CHAPTER 8

Family Values

Advice Literature for Parents and Children in the Early Republic

In Philadelphia in 1783, twenty-year-old Nancy Shippen took some time out of her busy day to record how she wanted to raise her seventeen-month-old daughter Peggy. The child was her first, and Shippen, like many new parents, wanted to have some purposeful design behind her parenting. Starting from the premise that her daughter’s upbringing should be “in some particulars . . . different from mine,” Shippen recorded in her journal a list of points “Concerning a Daughter’s Education”:

1st. Study well her constitution and genius.
2nd. Follow nature and proceed patiently.
3rd. Suffer not servants to terrify her with stories of ghosts and goblins.
4th. Give her a fine pleasing idea of good, and an ugly frightful one of evil.
5th. Keep her to a good and natural regimen of diet.
6th. Observe strictly the little seeds of reason in her, and cultivate the first appearance of it diligently.

Shippen listed thirty-five points in all. She ended her list with this thought: “When wisdom enters into her heart, and knowledge is made pleasant to her soul, discretion shall preserve her, and understanding shall keep her.”

Almost fifty years later, in 1831, another parent paused to record his thoughts about child rearing. The Reverend Francis Wayland was a New England minister and the father of a fifteen-month-old son named Heman. One Friday morning, Heman began to cry. Francis took from the child a piece of bread, “intending to give it to him again after he became quiet.” Heman quivered down, but when his father offered him the bread, the child threw it away in anger. Displeased by this fit of temper, Francis decided it was time to teach his son a lesson. He left the child alone in a room and gave orders that no one was to speak to Heman or give him food or drink until further notice. Every hour or two throughout the day, Francis visited his son, offering him the bread and putting out his arms to take him,” but the child refused to take any food or drink or to embrace him. Heman went to bed that night without having had anything to eat since the previous day; the next morning, the test of wills continued. At 10:00 A.M., Heman took some bread and milk from his father but still refused to embrace him, so Francis continued the child’s confinement. Finally, around 3:00 P.M., Heman capitulated and came to his father, “completely subdued.” Francis Wayland was so proud of his method of disciplining Heman, which had rendered the child so much more “mild and obedient,” that he published a summary of the episode in the American Baptist Magazine to serve as a model for other parents.

Between 1780 and 1830, middle-class Americans made child rearing a national project, devoting an enormous amount of time and energy to raising the first generation born after independence. Of course, parents of all times and places have always contemplated the best way to raise their children, and every culture produces a prescribed set of rules for doing so. Shippen and Wayland, however, were representatives of a conscious effort by American parents in the wake of the Revolution to reexamine and experiment with child-rearing practices. Parents such as Shippen and Wayland became self-consciously reflective about their child rearing, often writing about their experiences with an air of scientific observation and detachment. They also felt the urge to share their thoughts on child rearing with others, to read books published by self-appointed experts, or even (as in Wayland’s case) to announce their own expertise. Along with this advice literature for parents came a steady flow of books and magazines aimed at children. By 1830, a homespun genre of children’s literature had emerged in America, offering not only instruction in reading and writing but also stories meant to instill habits and values in their young readers appropriate to the gender roles they would assume as adults.

This focus on child rearing and childhood in the early republic had its roots in several important cultural trends associated with American independence. First, the political ideology of the American Revolution, grounded in the scientific and intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment, challenged patriarchal power in all forms, whether it was held by kings or fathers. As a model of family government, patriarchy equated the father’s power over the family with a king’s power over his subjects: both were absolute and ordained by God. When the colonies disavowed their allegiance to the British Crown, they also dealt a blow to the unlimited power of the father within the family. A significant figure in this regard was the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, whose Second Treatise of Government had inspired Jefferson’s language in the Declaration of Independence. Locke also authored two works, Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) and Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), that influenced American attitudes about child rearing. Locke posited that an infant’s mind was a tabula rasa, or blank slate: children learned and
developed personalities according to the circumstances in which they were raised. Locke's ideas challenged long-held beliefs about original sin and the inherent depravity of children, and they were popular among many parents in eighteenth-century America, as evidenced in Nancy Shippen's emphasis on controlling her daughter's environment and nurturing her reason.

Evangelical Protestantism also encouraged a reexamination of child rearing in the new nation, although often on principles much different from those associated with John Locke. When Francis Wayland waged battle with fifteen-month-old Heman, he was following a time-honored practice among many Anglo-American Protestants: "breaking the will" of the child. The Calvinist theology of many Protestant denominations (especially Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists) taught that original sin corrupted human nature. Left to their own devices, children would follow their natural inclination to do evil rather than good. A parent's job was to break the child of this predisposition early in life, so that a temperament more submissive and obedient to parental and godly authority could be molded in its place. Wayland's episode with his son perfectly illustrates this process and the reasoning behind it. During the early nineteenth century, a wave of religious revivals known as the Second Great Awakening reinvigorated evangelical religion in America, adding to the old Calvinist emphasis on original sin a new message of spiritual perfectionism made possible by God's grace. The evangelists' metaphor of being "born again" into salvation in Christ drew a parallel between spiritual redemption and childhood, inspiring many parents like Wayland to redouble their efforts to raise children who would be fit to respond obediently to God's call when it came.

