *Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers Their Future—and Ours* argued that an earlier ideal of childhood as a protected state, in which children were sheltered from the realities of the adult world, had given way to a very different ideal. We have returned, they contended, to the pre-industrial, premodern conception of children as "little adults." There is some truth to this argument. Young people, even before they enter their teens, are increasingly knowledgeable about adult realities. Through the instruments of mass culture, the young are exposed from an early age to overt sexuality, violence, and death. They have also become independent consumers at an earlier age. A precocious adulthood is apparent in young people's dress, their earlier initiation into sexuality, and the large number of students who hold jobs while going to school. Like their preindustrial counterparts, young people linger longer on the threshold of adulthood, delaying marriage and, in many cases, living off and on with their parents well into their twenties. Yet despite some superficial similarities, we have not returned to the premodern world of childhood and youth. We are much more self-conscious about the process of childrearing. Like our nineteenth-century ancestors, we continue to think of young people as fundamentally different from adults. Above all, we have institutionalized youth as a separate stage of life. Young people spend an increasing number of years in the company of other people their same age, colonized in specialized "age-graded" institutions. Young people's interactions with adults are largely limited to parents, teachers, and service providers.[24]

One defining feature of young people's lives today is that they spend more time alone than their predecessors. They grow up in smaller families, and nearly half have no siblings. They are more likely to have a room of their own and to spend more time in electronically mediated activities, playing video games, surfing the Internet, or watching television on their own set. Because fewer children attend neighborhood schools within walking distance, most children live farther from their friends and play with them less frequently, experiencing a greater sense of isolation.[25]

Meanwhile unstructured, unsupervised free play outside the home drastically declined for middle-class children. As more mothers joined the labor force, parents arranged more structured, supervised activities for their children. Unstructured play and outdoor activities for children three to eleven declined nearly 40 percent between the early 1980s and late 1990s. Because of parental fear of criminals and bad drivers, middle-class children rarely got the freedom to investigate and master their home turf in

ways that once proved a rehearsal for the real world. Older children, too, had less free time as they spent more time in school, completing homework, performing household chores, and working for wages. The psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim estimated that the span of a middle-class childhood, defined in terms of freedom from household responsibilities, declined from eleven years in the 1950s to between five and eight years toward the end of the century.[26]

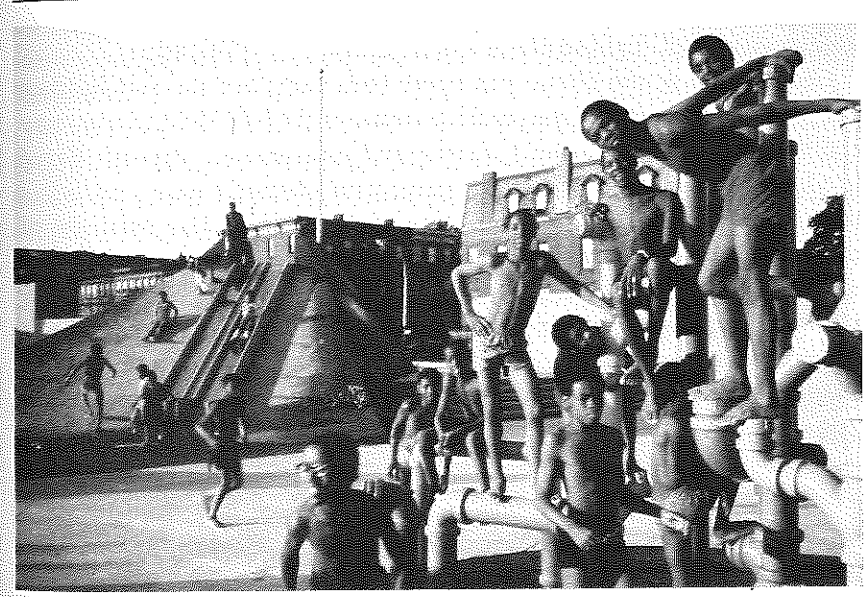
The period of childhood innocence has grown briefer. Originally Barbie was aimed at six- to ten-year-old girls. Today her popularity peaks with three- to five-year-olds. By the time girls are eight, frilly dresses have given way to midriff tops, off-shoulder T-shirts, and low-slung jeans. Marketers coined the word *tween* to describe the demographic group from eight to twelve, which has not yet reached the teen years but aspires to teenage sophistication. In an era of niche marketing, the tweens—whose average weekly income rose from $6 to $22 a week during the 1990s—became one of the most popular markets for clothing manufacturers and record companies.[27]

The geography of young people's lives has been reshaped. Much of the "free space" available to youth in the past, from empty lots to nearby woods, has disappeared as a result of development and legal liability concerns. Public playgrounds continue to exist; but as they were childproofed to improve safety, they inadvertently reduced the opportunities for the young to take part in forms of fantasy, sensory and exploratory play, and construction activities apart from adults. Safety and maintenance concerns led to the removal of sandboxes and swings, metal jungle gyms, and firepoles. Fear of child abductions and sexual abuse resulted in the elimination of playgrounds with obstructed views. Meanwhile many traditional teen hangouts also vanished. McDonald's pioneered the practice of discouraging teens from hanging out at their restaurants, and this practice has since been mimicked by other fast-food outlets, pizza parlors, ice cream shops, and other traditional teen havens. Lacking spaces to call their own, adolescents engaged in frequent battles with adults as they sought space at shopping malls, fast-food restaurants, and public streets.[28]

One of the most striking developments was a sharp increase in part-time teenage employment during the school years. Today about 44 percent of sixteen- and seventeen-year-old males and 42 percent of females hold jobs, compared with 29 percent of boys and 18 percent of girls in 1953. In the past, teen employment was concentrated among the working class; it has since become predominantly a middle-class phenomenon. Most teens work in sales and service jobs requiring no special training or

skills and spend most of their time working with other adolescents, without much adult supervision.[29]

Meanwhile a ritual that defined teen life in the past—dating—largely disappeared, replaced by hanging out at malls, participation in crowd activities, group dating, partying, and hooking up. Older symbols of commitment—like pinning or going steady—evaporated, mirroring the desire to postpone marriage to a later age as well as the general decline of marriage among adults. But of all the changes that took place in young people's lives, the most striking involved a marked increase in diversity—ethnic, economic, and familial. Ethnic diversity became a defining characteristic of childhood. Sixteen percent of young people are black (compared with 14 percent in 1972), 15 percent Hispanic (up from 6 percent), and 5 percent Asian (up from 1 percent). Diversity extends to family life. Between a quarter and a third of the children born during the baby boomlet of the late 1980s and 1990s were born to unmarried mothers, and about half of all children will spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent home. This familial shift was accompanied by a deepening economic divide. Children born in recent years are the most affluent in



Children at play in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in 1974. Courtesy of the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

American history—yet one in six lives in poverty. Reinforcing the sense of diversity is the fact that the generation of young today has not had the binding social or economic experiences that fostered an intense generational consciousness among the baby boomers or Depression kids.

