

# **The Parent Crime**

**by Dana Mack**

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"Accursed progenitor!"

*-Endgame*

Of our many cultural allegories of parenthood, the most famous concerns a father called Abraham who, with a very heavy heart, led his unsuspecting son, Issac, up a mountain to slaughter. Half way to the top, Issac ventured to break what must have been a painful silence.

"Father!" broached the son.

"Yes, my son," the father answered.

"There is the wood and the firestone, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

"God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son," the father demurred. Whereupon the son, ever trusting, walked on.

Today, the story of Abraham and Issac is likely to strike us as a quaint relic of a vanished age of innocence. For were Issac to live in our time, he might well have refused to accompany his father on the climb. And even if the son had agreed to climb the mountain, once up top - his father's

cleaver poised to slay him - there would have been a scene involving much recrimination.

Indeed, parents are no longer the unquestioned repositories of wisdom and rectitude they once were, no longer the unchallenged custodians of their children's welfare. Far from it! Remonstrations against parents have become one of our chief cultural preoccupations. Parents are everywhere assailed as impetuous, abusive, and unworthy of their authority over children.

Just take television. On television, this past season, Americans have borne witness to countless tales of parental cruelty and lasciviousness - to child beatings, sexual molestations, and even murder. From the testimonials of the Opra Winfry show, *Scared Silent*, to the made for TV movie, *Child of Rage*, to the *Prime Time* segment devoted to "Satanic Child Abuse," TV spread the disconcerting impression that everywhere sick parents are brutalizing young lives.

TV, however, is neither the author nor the major panderer of this distorted view of parental behavior. Rather it simply rides on the crest of a publishing industry wave. For well more than a decade now a number of personal confessions coming from celebrities and their children (The memoirs of Joan Crawford's daughter, and former Miss America, Marilyn

van Derbur are perhaps the best known of these) have fostered a vain and ferocious image of parenthood. These confessions, more than anything else, seem to have convinced the American public that behind even the most glamorous lives lie tawdry tales of family violence and depravity.

More importantly though, the "parenting" sections of book stores have been increasingly flooded with child rearing tomes portraying parents as lethally dangerous. A recent visit to the Barnes and Noble "Child-sense" section revealed no less than eighty-four current titles on the subject of child abuse - many of these best-sellers, and almost all boasting the academic credentials of their authors. These titles constituted about a third of the books on the parenting shelves, conveying the impression that child mistreatment is a ubiquitous social malaise.

It is not. We live in a violent society, and one in which the family is an increasingly volatile social unit. Still, child-abuse fatalities in this society remain surprisingly low, at 2.5 per 100,000 children. According to American Human Society statistics, child abuse reports have skyrocketed between 1976 and 1993 from 669,000 to nearly three million yearly; but this massive increase in reporting is due more to the recent, relentless media campaign for public awareness on the subject of child mistreatment than to the existence of a truly pervasive problem. According to

Douglas Besharov, founding director of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, only 1/7th of the 2.6 to 3 million reports each year enter child welfare records as substantiated new cases of child abuse. And only a quarter of these substantiated cases involve serious child maltreatment - i.e. sexual molestation, health endangering deprivation or physical assault. Indeed, no more than three percent of substantiated cases of physical abuse each year require any medical attention at all. 1

A large portion of substantiated "child abuse" cases involve the poor, and manifestations of poverty which child-care professionals and child-welfare authorities mistakenly interpret as evidence of "neglect" (an unsanitary dwelling for example, a lack of heat in winter, or an empty refrigerator). But more disturbingly, "substantiated" child abuse cases have in recent years run the gamut of what most of us would consider pretty innocuous parenting practices. Parents have actually been convicted in family- court for such 'crimes' as spanking, restricting television viewing, or taking a child out of school for a few days for reasons unacceptable to school authorities. Widely respected authorities on the subject of child mistreatment - among them Besharov, and Richard Wexler, the author of a

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1. See *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1991 Annual Fifty-State Survey; The National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, and Douglas Besharov, "Gaining Control over Child Abuse Reports" Public Welfare, Spring 1990*

meticulously documented 1990 book entitled *Wounded Innocents: The Real Victims of the War Against Child Abuse* (Prometheus Books; New York) have consistently pointed up the statistical evidence that parents need no Surgeon General's Warning label. But strangely enough, the message that most parents do not abuse their children is hard to get to the public.

Even those foibles of parenting which used to be the object of good natured jibes - chastising too much, demanding too much, worrying too much - are now widely depicted as serious misdemeanours against childhood well being. The National PTA, for example, having declared parenting "the underdeveloped skill," is now distributing flyers to the public schools warning parents that chiding, criticizing and over-protecting as well physical punishment are all serious offences against childhood self-esteem. 2

To get an indication of our culture's exhaustive indictment of parents, however, one need not merely look at scandal mongering celebrity memoirs, child-abuse reporting, or contemporary parenting advise. Indeed, our cultural critique of parents has been honed by an exploding "self-help" literary genre which specializes in parent-bashing. Perhaps the most well known of these is *Toxic Parents*,<sup>3</sup> the

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2. See National PTA Publication, *Parenting: The Underdeveloped Skill*