Economic change and political ideas also influenced family roles and child rearing in the early republic, especially in the Northeast, where urbanization and industrialization were separating the home from the workplace. As fathers took jobs outside the home, the mother's role in child rearing became more pronounced, and the family's domestic life came increasingly under her authority. Middle- and upper-class women redefined their role in society as "republican mothers," charged with the task of raising children capable of governing themselves as productive citizens of the new nation. The notion of Republican Motherhood encouraged female education because mothers had to be capable of instructing their children not only in reading, writing, and arithmetic but also in the moral habits and virtues of a free citizen: industry, frugality, trustworthiness, public duty, and piety. The "Cult of Domesticity," a phrase used by historians to describe nineteenth-century America's celebration of the home as a refuge from the cold, impersonal world outside, elevated mothers as the central figure in the household. Society praised them for their loving nurture and wise counsel they dispensed to their children. Unlike the patriarchal family model so evident in Francis Wayland's disciplining of his son, Republican Motherhood and the Cult of Domesticity made affection and sentiment, duty and obedience, the primary bonds of family life. In the South, where slavery persisted after the American Revolution and industrialization occurred much more slowly, patriarchy remained the defining principle behind family roles in white society.

The transformation of child rearing and childhood in the early republic had important ramifications for family and gender roles in American society. Many of the ideals and images associated with our modern debates over family values—the nuclear family, the stay-at-home mother, the "breadwinner" father—have their origins in the world of Nancy Shippen and Francis Wayland. In the half-century after the American Revolution, they made a purposeful effort to redefine the meaning and purpose of family in a democratic society, and their efforts left a lasting imprint on our culture.

### Using the Source: Advice Literature for Parents and Children

Before 1800, Anglo-Americans imported their advice on child rearing from Britain or wrote their own imitations of popular English works. Rising literacy rates in eighteenth-century Britain produced a consumer market for children's books in which colonial Americans participated as well. The market for these English works decreased during the revolutionary era, when Americans rejected much of their cultural patrimony from Britain. Just as many artists thought it important for the new nation to create its own art rather than slavishly imitate Europe's, so too did prominent intellectuals such as Noah Webster, the author of the first American dictionary, urge Americans to reinvent their methods of raising and educating children. By 1830, this impulse had led to a significant surge in magazines and books published by American authors for American parents and children.

### What Can Advice Literature Tell Us?

Reading advice literature for parents and children is one of the best ways to reconstruct cultural expectations about roles within the family. All advice literature tells its readers how things ought to be, and parenting literature is no exception. Consider for example this excerpt from a popular parenting book, The Mother at Home, or, The Principles of Maternal Duty Familiarly Illustrated by John S. C. Abbott (1833; repr. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852), in which the author uses the occasion of a boy's question about a pot of boiling coffee to advise parents on how to deal with a child's curiosity:

"Mother," says the little boy, "what makes the coffee bubble up so?"

Here the motive is good, and the occasion is proper. And one of the parents explains to the child the chemical process which we call the boiling. The parents have reason to be gratified at the observation of the child, and the

1 For the child to ask a question.
This passage calls to mind the adage, "children should be seen and not heard," but closer reading also reveals assumptions the author is making about gender and the division of power within the family. The father is present in this scene, but the mother intercedes when the child speaks before company. What does this vignette tell you about the author's notion of how authority ought to be ordered within a family?

Even children's literature, which at first glance might seem formulaic and transparent in its purposes, reflects the wider cultural currents in which it is produced. Consider the famous illustrated alphabet from The New-England Primer (see Figure 8.1), the most commonly used book for teaching spelling and reading to American children before 1850. The images and rhyming couplets that accompany the letters are meant to focus the children's attention as they memorize their ABCs, in much the same way that the "Alphabet Song" is used today. These images and couplets also convey messages that teach moral lessons and proper behavior.

Another advantage to using advice literature to study the family and childhood in the early republic is its inclusion of both male and female voices. Before 1800, advice literature on child rearing was written overwhelmingly by men, usually ministers concerned with the moral instruction of youth. The notion of Republican Motherhood, however, gave women the social authority to write and publish their own opinions on the family and domestic life. Indeed, several of nineteenth-century America's most prominent female public figures first gained recognition for their advice literature on the home and child rearing. By comparing male and female authorship of such works, historians can get a sense of how women reshaped their private and public lives during the early nineteenth century.