The most popular children's names provide an index to society's increasing diversity. While the Roberts and Susans of earlier generations persisted, new names were added to the cultural stew. There was a sharp increase in gender-neutral names, such as Alex and Leslie, and feminized versions of boys' names, such as Sydney and Kari; in unusual and original names stressing children's uniqueness and individuality, such as Beyonce and LeToya; and in Waspy names with overtones of wealth and glamor, such as Kendall and Taylor. The most striking development was a proliferation of names exhibiting pride in ethnic heritage, including a surge in biblical names like Samuel and Rebecca, and, especially among African Americans, traditional African and Islamic names such as Jamail and Yasmin, as well as newly coined names that draw upon African patterns, such as Makayla and Nyasia.

Youth in America has never been a homogeneous or monolithic group. It has always been divided along lines of class, ethnicity, and gender. But as the twentieth century ended, these divisions, which appeared, at least superficially, to be declining, reasserted themselves. Two of the most crucial divides involved the children of the urban poor and the children of immigrants. Both demand closer examination.

Growing up in the ghetto has never been easy, but for two brothers caught in the crossfire of the crack epidemic of the late 1980s it was especially bleak. Eleven-year-old Lafeyette and nine-year-old Pharoah Rivers lived in the Henry Horner housing project on Chicago's near west side, a mile from the Sears Tower. Consisting of sixteen high-rise buildings on thirty-four acres of concrete eight city blocks long, the complex housed 6,000 residents; 4,000 were under eighteen. Grim and dilapidated, Henry Horner Homes was plagued by violence. One person was beaten, shot at, or stabbed at the project every three days during the summer of 1987. Kids played basketball by shooting the ball through an opening in a jungle gym.[30]

Children in the Chicago projects, observed a teenager, were "like M & M's—all hard on the outside and sweet on the inside." Tough, swaggering, and ruthless on the outside, because "if they see you're soft in the projects it's like a shark seeing blood," and on the inside, vulnerable, frightened, and lost. The Rivers family subsisted on a $931 monthly welfare check, supplemented by odd jobs the boys picked up. Their apartment, infested with cockroaches, had iron bars on the windows, rusted-

out metal cabinets, and a faucet that leaked scalding water into the bathtub for two years before the housing authority finally repaired it. The boys' father, an unemployed bus driver, was addicted to heroin and alcohol. An older sister was also a drug addict. One brother was in jail, and another had been arrested forty-six times before his eighteenth birthday. In a single year, the boys' mother was mugged, the family lost its welfare benefits, and Lafeyette was arrested for breaking into a truck and stealing cassettes. Speaking of his future, Lafeyette said: "If I grow up, I would like to be a bus driver." "If," not "when."[31]

Inner-city Chicago was not the only place where American children were exposed to poverty and violence. Even at the height of the economic boom of the late 1990s, a sixth of young people (and 30 percent of black children and 28 percent of Hispanic children) lived in poverty; children were almost twice as likely to live in poverty as any other age group. Navigating the road to adulthood has never been easy, but it is particularly difficult in the "other America," where children grow up amid the blight of joblessness and discrimination. Imprisoned by stereotypes, minimal expectations in school, and inadequate resources, children in the nation's ghettos quickly learn that society perceives them as potential criminals or welfare recipients. Constituting about 13 percent of the urban population, the residents of the neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated loom far larger in the public imagination, in part because these areas produce more than half of all those arrested for murder, rape, and nonnegligent manslaughter.[32]

In his classic study of St. Louis's now-demolished Pruitt-Igoe housing project, the Harvard sociologist Lee Rainwater argued that poverty and racism produced a very different world of childhood from that found in middle-class communities. Crowded ghetto conditions as well as the small size of slum apartments made it impossible to create a child-centered home or to insulate young children from adult activities. Children in Pruitt-Igoe grew up in a highly stimulating environment where they frequently interacted with other adults, including many nonfamily members, and were expected to become socially assertive and socially self-confident at an early age. Mothers in Pruitt-Igoe did not worry about when their children began to crawl or walk or talk; their concerns were more immediate: to ensure that their children were safe and adequately fed.[33]

Girls were expected to take part in household activities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for babies, and therefore quickly assumed a recognized and valued family identity. As children grew older, it often proved difficult to protect them from the troublemaking possibilities of the outside world. Lacking the resources to insulate children from trouble, adults

made greater use of physical punishment and cautionary horror stories as control mechanisms than their middle-class counterparts. Childrearing methods that might appear harsh by middle-class standards sought to prepare children for a more dangerous environment. As children reached adolescence, some parents stopped closely monitoring their children to protect themselves from what they might discover. In other instances, extended relatives formed supportive networks and offered close supervision to help adolescents negotiate a dangerous passage to adulthood. An overriding problem facing Pruitt-Igoe's youth was the hostility that they received from the outside world: the stares, the suspicion, the repeated reminders that authority figures neither trusted nor respected them.