3. Forward, Susan; *Toxic Parents*. Bantam Books, 1989

4. Forward, op. cit., p. 97

1989 best seller by Dr. Susan Forward. Forward, one of the first psycho-therapists to charge American parents with widespread child-mishandling, made a veritable science of ferreting out ways in which parents can oppress children. The behavior she assails in her book as "abusive" ranges broadly from incest to occasional moralizing, from life threatening beatings to the demand that children show up for Christmas dinner. Indeed, whether horrific or harmless, Forward treats every parental demand on children as a contentious and untoward display of power-hunger. It isn't enough, she claims, to expose excesses of violence perpetrated by parents on their children. Subtle psychological pressures, she claims, can be just as destructive to children's lives as brutal beatings. "Many civic authorities," she warns "have come to recognize the need for new procedures to deal with... physical and sexual abuse. But even the most concerned authorities can do nothing for the verbally abused child. He is all alone." 4

A more recent book entitled, *How to Avoid Your Parents' Mistakes*,<sup>5</sup> indulges less gruesome imagery than the forbidding skull and bones metaphor of *Toxic Parents*. But it endeavours, through an even broader definition of parental impropriety, to help today's parents overcome their sorry parenting heritage. If one is to judge from educator

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5. Wassil-Grimm, Claudette; *How to Avoid Your Parents Mistakes When You Raise Your Children*. Simon and Schuster. New York; 1990

Claudette Wassil Grimm's long list of parenting "disorders", children are ruined by the least indication of parental frailty and suffering, as well as vice. Grimm is as glum about the child rearing capabilities of American families as her name implies. She considers not only substance abuse, mental illness, divorce and desertion indications of "dysfunctional" parenting, but "over-working," "overeating," "overspending," "moodiness," "illness," and even "death!"

Lest the few people who come away from a reading of Grimm's book still believing their family records clean, there are still a number of tomes which can divest them of their smugness - particularly those which expose the double-edged sword of parental love.

One book bears the provocative title, *When Parents Love Too Much*.<sup>6</sup> The thesis: Even the nicest parents are just rabid wolves in sheep's clothing. And oh, the dastardly deeds exposed by the writers of this tome, family therapist Mitch Meyerson and educator, Laurie Ashner! Here are stories of parents who purchase apartments for their children, help them find jobs, render judgements on the characters of their suitors. Such parents, claim the authors, cleverly deceive themselves and their children into thinking they are generous and caring - and that they are only doing their job

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6. Ashner, Laurie and Meyerson, Mitch. *When Parents Love Too Much*. Avon Books, 1990

as good parents. But in truth, they are "controlling" and "manipulative."

Another volume bears the titillating name , *The Emotional Incest Syndrome; What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*.<sup>7</sup> Here Patricia Love, a doctor of educational psychology, mercilessly prosecutes parents who are not quick enough to detach themselves from their offspring. These parents, the author claims, promote insidious syndromes of "co-dependency" that recur generation after generation. And what are the tell-tale signs of "co-dependency?" Parents who have educated their children at home, have spent time with their children in the pursuit of common interests and hobbies, and especially those who have taken their children into their beds for cuddles. It is all too easy, says the author, to trespass into that danger zone of family life where love becomes "over-involvement." Parents must watch themselves; for they are a source of incalculable emotional anguish to children who, even in adulthood, cannot wrest independence from them.

'Toxic parenting,' 'dysfunctional parenting,' 'incestuous parenting"... This is the overbearing vocabulary the psychotherapeutic community uses to describe what it considers the child persecuting legacy of the baby-boom generation. Baby-

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7. Love, Patricia (with Robinson, Jo); *The Emotional Incest Syndrome: What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life*. Bantam, 1990

boomers, they insist, have been devastated by parental abuses on their physical persons, parental violations of their sexual integrity, parental wounds on their self esteem, parental assaults on their independence, by parental obsessions for their welfare, by parental displays of affection - in short by parental depravity *and* parental love. How did we come to this hypercritical attitude toward parenthood?

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Our culture's critical preoccupation with child rearing methods has increased at about the same speed as our perception of the particular vulnerabilities of childhood. And to these, we have become, of late, hyper-sensitive. In fact, the parents of baby-boomers now derogated as "abusive" are, if one were to consider the long term historical record, perhaps the least deserving ever of such derision.

We baby boomers grew up in a charmed and enlightened era - an era in which the child was first recognized a creature quite distinct from the adult, and therefore exempt from the pressures and responsibilities of adulthood. While the child's limited understanding, his sexual innocence, his vivid fantasy, his need for play were appreciated by child-rearing theorists back into the eighteenth century, it was

in the post-war period that a gentle child rearing ethos began to permeate society at all levels.

Far from harboring contempt for their children's fragile spirits, twentieth century parents have, with the help of invaluable research in psychology and child development, taken great care to indulge them. Indeed, the discoveries of Freud undermined parental nonchalance and arrogance more radically than any other set of ideas in the history of civilization. For they meant the dissemination of a new and very frightening notion: that parents who remained insensitive to the psychic pain of growing up could make monstrous mistakes.

Benjamin Spock was, of course, the child rearing expert who primed the general public to a new, psychologically solicitous parenting. In his irresistibly folksy way, he enlightened American mothers and fathers as to their important part as players in the Freudian romance of love, guilt and repression. The key to raising happy children, said Spock, was to relinquish the traditional, Biblical model of parenthood and relieve children of those pressures of parental power and authority which, in the Freudian view, created dependent and inhibited adults. Spock set out to revolutionize the way parents went about their civilizing mission. He urged the generation who read him to re-adapt their methods of discipline to an understanding of the child

as a suffering suitor yearning for Mom and Dad's attentions, rather than as an uncouth savage out to get their goats.