When working with these sources, it is also important to bear in mind their shortcomings. First, advice literature on child rearing is prescriptive: its purpose is to tell people what to do, and if they need to be told, then they probably are not doing what the literature recommends. No one should assume, for example, from the glut of diet books available in modern American bookstores that we are a society in which everyone eats right and gets enough exercise. Likewise, nineteenth-century advice literature on parenting does not necessarily reflect how people raised their children, only what certain authors thought about the way people should raise their children. Historians always

Figure 8.1 Illustrated Alphabet from The New-England Primer. This illustrated alphabet from an early nineteenth-century edition of The New-England Primer shows how children learned lessons about morality and proper behavior as they learned to read and write. The letters B, H, I, and S teach submission to the authority of God and parents. A, E, and P warn of the punishments that follow bad behavior. G, R, T, X, and Y remind children of their own mortality: death can come at any time, to the old or young, weak or strong.

approach prescriptive literature with skepticism, assuming that if everyone acted according to the instructions contained in such books, their authors would not have felt compelled to write them in the first place.

You should also look for regional, class, or racial biases that may be evident in these sources. The authors often presume to speak for everyone, but who actually reads these books? Obviously, the authors wrote for a literate audience, but literacy rates varied widely in early nineteenth-century America. Men were more likely to be literate than women, although this gap closed considerably in the Northeast, the center of the nation's publishing industry. Protestants were more likely to be literate than Catholics, many of whom were poor Irish immigrants working in urban centers, and African American slaves suffered from legal prohibitions against teaching them to read. Literacy also reflected a person's social class, and works on childhood and child rearing enshrined an ideal image of the family that was distinctively middle class, in which fathers were breadwinners, mothers were homemakers, and the nuclear family (parents and children living together under one roof) was the norm. Such an image held little meaning to many working-class, immigrant, and African American families.

This last point brings to mind another caveat about using these sources. Change in family roles and child-rearing practices was hardly uniform in the early republic, even for people living in the same region or in similar material circumstances. If you observe parents and their children at a playground today, you will not have to wait long to witness sharply different models of child rearing practiced by people who in many respects seem alike. The same is true for people of the past. Nancy Shippen and Francis Wayland both lived in northern cities and came from privileged backgrounds, yet each took a very different approach to raising children. As you read these sources, rather than thinking in terms of one type of family or approach to child rearing replacing another, try to identify the different types and approaches that coexisted and influenced each other.

Questions to Ask

When working with any kind of literature as a source, you need to determine the author's intended audience. Is the book or story aimed at adults or children, mothers or fathers, boys or girls? After answering that question, ask what kind of role models the advice literature is establishing for its readers. What is the author's idea of a happy family, of a perfect mother, father, daughter, or son? How do the answers to those questions make clear the conduct or practices in parents and children that the author finds objectionable? Finally, you will want to connect this advice literature to its wider cultural and political context: what values or biases are evident in how it describes family and gender roles?

- Who is the intended audience?
- What set of familial roles does it hold up as ideal?
- What sort of conduct by parents or children does it criticize?
- What wider social values or biases are evident in this literature?

Source Analysis Table

Use the first three columns in the following table to organize your notes on how each of the sources establishes expectations and role models for its intended audience. In the last column, note the values or biases that you think underlie the author's advice.
The Source: Advice Literature on Child Rearing and Children’s Literature, 1807–1833

ADVICE LITERATURE ON CHILD REARING

1

The Mother at Home by John S. C. Abbott, 1833

John S. C. Abbott was a New England minister who published two of the most widely read books on child rearing in early nineteenth-century America: The Child at Home and The Mother at Home. These excerpts, from the latter book, concern a topic commonly addressed in such literature: the proper method of disciplining children.

Never Give a Command Which You Do Not Intend Shall Be Obeyed.

There is no more effectual way of teaching a child disobedience, than by giving commands which you have no intention of enforcing. A child is thus habituated to disregard its mother; and in a short time the habit becomes so strong, and the child’s contempt for the mother so confirmed, that entreaties and threats are alike unheeded. . .

Sometimes a child gets its passions excited and its will determined, and it can not be subdued but by a very great effort. Almost every faithful mother is acquainted with such contests, and she knows that they often form a crisis in the character of the child. If the child then obtain the victory, it is almost impossible for the mother afterward to regain her authority. . . . When once entered upon, they must be continued till the child is subdued. It is not safe, on any account, for the parent to give up and retire vanquished.

The following instance of such a contest is one which really occurred. A gentleman, sitting by his fireside one evening, with his family around him, took the spelling-book and called upon one of his little sons to come and read. John was about four years old. He knew all the letters of the alphabet perfectly, but happened at that moment to be in a rather sullen humor, and was not at all disposed to gratify his father. Very reluctantly he came as he was bid, but when his father pointed with his pencil to the first letter of the alphabet, and said, “What letter is that, John?” he could get no answer. John looked upon the book, sulkily and silent.