What, then, is it like to grow up in America's poorest neighborhoods? All the challenges of growing up are compounded by poverty and unstable kinship structures. Temptations and dangers—from alcohol, drugs, gangs, and casual violence—lurk around young people. Isolated from mainstream society, many lack successful role models to guide them through the minefields of youth and instill a sense of their potential. When they are young, many mothers forbid them to go out to play, considering it too dangerous. They grow up with a sense of confinement, unfamiliar to suburban children. They inhabit a world where childhood mischief can lead to arrest or worse. They learn, from an early age, that they must be careful never to say or do anything that older youths might take as an insult. They quickly find out that there are places where they cannot go without provoking hostile stares and nervous glances.[34]

Their lives do not conform to the script of television mythology. Their kinship relationships are much more expansive, with an extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents who feel responsible for them. Ties between children and their mothers tend to be exceptionally strong; relationships with fathers are often complicated and conflicted. Contrary to the stereotype of uncaring, absent fathers, numerous fathers spend significant time with their offspring in infancy and early childhood, but many become disconnected after a few years.[35]

By middle-class standards, children in inner-city neighborhoods have to grow up fast. From an early age, boys and girls are expected to be housekeepers, nannies, protectors, and providers. The money they contribute, however little, offers a crucial margin of difference for their families. Some, convinced that they have no future, give in to immediacy, seeing no reason to resist the lure and profit of gangs or early pregnancy. Gangs offer some boys a missing source of employment, respect, and identity. Motherhood offers some girls the same. While overall school dropout rates have dropped sharply, 40 to 50 percent of youth drop out in the nation's most distressed inner-city neighborhoods. Youth unemployment rates in such areas stand at 40 to 60 percent, three times the rate in 1960. While labor force participation of white men and women under twenty-four has risen, the rate for poor black and Hispanic teenagers has fallen. Altogether, half of all inner-city youth have never held a regular job by their twenty-fifth birthday. Joblessness and school failure, in turn, contribute to rates of teen pregnancy and juvenile delinquency that are the nation's highest. The strongest predictors of teenage motherhood are poverty, poor reading skills, and school failure. Similarly, poor academic performance and a lack of job prospects have produced the nation's highest juvenile crime rate. By the age of thirty, over a third of all inner-city males have been in a youth facility or a jail or placed on probation.[36]

But despite popular stereotypes of ghetto pathology, most inner-city residents resist the temptations of crime, drug abuse, or teenage pregnancy. Indeed, inner-city youth drink less, smoke less, and use drugs less than their suburban middle-class counterparts. One factor that has contributed to this pattern is the strength of black mothers, who serve as models and nurturers of strong and independent behavior. Socialization among African Americans historically has not emphasized sex-role dichotomies in the way found among white families, and as a result many young black women, even in the poorest neighborhoods, have higher aspirations for education and a career than many of their white counterparts.[37]

Like their inner-city counterparts, the children of immigrants experience intense challenges as they find their way toward adulthood. Like earlier immigrant children, Esmeralda Santiago faced daunting and painful cultural adjustments. But unlike previous immigrants, her desire to assimilate clashed with an equally intense desire to maintain her cultural identity. Her family called her Negi, short for Negrita, "our dear little dark one." Born in a Puerto Rican barrio in 1948, the eldest of eleven children, she moved at the age of four to the town of Macun, where her family crowded into a one-room corrugated metal house on stilts. Each morning she awoke to a radio program that celebrated traditional *jibaro* music and poetry. She later wrote poignant descriptions of incidents in her life in rural Puerto Rico, including a custom in which she had to close a dead infant's eyelids to let the deceased child rest peacefully.[38]

In 1961 she, her mother, and six siblings arrived in Brooklyn. Her mother, seeking medical help for a son who had injured his foot, was also trying to escape an unhappy marriage, and supported the family by sewing bras. In Brooklyn Esmeralda's family struggled with a difficult and sometimes frightening social environment. None spoke a word of English, and Esmeralda encountered many instances of discrimination.

Taxi drivers refused to pick her up, people of a variety of ethnic groups treated her as a foreigner, and even Puerto Ricans born in New York kept their distance. When she enrolled in public school, the principal wanted to move her back a grade, and when she refused, he placed her in a class for learning-disabled students.

Compared with turn-of-the-century immigrant children, Esmeralda felt much more ambivalence about becoming American. She vividly recalled going to the Bushwick branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, seeking any book written by an author with a Spanish name. The closest she came was to a volume of poetry by William Carlos Williams. "The more I read, the more I realized that people like me didn't exist in English language literature," she said. "The feeling was that I wasn't wanted here. Otherwise, I would be reflected in the culture." She discovered that assimilation involved much more than learning the English language. She studied Archie comic books to understand the way American girls dressed and talked, and envied Veronica, who had fancy clothes and a car.[39]

Like earlier immigrant children, she had to assume adult responsibilities at an early age. Barely able to speak English, she translated for her mother at meetings with a welfare agent. Every few months her family moved, in search of lower rent or larger rooms. She received conflicting and confusing messages from her family. She was told to strive to get ahead, but not to leave other family members behind. Her mother warned her to be wary of men, and did not allow her to have male friends. At the High School for the Performing Arts in Manhattan, however, Esmeralda encountered a diverse, multicultural environment. She performed classical Indian dance and portrayed Cleopatra in a play. When she returned to Puerto Rico after thirteen years of living in the United States, Puerto Ricans told her that she wasn't Puerto Rican "because I was, according to them, Americanized." But she continued to feel a deep sense of uncertainty about whether she was black or white, rural or urban, Puerto Rican or American. Her experience was shared by innumerable other immigrant children caught between two cultures, neither of which they can identify fully as their own.

Today the number of immigrant children is at an all-time high. A fifth of all young people in the United States are the children of immigrants—either immigrants themselves or the U.S.-born children of immigrant parents. In New York City and Los Angeles, about half of all school children are the children of immigrants. Nationwide about four million children have limited English proficiency. The current surge in immigration followed enactment of the Hart-Cellar Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which ended a quota system that severely restricted immigration from

A young Cuban refugee enters the United States in 1961 following the Cuban Revolution. Under Operation Pedro Pan, the largest child refugee program in the history of the Western Hemisphere, more than 7,000 children arrived in the United States unaccompanied by their parents. Courtesy of the Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

outside northern and western Europe, and instead emphasized the principle of family reunification. Today's immigrant children are predominantly Asian, Caribbean, and Hispanic, and face racial barriers that did not exist for their European predecessors, as well as economic barriers that limit their economic prospects. A century ago the children of European immigrants joined an expanding American industrial workforce; today's second generation finds a stagnating job market with limited prospects for advancement for those without a college degree.[40]

For many children, the immigrant journey exacted a high cost. Many immigrants fled economic or political upheavals in their country of birth, and immigration entailed family separation, either because parents migrated ahead of the children or because the children were sent to the United States first. Altogether, only about 20 percent of immigrant children arrived in the United States with their entire immediate family. Family reunification often proved to be a prolonged, tension-filled experience, complicated by the fact that many immigrant parents hold multiple jobs, and thus have less time to interact with their children.[41]