By interpreting childhood misbehavior as romantic disenchantment rather than as untamed mischief, Spock rendered obsolete the "Spare the rod, spoil the child" approach to parenting. Children, he insisted, were creatures too sensitive to be subjected to the intractable exercise of authority that characterized the traditional, Biblical image of parenting. Indeed, traditional discipline - with its harsh sting of anger and reprobation - was Spock's great bugaboo. That childhood naughtiness derived from psychological anguish, and that this anguish often demanded compassion and not punitive measures was a sound notion; but it was one he still drives home to the point of moral equivocation. In *Baby and Child Care*, for example, he suggests that parents might respond to school-age stealing by "thinking over" whether their child might "need more..approval at home," and even a raise in allowance!<sup>8</sup>

It is important, I think, to acknowledge the extent to which Spock and his disciples of the so-called "permissive parenting" ilk stood the ideal of good parenthood on its head. For them, the "good" parent was not the parent who got his children to behave, but the parent who understood

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8. Spock, Benjamin; *Baby and Child Care* (1976) Star Books, Reprint 1983, p. 441

why his children might not behave. The good parent did not depend upon wielding power in rearing his children. He did not demand; he did not rage; he was careful not to react to provocation with anger. Rather, he empathized with the arduous process of psychic development, and coped with - rather than fought - the passing stages.

Much of the popular child rearing advice that followed Spock's was in fact an increasingly degagé elaboration of this essentially psycho-analytic model of parenthood. The most famous child rearing authors of the late sixties and early seventies, Haim Ginott (*Between Parent and Child; Between Parent and Teenager*),<sup>9</sup> and Thomas Gordon (*P.E.T. Parent Effectiveness Training*)<sup>10</sup> in their efforts to metamorphose mothers and fathers from wrathful moralizers, turned them into poker-faced therapists. These child rearing experts, whose works still enjoy wide popularity, wrote their books at a time when the baby-boom generation had grown into rebellious teenagers, and were testing parental tempers to the limit. Gordon in particular urged parents to try to bridge the generation gap with therapeutic and counselling techniques. He even suggested that parents commit to memory monologues designed to transmit emotionally neutral "behavioral messages."

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9. Ginnot, Haim; *Between Parent and Teenager*. Avon Books, 1969

10. Gordon, Thomas; *P.E.T. Parent Effectiveness Training*. Penguin Book, 1970

While it is unlikely that such a studied approach to parenthood penetrated the majority of American homes at the time they were written (Focus group research, today, indicates that most middle-class baby-boomers remember parents - especially fathers - who were not afraid to impose authority in their households.<sup>11</sup>), the proponents of the therapeutic parenting model exerted an enormous influence on the best educated Americans. And their notions about good parenthood came to permeate education, social work, and the media.

Indeed, there was a clear public perception, as early as the sixties, that the traditional arsenals of parental authority - screaming, chiding, slapping, and threatening - were no longer to be regarded as immutable parental prerogatives for making kids behave. Corporeal punishment had long since disappeared from the schools - educators firm in the not very well grounded conviction that humiliating punishments assaulted self-esteem, and thus, stifled academic achievement. <sup>12</sup> Social and public health workers,

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11. I have found this true both in my work with focus groups on the subject of parenting, and also in the work of my colleagues David Blankenhorn, Barbara Defoe Whitehead and David Poppence, who have conducted a number of focus groups for a book on the subject of fatherhood.

12. Few of us would want a return to corporeal punishment in the schools; yet, there is no empirical evidence at all to justify the widely held assumption that such punishment hinders school performance by destroying childhood self-esteem. Rather the opposite. Since the abolition of

taking their cues from the new pedagogy of "self esteem," zealously vilified punitive disciplinary measures as untoward oppression. Most importantly, popular television shows portrayed parents as masters of sensitivity and self-control. Indeed, the parents who still insisted on continuing to rely on physical punishment or verbal rebuke as means of child management knew from television alone - from *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it To Beaver* - that a powerful cultural elite considered them backward.

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Growing up in the sixties, I remember my own parents breaking into gales of laughter on hearing the aging comedienne Ruth Goldberg quaintly counsel, "Spank your child once a day; if you don't know what he's done to deserve it, he will!" And many others I knew like my parents were conscious, in these years, of being both unfashionably strict and shamefully emotional. But they refused to adapt themselves to the new parental role models, claiming that the ever increasing cultural pressures on them to lighten-up on parental authority were unwelcome pressures not just on their temperaments and cultural traditions, but on their modest political ambitions. It seemed clear enough to them that Dr. Spock and his disciples, in preaching a new

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corporeal punishment in the schools, academic achievement has fallen, and many educators blame that falling achievement on a lack of discipline in the classroom.

child rearing ethos, were not simply out to revolutionize the relationship between parents and their children; they were out to revolutionize *society* through the agency of the family as its primary social institution.

One of the most striking aspects of the new parenting ideology was its pacifism - the conviction of its proponents, in the aftermath of two devastating world wars, that the path to world peace must be first forged in the home. Spock's repeated warnings, in *Baby and Child Care*, that the world is "in imminent danger of annihilation" - his pleas for bringing up children who might realize the possibility of nuclear disarmament - are not simply passing statements. They remain a consistent and important component of his child-rearing philosophy. 13

Many of the child-rearing 'experts' who followed Spock have evinced even more specific political agendas than disarmament. At the height of their popularity in the seventies, reading Ginott and Gordon was a sign among well educated liberals of belonging to a community of values. This community believed that children, as well as adults, had inalienable individual rights, and that their governance was best attempted by social contract, rather than by force. These were years in which 'family council' meetings and parent child "negotiation" became popular as so-called

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13. Spock, op. cit. quotes from p. 12-18

'no-lose' ways to solve issues of contention between parents and children. I myself remember a close associate of my father turning his home into a veritable training ground for democracy-in-action a la Gordon's *P.E.T* - that is, until it occurred to him that at least one member of the 'family council' was repeatedly showing up stoned out of any legislative frame of mind.

