

Preface

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED to inform the challenge of contemporary parenting by discussing some significant changes in child-adult relations in the past several decades. It is not a how-to book, of the sort that dominates parenting shelves in the bookstores. Rather, it is an orientation to the history of modern parenting and to the connections of past to present; as such, it offers considerable understanding of how-not-to, which is important in its own right.

Why is it that American parents so often get caught up in worries that they lose perspective on some of the basic goals and pleasures of parenting? Understanding the sources and locations of some key anxieties can help us decide what's worth worrying about. And the process that brought us to our current anxieties is interesting and revealing in its own right, which adds to the pleasure of contemplation. We need to know, and we can know, how we got to where we are today, distresses and all.

The basic argument is not complicated. Several decades back, many American parents, and those who advised them, began to change their ideas about children's nature, attributing to it a greater sense of vulnerability and frailty. This new view then influenced the handling of matters within the family, such as discipline and chores. It also affected the ways parents tried to mediate between children and other experiences that affected them, such as schooling or recreation. Some of our most striking practices, from grade inflation to worries about children's boredom, result from the intersection of beliefs in vulnerability and the influence of wider social institutions.

American parents have been dealing, and continue to deal, with some tough issues, which are complicated by the fact that they're of fairly recent origin. The equation between childhood and schooling is the focus of one set of concerns, and the increasing separation of children from work is another. The effort to manage the place of children in a consumer society, surrounded by commercial media, presents another set of challenges. The contemporary environment for children has taken on additional complexity deriving from the worries about emotional and physical vulnerability that gained center stage from the 1920s onward. These worries reflected not only new ideas but also significant changes in the ways children were behaving and in the lives of parents themselves.

The book aims at better understanding of what contemporary parenting is all about. It does not prescribe—parents get enough prescriptions from the many books on the parental advice shelf. It does provide a basis for thinking about appropriate reactions to pervasive worries and for acquiring some perspective on the season's dominant fads and the experts who push them. It aims at providing a better understanding of the evolution of parenting, in the process helping parents themselves to chart their own course a bit more on a sea of advice.