In certain respects the experiences of immigrant children at the end of the twentieth century mirrored those at the century's start. Many immigrant fathers suffer a sharp loss in status following migration, as they have to take on low-prestige jobs to support their families, diminishing

their authority over their children. Role reversal remains quite common, as children must serve as cultural and linguistic interpreters, but also very unsettling. Lan Cao, a Vietnamese immigrant who arrived in the United States at the age of thirteen, explained: "I was the one who would help my mother through the hard scrutiny of ordinary life." She, like other children of immigrants, had to assume adult responsibilities quickly: "I would have to forgo the luxury of adolescent experiments and temper tantrums, so that I could scoop my mother out of harm's way." As in earlier generations of immigrant families, the experiences of boys and girls diverged. Girls assumed greater domestic responsibilities as translators, as intermediaries in financial, legal, and medical transactions, and as babysitters, and were more likely to face restrictions on dating and other activities outside the home. One unexpected consequence of those restrictions was that immigrant girls viewed school as a liberation, unlike many nonimmigrants, who considered school a form of detention.[42]

Unlike early twentieth-century immigrants' children, who felt they had to reject the Old World to get ahead in the new, many contemporary immigrant children feel less eager to assimilate and less pressure to reject their cultural traditions. Foreign-language television shows, newspapers, magazines, radio talk shows, and the Internet allow immigrant children to maintain regular contact with family and friends in their country of birth. Some groups are able to sustain their native language at high rates, including about 70 percent of Haitian-American and Filipino-American children. Nevertheless, like second-generation immigrants of a century ago, immigrant children encounter the humbling experiences of learning English and of generational tensions with elders who find American culture profoundly alienating. For today's immigrant children, the process of adjustment is made all the more difficult by a sense of a profound gap with American-born children, who seem preoccupied with boyfriends, clothes, and the latest fads.

The lives of children of immigrants involve a paradox. On the one hand, they are healthier than nonimmigrant children, even though more than a quarter do not have a regular source of health care. Immigrant children also work harder in school than do nonimmigrant children, and are overrepresented as high school valedictorians. Yet the more Americanized these children become, the more likely they are to engage in risky behavior, such as smoking, drinking, using illegal drugs, engaging in unprotected sex, joining gangs, or committing crime. This trend seems to be related not only to the impoverished neighborhoods that many immigrant children live in, but also to the social expectations that children of immigrants encounter, especially the preconception that they are of lower intelligence or are dangerous. Some immigrant children who feel themselves marginalized and disparaged respond by embracing an adversarial identity, hostile to authority and school achievement. At the same time, many find themselves forced into preexisting American racial and ethnic categories, required to choose between being white, black, Asian, or Hispanic.[43]

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, many of the most divisive domestic policy issues, from gun control to the Internet, were debated in terms of their impact upon children. Images of fragile and vulnerable children, unable to assert their needs or defend their interests, gave legislative proposals a moral weight that they would otherwise have lacked. During the 1970s, liberals and conservatives discovered that child endangerment was a highly effective way to mobilize political support. It was a liberal, Marian Wright Edelman, the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi bar, who pioneered the politics of child advocacy by founding the Children's Defense Fund in 1973. Recognizing that support for programs identified with racial minorities and the poor was dwindling, she concluded that "new ways had to be found to articulate and respond to the continuing problems of poverty and race, ways that appealed to the self-interest as well as the conscience of the American people." By shifting the focus from poverty to children, she sought to generate support for childcare, child nutrition, and child health programs during a period of conservative ascendancy. Among the successes that can be attributed to lobbying by the Children's Defense Fund were an expansion of Head Start, prekindergarten, and afterschool programs; the Earned Income Tax Credit (a refundable federal income tax credit for low-income families enacted in 1975 to offset social security taxes and provide an incentive to work); the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, providing unpaid parental leaves; and the 1997 Children's Health Insurance Program, which furnishes health insurance to children in families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid but too low to afford private insurance.[44]

Social conservatives and political moderates quickly discovered that they could use the politics of childhood for their own purposes. Many policies they proposed in children's name proved to be highly restrictive. Convinced that it was politically counterproductive to regulate adult behavior, legislators imposed regulations on the young, including curfews, curbs on smoking and drinking, competency testing in schools, and more restrictive policies on teenage driving. Meanwhile school boards instituted dress codes, especially in middle schools, and zero-tolerance policies on drug use and school violence. A few mandated random drug tests for students engaged in extracurricular activities.

One of the most contentious issues was whether to fund daycare for the

children of working mothers. The issue of how to care for children when their mothers worked burst onto the political agenda in 1964, when a Department of Labor study counted almost a million "latchkey" children who were unsupervised for large portions of the day. Over the years, their numbers skyrocketed. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the number of working mothers with children five or under who worked outside the home tripled. Today two-thirds of all children under the age of six have a mother who works, more than three out of every five children under the age of four are in a regularly scheduled childcare program, and nearly half of all one-year-olds spend part of their day in nonparental care. As the number of working mothers grew, many family experts advocated organized daycare programs as a necessary response.[45]

Liberals, led by Democratic Senator Walter Mondale, called for a national system of comprehensive child development and daycare centers. Building on the model of Head Start, Mondale proposed in 1971 that the federal government establish a care system that would include daycare, nutritional aid for pregnant mothers, and afterschool programs for teens. President Richard Nixon vetoed the bill in a stinging message that called the proposal fiscally irresponsible, administratively unworkable, and a threat to "diminish both parental authority and parental involvement with children." Tapping into the widespread view that childcare was a parental responsibility, the president warned against committing "the vast authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach."[46]

Following the presidential veto, congressional support for a comprehensive system of federally funded centers evaporated. Nevertheless, a fragmentary patchwork emerged, consisting of ad-hoc, makeshift arrangements by individual parents; informal, family-style care in private homes; and a wide variety of nonprofit and for-profit centers. This crazy-quilt included regulated and unregulated and custodial and educationally oriented programs. In the United States, childcare is thought of primarily as a family responsibility, whereas in Europe it is regarded as a public responsibility. Yet despite ingrained hostility toward state intervention in the family, public involvement in childcare gradually increased. Direct federal funding was restricted almost exclusively to the poor and to military personnel, but the federal government also indirectly subsidized childcare through grants to organizations that operate daycare centers as well as through tax incentives and credits to individual families. In contrast, corporate support for childcare for their employees has remained negligible, with about 5 percent of employees eligible for corporate child-

care benefits. In 2000, forty-three states provided part-time prekindergarten programs, usually targeted at four-year-olds.