When one considers the reformist zeal behind the new child-rearing ethic, it is not surprising that by the late sixties, the permissive school of parenting had become a butt of *New Yorker* caricatures. It was, after all, the child rearing ideology of a privileged, well educated elite - an elite whose social consciousness was as generous as its household budgets, and whose disposition - not too much disturbed by ill fate and its attendant angry passions - were amenable to the message that tolerance begins at home.

What is surprising, however, is how few caustic attacks were waged on a philosophy of parenting that - while egalitarian enough - was nothing less than a wrong-headed assault on social discipline. This was, after all, a period when a number of high-class people, some of whom had granted their children 'voting rights' and power to negotiate all the household rules, were forced to rescue these children from

the dreadful embarrassments of drug busts, religious cults, and arrests for political subversion.<sup>14</sup>

Hardly a wonder then, that as the baby-boomers entered adulthood, and revealed the shortcomings of permissive parenting - their self absorption, their greed, their flightiness, and their high incidence of criminality - the experts began to revise the child rearing script.

By the eighties, faced with statistical evidence of ever rising substance abuse, violence, delinquency, and teen pregnancy - a new generation called for a return to more authority and discipline in child rearing. This did not mean, however, that they relinquished the therapeutic notion that children who misbehaved were unhappy, not naughty. Nor that they were prepared to relinquish the idea of parenting by social contract, rather than natural authority. Though they emphasized the necessity to wrest decency from children by authoritative means, they warned against resorting to old-fashioned punitive measures. Demanding obedience, displaying anger, spanking, reproofing or moralizing, they continued to make clear, were ignoble ways of managing children.

How, then, were parents to effectively discipline? By offering their children incentives, said the child rearing

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14. An exception to this is Dr. James Dobson's book, *Dare to Discipline*, published in 1970.

experts. Yes, incentives, just as all the big corporations offered their employees. Raising responsible children, they said, did not mean having to terrorize them into good behavior. In fact, it involved nothing more complicated than treating them as they would be treated in the work-a-day world. After all, isn't that where children would eventually end up?

In the work world, said the experts, children would eventually be required to cooperate with colleagues, and accept directions from professional superiors. And that meant impressing upon them early that self-discipline was a prerequisite to social acceptance and material success. The new child rearing revisionists warned against what they saw as too much psychological solicitousness on the part of parents. Parents, they said, should not indulge idiosyncratic behavior in children. Parents must be careful not be too compassionate in regard to bad school marks or anti-social outbursts. Rather, in the day to day matters of behavior, they must facilitate social adjustment by displaying the same detached resolve that a teacher or an eventual employer might. They must "withhold friendliness" or "remove special privileges" when their children acted up.

"Encourage good behavior with rewards... and with promises of more rewards," 15 the experts advised in a slew of new

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15. Windell, James Discipline: A Source of 50 Failsafe Techniques for Parents. Collier Books, Macmillan; 1991

books on the subject of "assertive" discipline. If parents would only implement this elegant principle of behavior modification, they insisted, they would have no trouble raising perfectly civilized children. Good parenting, thus, was conceived along the technocratic lines of the personnel management model. And books with such titles as *Megaskills* 16 and *The Six Vital Ingredients of Self-Esteem* 17 presented recipes for child rearing bound to produce excellent corporate executives.

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The "assertive discipline" school of child-rearing still boasts quite a number of adherents today, especially among teachers and behavioral psychologists. It is particularly popular in the suburbs where school sponsored speeches on "positive" parenting techniques attract the well heeled corporate set. But the media now pays little attention to it. They seem to find more interested in a newer and radically different theory of child-rearing.

In the early eighties, the translation of the work of a Swiss psychoanalyst, Alice Miller, took the American psycho-therapeutic community by storm. Two of her books,

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16. Rich, Dorothy. *Megaskills: How Families Can Help Children Succeed in School and Beyond*3. Houghton Muffin, 1988

17. Youngs, Bettie B. *The 6 Vital Ingredients of Self-Esteem and How To Develop Them In Your Child*; Rawson Assoc./Maxwell Macmillan. New York; 1991

*For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, and *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child* 18 dealt shattering blows to the optimistic notion that parents, with a few tips, could be remodelled from harsh and punitive autocrats to effective models of sensitivity, justice and psychological insight.

Miller presented the analytic community with a tough critique of modern parenting advice. Parenting, Miller insisted, was not a rational, conscious act dictated by a set of beliefs about child welfare and social responsibility. Parenting was not about a philosophy of strictness or permissiveness, nor about child-management techniques. Parenting, asserted Miller, was a subconscious behavioral syndrome - a gut-fed power struggle between parents and their children, and one which invariably ended with the former emerging victorious, and the latter crushed.

Parents, Miller said, were tyrants, whether they intended to be, or not. The roots of all hatred, violence, and criminality, she insisted, were to be traced to one source and one source alone: to the pathological outbursts of sadism perpetrated every day, and in every home, by parents on their children - regardless of their parenting philosophy. Miller urged her readers to "free themselves

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18. Alice Miller. *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence*; tr. Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum; Noonday Press, 1983 and *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, Meridian/Penguin; New York, 1984

from cliches about good or bad parents,"<sup>19</sup> and from the idea that parents could *choose* to be good or bad. Parents, Miller said, "cannot help themselves."