“My son,” said the father pleasantly, “you know the letter A.”

*Such contests.

"I can not say A," said John.
"You must," said the father, in a serious and decided tone. "What letter is that?"

John refused to answer. The contest was now fairly commenced. John was willful, and determined that he would not read. His father knew that it would be ruinous to his son to allow him to conquer. He felt that he must, at all hazards, subdue him. He took him into another room, and punished him. He then returned, and again showed John the letter. But John still refused to name it. The father again retired with his son, and punished him more severely. But it was unavailing; the stubborn child still refused to name the letter, and when told that it was A, declared that he could not say A. Again the father inflicted punishment as severely as he dared to do it, and still the child, with his whole frame in agitation, refused to yield. The father was suffering from the most intense solicitude. He regretted exceedingly that he had been drawn into the contest. He had already punished his child with a severity which he feared to exceed. And yet the willful sufferer stood before him, sobbing and trembling, but apparently as unyielding as a rock. I have often heard that parent mention the acuteness of his feelings at that moment. His heart was bleeding at the pain which he had been compelled to inflict upon his son. He knew that the question was now to be settled, who should be master. And after his son had withstood so long and so much, he greatly feared the result. The mother sat by, suffering, of course, most acutely, but perfectly satisfied that it was their duty to subdue the child, and that in such a trying hour a mother's feelings must not interfere. With a heavy heart the father again took the hand of his son to lead him out of the room for farther punishment. But, to his inconceivable joy, the child shirked from enduring any more suffering, and cried, "Father, I'll tell the letter." The father, with feelings not easily conceived, took the book and pointed to the letter.

"A," said John, distinctly and fully.
"And what is that?" said the father, pointing to the next letter.

"B," said John.
"And what is that?"
"C," he continued.
"And what is that?" pointing again to the first letter.
"A," said the now humble child.
"Now carry the book to your mother, and tell her what the letter is."
What letter is that, my son?" said the mother.
"A," said John. He was evidently perfectly subdued. The rest of the children were sitting by, and they saw the contest, and they saw where was the victory. And John learnt a lesson which he never forgot—that his father had an arm too strong for him. He learned never again to wage such an unequal warfare. He learnt that it was the safest and happiest course for him to obey.

But perhaps some one says it was cruel to punish the child so severely. Cruel! It was mercy and love; it would indeed have been cruel had the father, in that hour, been unfaithful, and shrunk from his painful duty. The passions which he was then, with so much self-sacrifice, striving to subdue, if left unchecked, would, in all probability, have been a curse to their possessor, and have made him a curse to his friends. It is by no means improbable that upon the decisions of that hour depended the character and happiness of that child for life, and even for eternity. It is far from improbable that, had he then conquered, all future efforts to subdue him would have been in vain, and that he would have broken away from all restraint, and have been miserable in life, and lost in death. Cruel! The Lord preserve children from the tender mercies of those who so regard such self-denying kindness.

The Mother's Book by Lydia Maria Child, 1831

Lydia Maria Child was one of the most distinguished women authors of nineteenth-century America, an outspoken advocate for the rights of women, Indians, and African Americans. Early in her career, she edited a successful children's magazine called Juvenile Miscellany and published The Mother's Book, a best-selling volume of child-rearing advice literature. The excerpts below are from Child's recommendations for dealing with teenage daughters.

The period of twelve to sixteen years of age is extremely critical in the formation of character, particularly with regard to daughters. The imagination is then all alive, and the affections in full vigor, while the judgment is unstrengthened by observation, and enthusiasm has never learned moderation of experience. During this important period, a mother cannot be too watchful. As much as possible, she should keep her daughter under her own eye; and above all things she should encourage entire confidence towards herself. This can be done by a ready sympathy with youthful feelings, and by avoiding all unnecessary restraint and harshness. I believe it is extremely natural to choose a mother in preference to all other friends and confidants; but if a daughter, by harshness, indifference, or unwillingness to make allowance for youthful feeling, is driven from the holy resting place, which nature has provided for her security, the greatest danger is to be apprehended. Nevertheless, I would not have mothers too indulgent, for fear of weaning the affections of children. This is not the way to gain the perfect love of young people; a judicious parent is always better loved, and more respected, than a foolishly indulgent one. The real secret is, for a mother never to sanction the slightest error, or imprudence, but at the same time to keep her heart warm and fresh, ready to sympathize with all the innocent gayety and enthusiasm of youth.