While most parents say that they are satisfied with the care that their children receive, expert studies have concluded that the care is of poor or mediocre quality for half of children in childcare arrangements. The most significant problem is inequality of access to educationally oriented programs, with 75 percent of the three- to five-year-olds of wealthier parents and only 45 percent of those of low-income parents in such programs. Other problems include the low status and pay of childcare workers, minimal standards for training, high staff turnover, prohibitive fees, and widely varied, loosely enforced regulations.

The politics of childhood has focused less on practical policies like childcare than on regulating children's lives. In 1970 Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker, who had once served as Richard M. Nixon's personal physician, recommended that the president order psychological testing for all seven- and eight-year-olds in order to determine whether they had "violent and homicidal tendencies." Disturbed, angry, rebellious, undisciplined, and disruptive children were to receive therapy from counselors and psychologists in afterschool programs and special camps. Dr. Hutschnecker's proposal was greeted with horror; critics labeled the treatment centers "concentration camps." While nothing like Dr. Hutschnecker's proposal for universal psychological testing has been implemented, there have been expanded efforts over the past three decades to intervene in children's behavior at an early age. These included greatly expanded use of psychotropic drugs such as Ritalin, not only among older children but also among preschoolers. There is also increased use of "sex-offense-specific" therapies directed at "children with sexual behavior problems," under which children as young as two have been diagnosed and treated for inappropriate behavior such as fondling or masturbating compulsively. The most pronounced trend was toward imposing new kinds of restraints and controls on the young.[47]

More than forty years ago, social critic Edgar Z. Friedenberg wrote that adults' hostility toward youth—"rooted in fear of disorder, and loss of control; fear of aging, and envy of life not yet squandered"—was often disguised as efforts to help the young. Friedenberg's comment provides an insight into the way society has addressed children's welfare since the early 1970s. Convinced that adult behaviors were deeply entrenched and not susceptible to change, persuaded that most problem behaviors take root in the early years of life, policymakers and advocacy groups focused on changing young people's behavior. This approach allowed authorities

to address pervasive social problems without alienating adult voters. More disturbingly, focusing on youth provided a thinly veiled way to target minority and lower-income youths without provoking widespread outcries of racism or class bias. This "tough love" approached seemed to offer a commonsense solution to social problems. But if the ostensible goal was to ensure young people's safety and well-being, zero-tolerance policies also sent the message that young people's needs were subordinate to those of adults.[48]

In 1994 two boys, aged ten and eleven, attacked five-year-old Eric Morse in a Chicago public housing project because he had refused to steal candy for them from a local supermarket. The boys stabbed him, sprayed him with Mace, and pushed him downstairs before dangling him out a fourteenth-floor window and dropping him to his death. At the time the two boys were the youngest people in American history to be jailed for murder, but they were not isolated examples of "kids killing kids." At least ten youths, twelve or younger, were charged with murder in Chicago in 1993 and 1994. In the weeks following the boys' arrest, additional facts came to light that helped explain the factors that predisposed them to violence, including troubled families, neglectful schools, and law enforcement authorities who had failed to do their job. Both had fathers in prison, and one boy's mother was a drug addict. Both grew up surrounded by violence. Although one boy had skipped classes for much of the year and had failed all his courses, he had been promoted to the next grade. Finally, in the six months before Eric's murder, one of the boys had been arrested eight times, including once for possession of ammunition, but was released each time, even though Chicago police guidelines mandated a referral to a juvenile court after three arrests.[49]

The murder of Eric Morse raised troubling questions. Should ten- and eleven-year-olds be held culpable for serious crimes? What should be done about children who are deeply troubled and are at risk of growing into violent adults? In the wake of the Morse murder and a 1996 case in which a six-year-old Richmond, California, boy pulled a one-month-old baby from his crib and kicked, punched, and beat the infant with a broomstick, every state moved to prosecute as adults juveniles who committed serious crimes, such as murder, armed robbery, and burglary. By being placed in the adult justice system, juveniles would receive stiffer sentences and be jailed under harsher conditions. Some jurisdictions adopted laws preventing juvenile court records from being expunged and requiring that schools be notified whenever a juvenile was taken into custody for a crime of violence or when a deadly weapon was used. Meanwhile, many increased

minimum sentences for juvenile offenders, and at least three states automatically tried delinquents with three previous convictions as adults.[50]

During the 1996 presidential campaign, President Bill Clinton urged cities to enact curfew laws to keep teenagers off the streets at night to reduce youth violence. "We simply cannot go into the 21st century with children having children, children killing children, children being raised by other children or raising themselves on the streets alone," he told 10,000 African-American church women. Curfews, he maintained, "give parents a tool to impart discipline, respect and rules at an awkward and difficult time in children's lives." At the time he made this speech, 146 of the 200 largest cities had curfews to keep youths off the street after dark.[51]

Clinton also called for other measures to reassert discipline and increase adults' authority. These included requiring school uniforms in elementary and middle schools; establishing a television rating system that used letters like *V* for violence and *S* for sex; preventing the movie, music, and video-game industries from marketing violent, sexually explicit products to children; requiring libraries to install filtering software on Internet-accessible computers; and placing "V-chips" in television sets to allow parents to block offensive programming. He also urged school districts to adopt "zero-tolerance" policies on illicit drug use, smoking, and violence to restore "order in our children's lives." The president portrayed these ideas as neither too coercive nor too strict. Young people needed to know that "these rules are being set by people who love them and care about them and desperately want them to have good lives." Like other measures that President Clinton took on behalf of parents and children—such as unpaid leave for teacher conferences and doctors' appointments, minimum hospital stays for childbearing, and a ban on tobacco ads aimed at the young—these had an activist flavor but required no new federal government spending. For a president accused of a pot-smoking, draft-evading, womanizing past, talking tough on values provided some rhetorical insulation from conservative attacks.[52]

In 1985 an elementary school in Oakland, California, launched an antidrug, antialcohol campaign with a simple message: "Just Say No." This campaign, which drew national attention after it gained vocal support from First Lady Nancy Reagan, was one of a number of efforts to alter youthful behavior through education. D.A.R.E., Drug Abuse Resistance Education, founded in Los Angeles in 1983 by then Police Chief Darryl Gates, was another. In nearly 70 percent of the nation's school districts, police officers lead classroom lessons on ways to resist peer pressure and live drug and violence-free lives. Usually in the fifth grade, students

are asked to sign a pledge that they will keep their bodies drug free, despite the fact that no scientific study has uncovered any statistically significant difference in drug usage rates between students who had taken D.A.R.E. and those who had not.[53]