For Miller, childhood "traumata" was an unavoidable condition of family life. It stemmed from the fact that parents were unwitting slaves to the dark secrets of their own childhoods - to their earliest feelings of disappointment in love. "The individual psychological stages in the lives of most people, " Miller wrote, "are... to be hurt as a small child...to fail to react to the resulting suffering with anger, to show gratitude for what are supposed to be good intentions,..(and) to discharge the stored-up anger onto others (namely, defenceless children) in adulthood..."<sup>20</sup>

According to Miller, even parents who never uttered a harsh word, much less raised a hand to their children, visited upon them unbearable psychological pain and cruelty. Repressing the agony of their own childhoods, parents failed to perceive their children's deeper emotional needs. Or believing that the young must be hardened to the trials of life, they refused to allow their children to express feelings of sadness and anger.

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19. Miller, *For Your Own Good*, p. 106

20. Miller, *ibid*, p. 106

Miller charged that by the mere exercise of their parenting instincts, parents promulgated an ideology of submission to authority and self-denial that amounted to "soul murder." This ideology, which she labelled "poisonous pedagogy," was a legacy of abuse which parents haplessly transmitted to children from generation to generation. So firmly established was "poisonous pedagogy" as a method of social control that neither parents nor children were aware of its cruelty. Religion, education, even psychoanalysis, she charged, encouraged children to idealize parents for mistreating them. Indeed, the child rearing conventions of Western culture, Miller said, congratulated parents for committing abuses against their offspring in the names of discipline and civilization.

How to reverse this vicious and "widespread" cycle of child abuse? Miller proposed a radical change in psychoanalytic approach. Psychoanalysis, she said, must concentrate on helping patients to release their pent-up "narcissistic rage" against the parents who mistreated them. Patients who by means of psychoanalytic catharsis re-experienced the sources and intensity of their childhood angers and resentments could, she claimed, disengage themselves from the impulse to victimize their children as they, themselves, had been victimized.

One would have thought that in attempting to support a psychoanalytic theory so new and so radical, a theory that posed the existence of crime inherent to parenting - "soul murder" - Miller would have wanted to call upon her clinical records. But pleading discretion, she disdained the obligation to produce empirical proof of widespread child abuse from her own psycho-analytic case histories. One wonders if, aside from the problems of protecting her patients' anonymity, she did not consider the lives of her patients too banal, their sufferings too quotidian, and their diagnoses too commonplace to lend her argument the resonance she wanted it to have. One thing is certain. The case histories she called to account were almost never those of her patients. Rather, they were well-known personalities - famous artists and notorious criminals whose lives were of inherent fascination to a broad public, and who lent her theories enhanced appeal by virtue of that fascination.

Thus, in reconstructing the childhoods of the major 'analysands' of her work, Miller had only the patchiest of historical records and testimony to go by. But no matter. Miller, blessed with a vivid imagination, a passion for theoretical construct and a gift for fervent rhetoric, simply speculated on the labyrinth of their childhoods. And on the basis of these speculations, she managed to pronounce every one of them, from Adolf Hitler and Sylvia Plath to Franz Kafka, victims of "soul murder."

Miller's main object, of course, was to assign social relevance to her theories by implying that the worst criminal psychotics conformed to her analytical model of childhood victimization. The major subject of *For Your Own Good*, in fact, was Adolf Hitler, whose troubled childhood Miller offered up as a prime example of the results of abusive parenting.

In a chapter entitled, "From Hidden to Manifest Horror" Miller traced the roots of Hitler's monstrous deeds to childhood thrashings by his father. Basing her account of Hitler's childhood on a passing statement by his sister, that as a boy, he had "got his due measure of beatings every day," 21 Miller charged that it was these cruel punishments which ultimately were the stimulus to Hitler's later crimes.

That a mean spirited and mercurial parent might tip the balance of a mind inherently disposed to mental illness is a point one would not have ventured to argue with Miller, had she made it. But she did not. Curiously, she saw nothing particularly unusual about the young Adolf's volatile character, nor about the frequency and harshness of his father's punishments. For Miller, the megalomaniac dictator never gave any indication in childhood of an

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21. Miller, *ibid*, p. 153

organic disposition to mental illness. Indeed, Miller even sees no genetic significance in the fact that Hitler's maternal aunt (who apparently lived with the family) was a schizophrenic.

Rather, Miller viewed even Hitler's more extreme symptoms of psychosis - his night-time hallucinations, for example - as the inevitable repercussions of undeserved childhood whippings. She rather sanguinely draws a portrait of little Adolf as the normal son of a typically autocratic Austrian father, and a typically weak and subservient Austrian mother. Describing Adolf as a "bright and gifted" child terrified of his father's overbearing authority, she compares him lightly to his national compatriots.<sup>22</sup> "The fact that Hitler had so many enthusiastic followers," she says, "proves that they had a personality structure similar to his....and a similar upbringing."<sup>23</sup>

Curiously, this portrait of the young Adolf as the unwitting victim of parental terror stands in some contrast to the one Hitler's own sister drew when she told the historian John Toland, "It was my brother Adolf who especially provoked my father to extreme harshness... He was a rather nasty little fellow, and all his father's attempts to beat the impudence out of him...were in vain."

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22. Miller, *ibid*, p. 168. For Miller's assessment of Hitler's father and the effect of their relationship on the boy's personality development, see pp. 147-180.

23. Miller, *ibid*, p. 170

For Miller, however Hitler's obsessive and murderous anti-semitism had nothing to do with paranoid fantasy, but rather with the reality of his childhood. In persecuting the Jews, Miller contends, Hitler re-enacted the crimes perpetrated against him by his father by "mistreating the helpless child he once was in the same way his father had mistreated him."<sup>24</sup> Even in his war mongering, Miller contends, Hitler was replaying a childhood drama of household skirmishes on the stage of international politics.