I would make it an object so to educate children that they could in case of necessity support themselves respectively. For this reason, if a child discovered a decided talent for any accomplishment, I would cultivate it, if my income would possibly allow it. Everything we add to our knowledge, adds to our means of usefulness. If a girl has a decided taste for drawing, for example, and it is encouraged, it is a pleasant resource which will make her home agreeable, and lessen the desire for company and amusements; if she marries, it will enable her to teach her children without the expense of a master; if she lives unmarried, she may gain a livelihood by teaching the art she first learned as a mere gratification of taste. The same thing may be said of music, and a variety of other things, not generally deemed necessary in education. In all cases it is best that what is learned should be learned well. In order to do this, good masters should be preferred to cheap ones. Bad habits once learned, are not easily corrected. It is far better that children should learn one thing thoroughly, than many things superficially...

My idea is this—first, be sure that children are familiar with all the duties of their present situation; at the same time, by schools, by reading, by conversation, give them as much solid knowledge as you can, no matter how much, or of what kind; it will come in use some time or other; and lastly, if your circumstances are easy, and you can afford to indulge your children in any matter of taste, do it fearlessly, without any idea that it will unfit them for more important duties. Neither learning nor accomplishments do any harm to man or woman if the motive for acquiring them be a proper one. I believe a variety of knowledge (acquired from such views as I have stated) would make a man a better servant, as well as a better president; and make a woman a better wife, as well as a better teacher.

It is certainly very desirable to fit children for the station they are likely to fill, as far as a parent can judge what that station will be. In this country, it is a difficult task to determine; for half our people are in a totally different situation from what might have been expected in their childhood. However, one maxim is as safe, as it is true: A well-informed mind is the happiest and the most useful in all situations. Every new acquirement is something added to a solid capital...

A knowledge of domestic duties is beyond all price to a woman. Every one ought to know how to sew, and knit, and mend, and cook, and superintend a household. In every situation of life, high or low, this sort of knowledge is a great advantage. There is no necessity that the gaining of such information should be attended with intellectual acquirement, or even with elegant accomplishments. A well regulated mind can find time to attend to all. When a girl is nine or ten years old, she should be accustomed to take some regular share in household duties, and to feel responsible for the manner in which it is done, such as doing her own mending and making, washing the cups and putting them in place, cleaning the silver, dusting the parlor, etc. This should not be done occasionally, and neglected whenever she finds it convenient; she should consider it her department. When they are older than twelve, girls should begin to take turns in superintending the household, keeping an account of weekly expenses, cooking puddings and pies, etc. To learn anything effectually, they should actually do these things themselves, not stand by and see others do them. It is a great mistake in mothers to make such slaves of themselves, rather than divide their cares with daughters. A variety of employment, and a feeling of trust and responsibility add very much to the real happiness of young people...

There is one subject on which I am very anxious to say a great deal; but on which, for obvious reasons, I can say very little. Judging by my own observation, I believe it to be the greatest evil now existing in education. I mean the want of confidence between mothers and daughters on delicate subjects. Children from books, and from their own observation, soon have their curiosity excited on such subjects; this is perfectly natural and innocent, and if frankly met by a mother, it would never do harm. But on these occasions it is customary to either put young people off with lies, or still further to excite their curiosity by mystery and embarrassment. Information being refused them at the only proper source, they immediately have recourse to domestics, or immodest school-companions; and very often their young minds are polluted with filthy anecdotes of vice and vulgarity. This ought not to be. Mothers are the only proper persons to convey such knowledge to a child’s mind. They can do it without throwing the slightest stain upon youthful purity; and it is an imperious duty that they should do it. A girl who receives her first ideas on these subjects from the shameless stories and indecent jokes of vulgar associates, has in fact prostituted her mind by familiarity with vice. A diseased curiosity is excited, and undue importance given to subjects, which those she has been taught to respect think it necessary to envelope in so much mystery; she learns to think a great deal about them, and to ask a great many questions. This does not spring from any natural impurity; the same restless curiosity would be excited by any subject treated in the same manner. On the contrary, a well-educated girl of twelve years old would be perfectly satisfied with a frank, rational explanation from a mother. It would set her mind at rest upon the subject; and instinctive modesty would prevent her recurring to it unnecessarily, or making it a theme of conversation with others...

It is a bad plan for young girls to sleep with nursery maids, unless you have the utmost confidence in the good principles and modesty of your domestics. There is a strong love among vulgar people of telling secrets, and talking on forbidden subjects. From a large proportion of domestics this danger is so great, that I apprehend a prudent mother will very rarely, under any circumstances, place her daughter in the same sleeping apartment with a domestic, until her character is so much formed, that her own dignity will lead her to reject all improper conversation.

Sexuality.