Similar efforts urged young people to say no to sex. The 1996 Welfare Reform Act earmarked $50 million a year in federal funds for states implementing programs that had as their "exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological and health gains" of sexual abstinence. In order to receive funding, the "exclusive purpose" of sex education must be to teach "that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity" and "that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects." Schools that received these grants had to teach abstinence as the only reliable way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Grant recipients were not to discuss contraception except in the context of failure rates of condoms. Supporters claimed that abstinence education helped youngsters develop the skills to "say no to sex." Critics noted that in a society in which half of high school students and three-fifths of high school seniors report having had intercourse, the abstinence-only approach failed to provide them with the information they needed about sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. By 1999 nearly a quarter of all sex education teachers taught abstinence as the only way of preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, compared with just 2 percent in 1988.[54]

To buttress the "just say no" programs, many schools implemented zero-tolerance rules that mandated expulsion, denial of a diploma, or loss of a driver's license if a high school student smoked, drank, or used drugs. In North Carolina, teen smokers could be fined up to $1,000, and in Florida, Minnesota, and Texas, teen smokers could lose their driver's licenses. No empirical evidence has shown these programs to be effective in inoculating the young against substance abuse or premature sex. For a significant number of adolescents, risky behavior is a way to assert their individuality, define an identity, rebel against authority and conventionality, and symbolize their initiation into adulthood. Given that our society offers few positive, socially valued ways for the young to demonstrate their growing competence and independence, it is not surprising that many embrace these symbols of maturity.[55]

In the spring of 1993 national media focused on first-grader Jonathan Previte, who kissed a girl on the cheek at his North Carolina school. The principal, upon being informed of Jonathan's kiss, decided that he should be punished under the school's sexual harassment policy. The school subsequently retreated from the sexual harassment label, yet its initial response generated a media frenzy citing "political correctness" run amok. That same year, LaShonda Davis, a fifth-grader in Monroe County, Georgia, was harassed for five months by a boy who rubbed up against her, repeatedly grabbed her breasts and genital area, and asked her for sex. She and her mother complained to school officials to no avail. It took three months of daily requests before the boy was moved to another desk, and LaShonda was so depressed that she wrote a suicide note. The harassment ended only after she and her mother swore out a criminal warrant against the boy, who pleaded guilty to sexual battery. The family then sued the school district, claiming that its failure to take any action to stop the pervasive and damaging harassment violated Title IX, the federal law that prohibits schools from discriminating on the basis of sex. In 1999 the Supreme Court ruled in LaShonda's behalf, holding that when a school is deliberately indifferent to "severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive" harassment, a student has the right to compensation.[56]

Jonathan and LaShonda served as proxies in a broader culture war, a struggle over gender roles, abortion, homosexuality, and censorship that raged from the early 1970s to the late 1990s. School vouchers, charter schools, Internet filtering software, and abstinence-only sex education served as battlegrounds. Even potty training could become fodder in this *Kulturkampf*. John Rosemond, a North Carolina psychologist and a popular conservative writer on childrearing, attacked the pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, whom he accused of adopting a "laissez-faire" approach to toilet training. Rosemond insisted that properly disciplined children needed to be toilet trained by the age of two.[57]

Child discipline was a central arena of conflict. At one pole were experts who echoed concerns first voiced by then Vice President Spiro T. Agnew: that too much coddling of children and overresponsiveness to their demands resulted in adolescents who were disrespectful, rebellious, and undisciplined. An extreme example of this viewpoint was James Dobson's *Dare to Discipline,* first published in 1970, which called on parents to exercise firm control of their children through the use of corporal punishment. At the other pole was Thomas Gordon's 1970 million-plus seller, *Parent Effectiveness Training,* which advised parents to stop punishing children and start treating them "much as we treat a friend or a spouse."[58]

The acceptability of spanking became a point of contention as definitions of what constituted "enlightened" childrearing underwent a dramatic transformation. In 1998 the American Academy of Pediatrics called on parents to reject spanking, saying that the practice taught chil-

dren that "aggressive behavior is a solution to conflict." Murray A. Straus, an expert on abuse, called spanking a "major psychological and social problem" that could doom a child to a lifetime of difficulties ranging from juvenile delinquency to depression, sexual hangups, limited job prospects, and lowered earnings. Defenders of the practice included Dobson and Rosemond, whose *To Spank or Not to Spank* advocated the light swat on the bottom as "a relatively dramatic form of nonverbal communication."[59]

The issue of corporal punishment extended to the schools. As recently as the 1940s, corporal punishment in schools was legal in all but one state. By the end of the century, twenty-seven states and many municipalities had banned the practice. Increasingly, corporal punishment was concentrated in the South, where proponents argued that they were seeking "a return to accountability, authority, and increased order in schools." On the other side were those who wanted "to make schools a sanctuary from social violence," and who believed that corporal punishment contributed to disruptive student behavior. Despite four decades of efforts to ban the practice, corporal punishment remains a reality in many school districts.[60]

The gender wars were repeatedly played out in the juvenile arena. During the 1980s and 1990s a number of influential studies argued that girls were "underserved" and "shortchanged": that gender-biased teachers overlooked girls in class; that girls were less likely to participate in school sports; and that female students were discouraged from pursuing mathematics, science, and technology. Such popular writers as Peggy Orenstein and Mary Pipher reported that many adolescent girls had poor self-esteem, an obsession with body image, and encounters with sexual harassment. Their adversaries, such as Christina Hoff Sommers, claimed that boys had it worse. High school boys lagged three years behind girls in writing, one and a half years behind in reading, and were 50 percent more likely to be held back a grade. Boys were also three times more likely to be enrolled in special education programs, four times more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit disorders, five times more likely to be involved in drugs and alcohol, and eight times more likely to commit suicide.[61]

During the last decades of the twentieth century, arguments over gender were often fought over how best to socialize girls and boys. One side saw the traditional virtues of boyhood as threatened by psychologists who "medicalized" and "pathologized" everyday boyhood behavior, treating physicality, mischief, rough-and-tumble play, and confrontation as psychological disorders. Their opponents argued that boys needed to have more of the nurturing, expressive qualities associated with girls, while

girls needed to be more "boylike": tougher, less preoccupied with popularity and appearance, and more analytical, athletic, and competitive. Such authorities as William Pollack and James Garbarino believed that boys were programmed at an early age to be little men, to refrain from crying, to keep their feelings inside, and never to display vulnerability, and therefore found it difficult to express their emotions without feeling effeminate or to manage their anger and frustration in a way that did not involve violence.[62]