Miller's political motivations for positing Hitler not as a lunatic, but as a logical product of a commonplace environment were clear enough; her audience of German psycho-therapists - devotees of what was derogated, under the Nazis, as a 'Jewish science,' - were likely vitally interested in the deeper reasons for both their professional mortifications and their rotten political legacy.

Indeed, by asserting that Hitler appealed to a certain repressed hostility in the German character, Miller set millions of minds to rest on the uncomfortable matter of Hitler's popularity among the Germans. And she exonerated them as well for their culpability in Nazi war crimes. The question of guilt, she insisted was a moot one, since "nothing is ever gained by assigning guilt."<sup>25</sup> For Miller,

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24. Miller, *ibid*, p. 188.

25. Miller, *ibid*, p. 195

every player in Hitler's drama of revenge - whether Jew, ordinary German or raving Nazi- was an unwitting "victim" of German child rearing conventions - of 'poisonous pedagogy' and 'soul murder.'

Of course, by setting up Hitler as a casualty of despotic parenting, and Nazi terror as a re-enactment of child rearing conventions, Miller did not simply offer a clever apology for German political sins. She rendered a portrait of German family life as a veritable microcosm of fascist dictatorship. The Germans, she said,

"had been raised to be obedient, had grown up in an atmosphere of duty and Christian virtues; they had to learn at a very early age to repress their hatred and their needs. And now along came a man who did not question the underpinnings of this bourgeois morality...someone who...put the obedience that had been instilled in them to good use, who never confronted them with searching questions or inner crises, but instead provided them with a universal means for finally being able to live out in a thoroughly acceptable and legal way the hatred they had been repressing all their lives. Who would not take advantage of such an opportunity? The Jews could now be blamed for everything, and the actual erstwhile persecutors - one's own often truly tyrannical parents - could be honored and idealized."<sup>26</sup>

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26. Miller, *ibid*, p. 187 Miller's accusations of widespread cruelty in German child rearing is not to be trusted as empirically verifiable. Among Europeans, Germans have for a very long time enjoyed a reputation of parental indulgence - and especially with small children. Freud was hardly the first German intellectual to express a fascination with the intense creativity and stubborn wilfulness of early childhood. From what I have observed, having lived in Europe for many years, the German parent today is likely to go much easier than his English or French counterparts in the matter of disciplinary action. Walking the streets and parks of Europe with my own child, I have watched numbers of French women slap infants for no greater crime than putting rattles in their mouths, and have observed about the same

It would have been a spurious enough indictment of 'bourgeois' family life had Miller ended her arguments with the assertion that Hitler's family structure, as that of the majority of his followers, "could well be characterized as the prototype of a totalitarian regime."<sup>27</sup> But Miller reached deeper in her indictment of the family, which she saw not only as a school for Nazism, but as a natural adversary of social order - as a profoundly sociopathic institution.

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Every crime, Miller said, could be traced to parental tyranny and the "poisonous pedagogy" which demanded childhood submission to that tyranny. And criminals, she contended, did not only emerge, as Hitler did, from homes where they were subjected to consistent physical brutality at the hands of an unloving parent. Criminals, Miller insisted, were also bred in circumstances where parents interspersed much subtler tortures with expressions of love.

It was this insidious interplay of love and hate in parenting, claimed Miller, that was the foundation of most

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number of Germans passively enjoy a pre-schooler's screaming tantrum as if it were a circus side-show.

27. Miller, *ibid*, p. 146

anti-social behavior. The seemingly arbitrary combination of restrictions and indulgences, humiliations and caresses, spankings and kisses that parents dealt out to children confused, demoralized, and terrified them. The most gruesome of criminal acts, Miller insisted, were simply recastings of the precipitous pains and pleasures to which parents all too commonly subjected their children - re-enactments of the at once violent and erotic drama of childhood as distilled in the child's psyche.

To prove the evil repercussions of this love/hate dynamic in parenting, Miller called upon the example of a sex-criminal by the name of Jurgen Bartsch.

Between the ages of 16 and 20, between the years 1962 and 1966, Jurgen Bartsch, the adopted son of a butcher in Essen, Germany murdered four little boys. First he lured them into deserted air-raid shelters, then beat them, then tied them up with a butcher's string, manipulated them while masturbating himself, and then killed them with a butcher knife - cutting open their bodies and emptying the cavities thereof of whichever organs he happened to obsess upon at the time. It was during this prolonged activity of smelling the warm, freshly cut flesh, Bartsch confessed during police questioning, that he experienced orgasm.

For this creature of hell, Miller urges compassion. "Once we have become familiar with the mechanisms that turn child-rearing into a form of persecution," Miller stated, "... and we realize the powerful effect these mechanisms have on the individual...we see in the life of every 'monster' the logical consequences of childhood."<sup>28</sup>

And what was so "logically" deterministic about Jurgen Bartsch's childhood? Well, the fact is Miller knows very little about it. The boy, she tells us, was born the illegitimate son of a tubercular war-widow and a Dutch seasonal worker. Deserted in early infancy by his mother, he remained in institutional care until about a year of age (Miller does not regard this time in institutional care as having had any great effect on Bartsch's later mental state; but which many psychologists today consider early institutional care a breeding ground for Anti-social Personality Disorder.) Thereupon he was adopted by a middle-class couple whose parenting methods, Miller insists, were a paradigm of 'poisonous pedagogy.'