Household servants.
CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

3 The New-England Primer, 1807

The New-England Primer was first published in the late seventeenth century, but it remained the most common textbook for teaching children basic lessons in reading, writing, and religion throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. No author was ascribed to it, but the first editions were published by Boston printer Benjamin Harris in the 1690s. Over the next 150 years, many other printers published versions of it, varying the content little from one edition to the next. These excerpts illustrate The New-England Primer’s moral instructions to boys and girls. Note how the material addressed to boys is rendered in prose form, while that to girls is in verse.

Description of a Good Boy

A Good boy is dutiful to his father and mother, obedient to his master, and loving to all his play fellows. He is diligent in learning his book, and takes a pleasure in improving his mind in every thing which is worthy of praise: he rises early in the morning, makes himself clean and decent, and says his prayers. If he has done a fault, he confesses, and is sorry for it, and scorns to tell a lie, though he might by that means conceal it. He never swears, nor calls names, nor uses any ill words to his companions. He is never peevish nor fretful, but always cheerful and good-humoured; he scourns to steal or pilfer any thing from his companions, and would rather suffer wrong, than to do wrong to any of them. He is always ready to answer when a question is asked of him—to do what he is bidden, and to mind what is said to him. He is not a wrangler nor quarrelsome, and refrains from all sorts of mischief into which other boys run. By this means he becomes, as he grows up, a man of sense and virtue, he is beloved and respected by all who know him; he lives in the world with credit and reputation, and when he dies, is lamented by all his acquaintances.

Description of a Bad Boy

A Bad boy is undutiful to his father and mother, disobedient and stubborn to his master, and ill-natured to all his play fellows. He hates his book, and takes no pleasure in improving in any thing. He is sleepy and slothful in the morning, too idle to clean himself, and too wicked to say his prayers. He is always in mischief, and when he has done a fault, will tell twenty lies, in hopes to conceal it. He hates that any body should give him good advice, and when they are out of his sight, will laugh at them. He swears, wrangles, and quarrels with his companions. He will steal whatever comes his way, and if he is not caught, thinks it no crime, not considering that God sees what he does. He is frequently out of humour, sullen and obstinate, so he will neither do what he is bid, nor answer any question which is asked him. In short, he neglects every thing which he should learn, and minds nothing but play or mischief, by which means he becomes as he grows up, a confirmed blockhead, incapable of any thing but wickedness or folly, despized by all men, and generally dies a beggar.

The Good Girl

So pretty Miss Prudence, You’ve come to the Fair; And a very good girl They tell me you are: Here take this fine Orange, This Watch and this Knot; You’re welcome my dear, To all we have got: For a girl who is good, And so pretty as you, May have what she pleases, Your servant, Miss True.

The Naughty Girls

So pert misses, prate-pace, how came you here? There’s nobody wants to see you at the fair; No Oranges, Apples, Cakes, or Nuts, Will any one give to such saucy sluts, For such naughty girls, we here have no room, You’re proud and ill-natur’d—Go hussies, go home.

The Busy Bee, 1831

The American Sunday School Union, a voluntary association formed by several Protestant denominations in 1824 to promote children’s religious education, published thousands of short children’s stories aimed at teaching proper values and habits. Like The New-England Primer, these stories usually appeared without any attribution to authorship. This typical story features the characters of Fanny and Jane, two eight-year-old orphans who live with a pious old woman, referred to in the story as their mother.

Source: The New-England Primer, Being an Easy Method to Teach Young Children the English Language (New York: Daniel D. Smith, 1807), 17-20.

The kind lady took the same pains with Fanny as she did with Jane, and taught both these little girls all those things which she thought necessary for children in their station. She endeavoured to teach them to read and write well, to cipher, and to do nearly all kinds of plain work, as well as to understand household business; but though, as I before said, she bestowed the same labour on both children, yet there was great difference in their improvement. Little Jane took every opportunity of profiting, not only by the instructions of her mother, as she called the lady, but like the busy bee, who gathers honey from every flower which comes her way, she strove to gain some good thing, some useful piece of knowledge, from every person she became acquainted with.

Her mother kept only one servant, whose name was Nanny. Nanny was a clever servant, and understood many useful things, though she was often rude and ill-tempered, and spoke in a vulgar manner. But little Jane had sense to know that although she was not to imitate the manner of Nanny, and her improper way of speaking, yet she might learn many useful things from her: therefore, when she went into the kitchen with the lady, she shut her ears against Nanny's disagreeable way of speaking, and gave her whole mind to learn how to iron, or to make pies and puddings, or whatever useful thing she might be doing.

When any ladies came to drink tea with her mother, Jane would take notice what work they were doing; and if it was pretty or useful, she would try to do something like it for her doll: and thus she taught herself many useful works....