In fact both sexes face significant problems that need to be addressed and have unique voices that need to be heard. Neither boys nor girls find it easy to navigate the path to maturity, and both sexes suffer from gender stereotyping. Thanks in large part to the battles fought by feminists, girls are now better able to synthesize disparate worlds, such as the world of sports, academics, and relationships. But anorexia and bulimia have increased in frequency, and girls must still navigate a social landscape that urges them to define themselves in terms of physical appearance. Both the academic and social problems faced by boys and the inequities and cultural expectations about appearance and proper behavior that girls confront need to be remedied.[63]

Neither the Democratic nor the Republican political party has been consistent on issues relating to children. Generally Republican conservatives favored parents' authority to raise their families without government interference. But in two of the highest-profile public controversies of the 1980s and 1990s—involving twelve-year-old Ukrainian immigrant Walter Polovchak and six-year-old Cuban Elian Gonzalez—conservatives took the lead in arguing that children should be allowed to decide where to live, even if this conflicted with their parents' wishes. Conversely, liberal Democrats, who generally emphasized the ideals of free expression, choice, and questioning authority, took the lead in advocating school dress codes, curfews, and other restrictions on youthful behavior. Clearly, political ideology does not always determine policy.[64]

One of the most explosive issues in the culture war involved introducing children to the reality of gay parents. Leslea Newman's *Heather Has Two Mommies* was the first picture book depicting a young child living with two lesbian parents. Published in 1989, it presented the story of Heather, a preschooler, who discovers that her friends have very different sorts of families. Juan has a mommy and a daddy and a big brother named Carlos. Miriam has a mommy and a baby sister. And Joshua has a mommy, a daddy, and a stepdaddy. Their teacher encourages the children to draw pictures of their families, and reassures them that "each family is special" and that "the most important thing about a family is that all

the people in it love each other." This book produced a firestorm of controversy.

A curriculum guide in New York City, which urged first-grade teachers to acknowledge "the positive aspects of each type of household," including those headed by gays and lesbians, placed *Heather Has Two Mommies* on a list of recommended books. School boards in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens banned the guide, calling it inappropriate for first-graders. Critics termed it a document designed to help recruit gays and lesbians, and in 1993 it headed the list of books that people sought to ban from public library shelves. The next year, after Republican Senator Jesse Helms branded the book an example of the "disgusting, obscene materials that's laid out before school children in this country every day," the U.S. Senate voted sixty-three to thirty-six to deny federal funds to schools that "implement or carry out a program that has either the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative."[65]

Heather Has Two Mommies was the product of a trend in children's literature in which writers dealt much more openly than in the past with such topics as divorce, death, domestic abuse, and the psychological complexity of childhood and adolescence. Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964) charted a new direction in adolescent literature by treating an openly sexual relationship as a symbol of growing up. John Donovan's 1969 novel, *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip,* introduced homosexuality as a theme. Alice Childress' *A Hero Ain't Nothing but a Sandwich* (1973), which described a thirteen-year-old heroin addict, depicted drug abuse as an escape from an intolerable environment and inept parenting. Books for younger children also underwent a radical shift in tone and content. In 1963, *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak aroused controversy because of its depiction of a child's temper tantrum. To be sure, works of fantasy and adventure, like the Harry Potter series, persist, but many of the escapist elements of earlier children's books were disputed.[66]

Of all the battlefields in the culture war involving children, the most hotly contested involved education. There were bitter controversies over Ebonics—the concept that vernacular black English is different enough from standard English to be considered a separate language—whole-language versus phonics in reading instruction, school vouchers, and accountability testing. At the heart of these battles was a conflict between traditional pedagogy, with its emphasis on the importance of memorization, discipline, and a traditional canon, and progressive pedagogy, with its stress on active learning, relevance, and skills-building. Five devastating critiques of public schools in the late 1970s and early 1980s touched off a wave of breast-beating over the state of American education. The most influential, *A Nation at Risk,* argued that there had been no measurable increase in student achievement despite sharp increases in school spending. In its most memorable passage, the report warned: "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people . . . If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." Other studies reported that American students ranked near the bottom in scores on international mathematics and science tests.[67]

Critics challenged the contention that student achievement was eroding, arguing that the proportion of poor students and those with limited English proficiency had sharply increased and that much of the increase in educational expenditures went to remedial tutoring, special education, guidance counselors, and social workers. Their arguments were rejected. Two movements to revitalize education arose. A back-to-basics movement called on schools to emphasize traditional reading, grammar, and arithmetic skills, while a movement for academic excellence sought to improve student achievement by raising requirements for graduation and imposing exit exams. In response to fears that students were not learning enough, that expectations were too low, and that a stronger curriculum was needed for all students, every state increased its graduation requirements, and many imposed "minimum competency tests" to ensure that children were learning basic skills. In 2002 the No Child Left Behind act required the states to create standards in math, reading, and science and to test every student's progress toward those standards. As a result of these campaigns, school curricula became more test driven and more tightly focused on reading, mathematics, and science.[68]

Not surprisingly, these years also saw a succession of movies and books that depicted schools in harshly negative terms. Unlike the more idealistic movies of the mid-1960s, like *To Sir with Love, Back to School, Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, Ferris Bueller's Day Off,* and *Porky's* presented a depressing picture of schools as little more than detention camps populated by rigid, uncaring teachers and lackadaisical, disconnected students. While some books, like Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace,* discussed inequities in educational spending on the rich and the poor, others like *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good about Themselves but Can't Read, Write or Add* expressed a fear that schools, in their preoccupation with educational fads and instilling self-esteem, had

allowed student achievement to decline; that textbooks had decreased in difficulty by two grade levels over the last quarter-century; and that children were not encouraged to work hard or to master rigorous or complex material. The schools became politicized, and as a result legislatures increasingly dictated curricula and graduation standards.[69]

The culture wars played out in the courtroom as well, as a series of legal cases functioned as moral theater, gripping the public's attention and allowing it to debate its beliefs and values. In the mid-1980s the *Baby M* case, the first high-profile court case involving surrogate mothering, generated intense controversy about the meaning of the "best interests of the child" standard. William and Elizabeth Stern agreed to pay Mary Beth Whitehead $10,000 and medical expenses to be artificially inseminated by the father's sperm and carry the child to term. After the birth, Whitehead refused to turn over the baby to the Sterns. A lower court awarded custody to William Stern, the biological father, and gave Elizabeth Stern the right to adopt the infant, partly on the ground that their higher income would allow them to better provide for the child. This decision was overturned in 1988 by the New Jersey Supreme Court, which awarded custody to William Stern, banned the practice of bearing children for money, prohibited Elizabeth Stern from adopting the baby, and granted Mary Beth Whitehead visitation rights.