Apparently, the adoptive mother - a fiend for cleanliness - beat Jurgen when, as a toddler, he fell back in his toilet training. She forbade him to socialize with the other children in his neighborhood. Finally, she sent him to be

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28. Miller, *ibid*, pp. 204-205

educated in a Catholic boarding school in the Essen area which had a reputation for rigid military discipline.

Jurgen's childhood, obviously left much to be desired in regard to the happiness quotient. But how monstrous were his parents, really? Did his parents harbor a warped sense of discipline and propriety, or was the young child's behavior so strange that they were driven to treating him severely? Were his parents bullheaded and cruel, or were they simply too clumsy to cope with a child who might have displayed psychotic behavior even as a toddler?

In an account of his life written in prison, Jurgen admits to have been repulsed by his parents' attempts to show affection for him. And the bizarre behavior he accuses them of does not always ring true. He claims he spent much of his early childhood locked alone in the cellar of his grandmother's house; that his mother bathed him top to toe with her own hands until he was sent to prison at age 20 (although, one must remember, for several of these years, he was at boarding school). And he tells of a curious incident which allegedly took place during his apprenticeship in his parents' butcher shop (a time, we must remember, when he was already committing the child murders): Once, his mother became angry that he had not cleaned a mirror to her satisfaction, and threw a knife at him.

Are we to believe these stories? If one assumed their truth, Bartsch would have had to be the victim of an unusually perverse childhood environment - and not, if Miller's theories are to be given credence, a typical one. However, there are a number of chronological contradictions and syntactic incoherences in Jurgen's memoir, and we are hard pressed to trust them. Given Bartsch's rather fragile mental state, we are forced to come to the conclusion that reality, sexual fantasy and delusions of persecution were always inextricably intermingled in his psyche - and probably from early childhood.

Miller, however, blames Jurgen's mental state entirely on his adoptive parents. She insists that Jurgen's horrific "repetition compulsion," derived from the combination injunctions and punishments, indulgences and displays of affection - to which his parents subjected him throughout childhood. She derogates the label given to him as "sex criminal," claiming that the medical authorities who advocated castrating him as a method of protecting the public from his uncontrolled and aberrant sex drive, failed to perceive that it was more projected anger against his parents than perverted sexual desires which drew him to his victims.

"I know that acts similar to Bartsch's often appear in patients' fantasies when they are able to bring to

consciousness the repressed desire for revenge stemming from their early childhood..." Miller asserts confidently, conveniently ignoring the fact that bloody fantasies are a far cry from bloody deeds. 29

Miller insists that in castrating Bartsch, the medical authorities brought to a "grotesque" conclusion the same "soul murder" practiced upon the boy by his stern adoptive parents and even his educators.<sup>31</sup> For human beings, she said, were not born to such outbursts of violence as Jurgen Bartsch's. They were *instructed* in these horrors by adults who, by virtue of their child rearing and disciplinary practices, were the mortal enemies of public safety and world peace.

"Until the general public becomes aware that countless children are subjected to soul murder every day and that society as a whole must suffer as a result," Miller wrote, "we are groping in a dark labyrinth, in spite of all our well-meaning efforts to bring about disarmament among nations." 32

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29. Miller, *ibid*, p. 227

31. Miller, *ibid*, pp. 222-224

32. Miller, *ibid*, p. 242

The impact of Miller's work on American elites should not be underestimated. The universality of her charges of cruelty as a inexorable condition of parenting - her definition of pre-analytic parenting *per Se* as a pathological act - was an idea bound to attract a wide coalition of political theorists and child-rearing experts.

Pacifists could only find in her work one more powerful explanation for the fact that, in an age of gentle child rearing prescriptions, war and aggression persevered. Her attack on the father as the prototype of reactionary political oppression was bound to catch the ear of feminists. Liberal social thinkers could identify with Miller's predilection for viewing criminal acts as inevitable consequences of a malignant social system, and not as the responsibility of individuals with bad moral character or diseased minds. 32

Educators and social workers, eager to promote social programs in the schools, would spot a banner to wave in the idea that violence is learned at home. Institutional day-care advocates had a powerful ally in Miller, who insisted that even the most loving and devoted parent could wreak destruction on a sensitive child by simple virtue of the intensity of the parent/child bond.

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Finally an ever growing community of psycho-therapists, who earned their daily bread from psychic pain, would see themselves delivered - and with one masterful stroke -an inexhaustible pool of clientele: parents and the children who suffer their inevitable abuse.

An enthusiastic American reception to Miller's ideas in the academic community had long been prepared. Her depiction of bourgeois family life as an authoritarian political model was already quite familiar to social thinkers. American pioneers of social reform sought as early as the beginning of the century to better acculturate immigrant children to American life by checking the "tyranny of the home." 33 And in the post war period, when the neo-Marxist scholars of the Frankfurt School advanced the theory that the seeds of Nazism lay in the patriarchal bourgeois family structure, this theory was greeted with serious interest by a number of young sociologists - many of whom reached prominence in the sixties and seventies.

But what was to guarantee the success of Miller's ideas among the broader public was not their affinity to an academic school of thought on the alleged socio-pathic propensities of family life, but their ready solution to the problem. While those theorists of the family who came before Miller seemed unable to offer any remedy to its shortcomings

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33. See Lasch, Christopher; *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Beseiged*, Basic Books, 1977. p. 14

except vast and complete social revolution, Miller promised more immediate help - and through merely the 'inner revolution' undertaken on the psychoanalytic couch.