But while Jane was thus daily learning all that is good, Fanny, in the mean time, was gathering all that is evil. Into whatever company she might chance to fall, she always first took notice of what each person was saying or doing wrong, and afterwards tried to do the same. Whenever she went into the kitchen with her mother, instead of learning to do any thing which might be useful from Nanny, she noticed her way of talking or moving, and then tried to do like her. ...

But I can scarcely tell you (and indeed it would only give you pain if I could) how many naughty things Fanny learned from the young people she met with, when she went with her mother to pay a visit in the town. She came home, I am sorry to say, much worse than she went, and that indeed was bad enough. ...

One afternoon, at tea, she[ ] said to the little girls, "To-morrow will be my birth day, and I mean to give you a feast, in which I intend to consult the taste of each of you."

The little girls said they were very glad to hear it, and the lady told them to come the next evening into her dressing room, where she said the feast would be set out.

When Fanny and Jane came, at the hour which the lady had fixed upon, to the dressing room, they found their mother sitting reading by the fire, and two little round tables were placed in the middle of the room. One of these tables was covered with a neat white napkin and a little dessert set out upon it in doll's dishes, made of white china with blue edges. There were four little dishes on this table: one contained an orange, another a few yellow apples, another a roasted apple, and a fourth a few biscuits; and in the middle was a little covered china cup, made in the shape of a bee-hive, which contained honey in the honey-comb.

The little girls had scarcely time to examine this table, so neatly laid out, before their eyes were caught by the other table, which was set out in a manner so strange, that they stood still with surprise, and were not able to move. This second table was covered with straw instead of a table cloth, and instead of dishes, there was a great empty wooden bowl.

The lady got up when the little girls came in, and, drawing her chair between the two tables, she said, "Come, Fanny, come Jane; come and enjoy yourselves. I have been trying to make a feast suitable to the tastes of each of you." She then pointed to the table neatly set out with china and fine linen, and invited Jane to seat herself at it, and directed Fanny to place herself by the other table. ...

"And now," said the lady, as soon as they were seated, "I will divide the feast." So saying, she began to peel the oranges, pare the apples, take the roasted apple out of its skin, and pour the honey from the comb. And, as she went on doing these things, she threw the rind of the orange, the parings of the apple, and the other refuse of the feast, into the wooden bowl, while she placed the best parts on the dishes before Jane. When all this was done, she invited the children to begin to eat. ... Fanny looked very red, and at last, broke into a violent fit of crying.

"What do you cry for?" said the lady. "I know that you heartily love, and have for a long time sought after every thing that is hateful, filthy, and bad; and like a pig, you have delighted in wallowing in mire. I therefore am resolved to indulge you. As you love what is filthy, you shall enjoy it, and shall be treated like a pig."

Fanny looked very much ashamed; and throwing herself on her knees before her mother, begged her to forgive her, and promised that she would never again seek after wickedness, and delight in it, as she had done.

"Fanny," said the lady, "it is very easy for little girls to make fine promises, and to say, 'I will be good,' and 'I am sorry I have behaved ill.' But I am not a person who will be satisfied with words, any more than you can be with orange-peel and skins of apples. I must have deeds, not words. Turn away from your sins, and call upon your God to help you to repent your past evil life. If you do not wish to partake of the portion of dogs and swine and unclean creatures in the world to come, you must learn to hate sin in the present world." ...

I am happy to say, that this day was the beginning of better things to Fanny; for she at once forsook her evil habits, and, with God's blessing upon her endeavours, and the care of the good old lady, she so far overcame her faults, as to be allowed, by the next birth-day, to feast with little Jane.
The Life of George Washington, 1832

George Washington was a fixture in nineteenth-century children’s literature, and his life was used to teach moral lessons about honesty and piety as well as civic lessons about patriotism and citizenship. In children’s biographies of Washington, his mother also played a prominent role and served as an exemplar of motherhood for the new nation.

Mrs. Washington was an affectionate parent; but she did not encourage in herself that imprudent tenderness, which so often causes a mother to foster the passions of her children by foolish indulgences, and which seldom fails to destroy the respect which every child should feel for a parent. George was early made to understand that he must obey his mother, and therefore he respected as well as loved her. She was kind to his young companions, but they thought her stern, because they always felt that she must believe correctly in her presence. The character of the mother, as well as that of the son, are shown in the following incident.

Mrs. Washington owned a remarkably fine colt, which she valued very much; but which though old enough for use, had never been mounted; no one would venture to ride it, or attempt to break its wild and vicious spirit. George proposed to some of his young companions, that they should assist him to secure the colt until he could mount it, as he had determined that he would try to tame it. Soon after sunrise one morning, they drove the wild animal into an enclosure, and with great difficulty succeeded in placing a bridle on it. George then sprang upon its back, and the vexed colt bounded over the open fields, prancing and plunging to get rid of its burden. The bold rider kept his seat firmly, and the struggle between them became alarming to his companions, who were watching him. The speed of the colt increased, until at length, in making a furious effort to throw his conqueror, he burst a large blood-vessel, and instantly died.