The case of "Baby Jessica" dramatized the conflicting rights of biological and adoptive parents. In 1991, two days after giving birth, Cara Clausen signed papers giving up the child for adoption. Two weeks later she filed papers to revoke the decision. The child's biological father, who had not previously been informed that the child had been put up for adoption, sued for custody. The adoptive parents, Jan and Roberta DeBoer, contested the case in court and, after a protracted legal battle, were ordered in 1993 to give Baby Jessica to the child's biological father. The case of Gregory Kinsley, a twelve-year-old Nintendo-playing Florida boy, involved the conflicting rights of parents and children. In 1992 he became the first minor to successfully sue his parents for a "divorce." In the preceding eight years his mother had spent only one year with him, and he asked to be placed with his foster parents, an upper-middle-class Mormon family. His biological mother argued that the boy was seeking more affluent parents and, as a Catholic, should not be placed with Mormons. The judge ultimately ruled that in cases involving overwhelming abuse or neglect, children had a right to sue to terminate their parents' rights.

In cases involving children, the courts had to balance three competing claims: young people's independent rights, including the right to make decisions about medical treatment and to decide where and with whom to

live; the right of parents, in the absence of abuse or neglect, to raise their child as they saw fit; and government's authority to regulate children's behavior. A majority on a bitterly divided Supreme Court took the position that earlier court decisions had fostered legalistic and adversarial relations within homes and schools, undercut adult authority, and undermined the nurturing environments young people needed to grow up. The conservative majority also expressed concern that federal and state governments were intruding on parents' right to raise their children as they wished.

In one area, young people's health, the Court extended children's rights. In three landmark decisions—*Planned Parenthood of Missouri v. Danforth* (1976), *Carey v. Population Services International* (1977), and *Belloti v. Baird* (1979)—the Court declared that juveniles had a right to obtain birth control information, contraceptives, and abortions even over their parents' objections. The Court's majority held that pregnancy had such significant implications for young people's future life that they had to be empowered to make this decision for themselves. In a 1981 case, *H. L. v. Matheson et al.*, the Court upheld the constitutionality of a Utah statute that required parental notice in cases of unemancipated minors seeking abortions, while affirming juveniles' right to an abortion. But the high court also required states with parental notification laws to provide a "judicial bypass" process allowing judges to drop the notification requirement.

While the Court extended juvenile rights in the area of reproductive health, the justices gave greater deference to the authority of parents and government in other realms. In a 1979 decision, *Parham v. J. R.*, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of parents to institutionalize their children without due process. The Court also granted school officials leeway in disciplining students and regulating their behavior. It ruled in 1977 that states could allow children to be paddled in school without parental consent or a hearing; in 1986, that a principal could suspend a student for making an obscene speech; and in 1988, that principals could censor school newspapers. The courts also held that school dress codes and restrictions on hairstyle were permissible so long as they were not unreasonable or discriminatory; and that school administrators could search lockers without demonstrating probable cause.

In 1995 the high court ruled that schools could test entire teams of student athletes, even if individual team members were not suspected of using drugs, on the grounds that athletes were important role models. In 2002 the Court went further and upheld the random drug testing of students in all extracurricular activities, not just athletics. The Court's conservative majority summed up its new attitude in a 1985 decision that up-

held the right of school officials to search a New Jersey girl's purse after she was caught smoking in a lavatory. "Maintaining order in the classroom has never been easy, and drug use and violent crimes in the schools have been a major problem," declared Justice Byron R. White. "Accordingly we have recognized that maintaining security and order in the schools requires a certain degree of flexibility in school disciplinary procedures." A commitment to child protection trumped the principle of children's rights.

Early in 2000, six-year-old Dedrick Owens shot and killed a six-year-old classmate, Kayla Rolland, at their elementary school in Mount Morris Township, Michigan. Under a revision of the state's juvenile justice law in 1997, generally considered the nation's toughest, Dedrick, despite his age, could be tried as an adult for murder. After the initial shock gave way, the complexities of treating juveniles as adults became apparent. Dedrick's classmates considered him a bully, and he had already been suspended for stabbing a classmate with a pencil. But there was also a sense in which Dedrick was himself a victim. His father was in jail. He, his mother, and his brother, lived with an uncle in a boardinghouse that local authorities called a crack house. His uncle, his closest male adult role model, exchanged drugs for stolen guns, one of which Dedrick brought to school to show off. After he shot Kayla and was taken into police custody, he drew pictures and asked whether he would see Kayla the next day. Ultimately he was deemed too young to be held criminally responsible and was placed in a private institution for children who have emotional problems.

For the past three decades, the overarching narrative of childhood has consisted of a discourse of crisis: a story of unstable families, neglectful parents, juvenile oversophistication, and teenage immorality. Individual children served as potent symbols in this morality tale. There was Jessica Dubroff, the would-be Amelia Earhart, who died because her father wanted her to become the youngest person to fly across the United States. Or JonBenet Ramsey, the six-year-old whose mother sought to make her a beauty queen. Rather than treasuring these children for their own sake, their parents treated them as pint-sized extensions of their own egos. These girls served as symbols of a society that professed to prize children, but in fact viewed them as means to their parents' fulfillment.

Americans are usually considered believers in progress, but the narrative of childhood turns the theme of progress on its head. However, this emphasis on decline is deeply flawed. It treats all children as if they were alike, while ignoring the crucial variables of gender and class. If the lives of suburban, middle-class white boys have grown riskier, middle-class

girls and minority children have more opportunities and role models than ever before. Equally important, the discourse of decline exaggerates the impact of family structure on children's well-being even as it distracts our attention from the genuine stresses that afflict the lives of the young, tensions that came glaringly to light in the youthful rampage at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999.