George was unhurt, but was much troubled by the unexpected result of his exploit. His companions soon joined him, and when they saw the beautiful colt lifeless, the first words they spoke were: “What will your mother say—who can tell her?” They were called to breakfast, and soon after they were seated at the table, Mrs. Washington said, “Well, young gentlemen, have you seen my fine sorrel colt in your rambles?” No answer was given, and the question was repeated; her son George then replied, “Your sorrel colt is dead, mother.” He gave her an exact account of the event. The flush of displeasure which first rose on her cheek, soon passed away; and she said calmly, “While I regret the loss of my favourite, I rejoice in my son, who always speaks the truth.”


Analyzing Advice Literature

1. Using your notes from the table on page 164, compare and contrast the different types of ideal fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters depicted in these sources. How do these ideals complement or contradict one another? How do the parenting philosophies depicted in these sources compare to those of Nancy Shipherd and Frances Wayland?

2. How do these sources depict parental discipline? How do the methods of discipline differ between fathers and mothers, and what do those differences tell you about assumptions you make about the distribution of power and authority within the family?

3. What sorts of positive and negative examples do these sources present for the behavior of boys and girls? Compare and contrast the language and plots of The Busy Bee (Source 4) and The Life of George Washington (Source 5) to determine how they define virtue and character differently for boys and girls? In what ways are the shortcomings of bad boys and bad girls gender specific? For example, compare Child’s discussion of sexuality in The Mother’s Book (Source 2) with The New England Primer’s descriptions of bad behavior (Source 3).

4. What clues do these sources offer about the economic class of their intended audience? How do they depict members of the household who are not biologically related to the parents or children? Where in these sources do you perceive any biases or assumptions that would limit their usefulness for studying the domestic life and family roles of immigrants, slaves, or the urban working class?

5. How do The New England Primer (Source 3), The Busy Bee (Source 4), and The Life of George Washington (Source 5) compare to the books and stories you read as a child? What does this comparison tell you about the cultural construction of childhood in early nineteenth-century America versus present-day America? What role has television taken in the moral and civic education of present-day American children, and how does it compare in that respect to the efforts of the American Sunday School Union?

The Rest of the Story

In the two decades after 1830, the changes that Republican Motherhood and the Cult of Domesticity wrought in the middle-class American family came into full bloom. Capitalizing on the influence and moral authority that society ascribed to them as mothers and household managers, women stepped out of the home and into public roles by forming female benevolent societies and maternal associations that embraced such causes as Christian missionary work and temperance reform. Lydia Maria Child was on the vanguard of this transformation, giving up her writing on domestic and family topics in the 1830s to promote the antislavery cause. Men continued to publish advice literature on
family government and child rearing, but the tone of this literature gradually shifted from its roots in evangelical Protestantism to a more scientific concern for controlling the early childhood environment and promoting public education. A significant work in this regard was Horace Bushnell’s Christian Nurture (1847), which attacked the practice of breaking the child’s will and recommended instead “bending the will” through loving and mild nurture. Bushnell’s approach assigned even greater importance to the role of the mother as a teacher and disciplinarian, because it discouraged the impact of grand confrontations between parent and child, such as that between Francis and Henan Wayland, in favor of a mother’s constant surveillance of children in their earliest years.

As the nineteenth century progressed, American children’s literature diverged into gender-specific themes that reflected the boundary between the female world of the household and the male world beyond it. While the exemplary lessons in honesty and manly virtue from George Washington’s boyhood remained a mainstay of schoolbooks, young boys in the mid-nineteenth century could also indulge in the tales of a fictional world traveler named Peter Parley or the rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger. Young girls were expected to read books that celebrated the roles they would assume as wives and mothers. Women fiction writers dominated the genre of the domestic novel, which featured female characters and mother-child relationships at the center of the plot. Perhaps the most enduring work in this genre is Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868), the tale of a temporarily fatherless family of four girls and their mother during the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) was not originally published for young readers, although it did appear in storybook editions for children. Its remarkable influence on its mostly female readership rested in a large part on its sympathetic portrayal of a slave family and its condemnation of slaveholders for violating middle-class domestic values.

The model of family that emerged in middle-class American culture in the early nineteenth century permeated itself in future generations through literature that prepared children to assume gender-specific roles as adults. Boys’ adventure stories anticipated the ups and downs and geographic mobility they would experience in the competitive marketplace of industrial America, while girls learned the joys and duties of domestic life from idealized fictional versions of themselves. Yet, as the careers of Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe suggest, society’s elevation of women as mothers also gave them an entrance into the public sphere as writers, reformers, and advocates for the political and social causes they embraced.

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