Indeed, Miller's philosophy seems ready made for the aging and self-absorbed revolutionaries of the baby-boom generation who were bound to find appealing the idea that they could effect fundamental societal change by simply exploring themselves. Hardly a wonder then that Miller's theories of 'poisonous pedagogy' have emerged as a public *cause célèbre*. The big- money, multi-media, confessional *credo* that 'toxic parenthood' is today - from the soaring sales of child abuse testimonies, to the teeming bank accounts of psycho -therapists specializing in family pathology, to the elevated ratings of the Opra Winfrey *Scared Silent* show - is testimony to the self-obsession of a contemporary American public hungry for easy answers to the hardest questions of life.

Miller needs very little interpolation to be taken to the heart of the contemporary American experience, and her books would have sold well even if she had not been able to boast the sponsorship of some the biggest stars of the therapeutic world - among them the renegade Freudian, Jeffrey Masson and the New Age guru of family therapy, John Bradshaw.

But certainly John Bradshaw is responsible for the widespread popularization of her theories. Talk-show host, television producer, management consultant, best selling author Bradshaw brought Miller's ideas forward in the crisp formulas and hope inspiring jargon of American "pop" psychology. Five years after the publication of *For Your Own Good* in English translation, Bradshaw introduced them in a version bound to appeal to the sensibilities of the American masses.

In his 1988 ten week PBS series and book *The Family*, Bradshaw asked, after Miller: "How could Hitler Happen?" And he presented an answer as succinct as any one could hope from a thorough reading of *For Your Own Good* : "Hitler and Black Nazism," he claimed, ominously, "are a cruel caricature of what can happen in modern Western society if we do not stop promoting and proliferating family rules that kill the souls of human beings." What rules? Rules of "obedience, " he said, and of "submission" to parental authority. 34

"Soul-murder," Bradshaw continued along Miller's line, is the most "basic" problem in world. It is not simply Germany's problem. Americans, he insisted, are also victims of the "poisonous pedagogy" of obedience - as Jonestown and Mylai proved. Even the most enlightened of modern American

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34. Bradshaw, John. *On: The Family*. Health Communications, 1988; p. 19

parents, he said, always falls back on "authoritarian" roles in times of "stress" and "crisis." And it is in these times that they crush the souls of their children. Indeed, 'soul murder' is something that happens, according to Bradshaw in "96 per cent" of American families. But not to worry. This need not continue to be the case. "Find out what species of flawed relating your family specialized in," Bradshaw advised in his inimitable New Age syntax. "Once you know what happened to you, you can do something about it."

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Bradshaw claimed to be able to reverse the process of 'soul murder' by means of what he called a "revolutionary method of self-discovery and spiritual renewal." This method, he contended, would return adults to that "true" childhood self which had been so cruelly crushed by parents. Though he suggested therapy as the best way to get to the bottom of the circumstances surrounding one's own loss of self, he intimated that his TV show and book, a "healing" program based on the Twelve-Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, could substitute, in a pinch, for a more personalized therapeutic experience.

Bradshaw's work, in fact, has become a model for the many volumes on the subject of family disorders and child abuse which have appeared in the last five years - the same ones

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35. Bradshaw, *ibid*, p. 20

that crowd the self-help shelves of bookstores. A myriad of books with such titles as *Soul Survivors*, *Pockets of Craziness* and *Twelve Steps to Self-Parenting* mimic his artless approach to the victimology of childhood, as well as his upbeat prescription for an easy-step cure.

The authors, almost always therapists, relentlessly pursue the theme of toxic parenthood. First, readers are assured that parents are poisonous. Just look around you, the authors insist. If parenting were done right, would there be so many unhappy people? Would things in your life be going so wrong?

Typically, the readers are presented with a few "check list" quizzes just to convince them beyond a shadow of a doubt that parents are, indeed, pernicious creatures. Did their parents do things to them that had to be kept secret, the books ask ominously? As a child, were they afraid of their parents? Did their parents ever use physical punishment to discipline them? Did their parents control them with threats or guilt? Did their parents ever ignore their needs? Did their parents ever tell them they were rude, stupid or worthless? Did they feel that no matter what they did, it wasn't good enough for Mom and Dad?

If a reader can answer yes to even to a portion of these questions, the authors warn, he may have been abused. And

they go on to reassure that almost everyone has been trampled by a whip cracking, goose-stepping father, ruined by a plaintive, oppressed mother.

The reader is then steered through a long index of greater and lesser parenting sins and disorders. Chapter after chapter, varying pathologies of family life are dissected and diagnosed, described, symptomized. Should the reader not recognize his own parents among the manifold profiles of child beaters, rapists, criticisers, controllers, substance abusers or love-smotherers, he is reminded that the self reading this book is (in Bradshaw's words) the 'false' or 'lost' self - the self that lives to deny parental depravity and childhood suffering, the self that therapists, too, until their recent enlightenment, have suppressed. The "real" self, the authors tell the reader, has been the victim of soul murder, and is yet too weak to confront the abuse that has been heaped upon it.

Indeed, the essence of the easy-step therapeutic cure, it is emphasized, is coming to grips with a long denied reality that something might, indeed, have been wrong with one's family life, even if it seemed perfectly normal and wholesome, even if one cannot remember anything too horrible about it. The most painful events of childhood, the reader is told, are all too often banished from consciousness,

hidden "behind a wall of amnesia" and "denial."<sup>36</sup> Terrible crimes are being committed, every day, they warn - 'ultimate betrayals' (in the words of Susan Forward) against childhood innocence. And these crimes - rape, murder, and crushing psychic torture are not the crimes of strangers, but of trusted family members who act out their carnal cravings and power hunger on innocent children. What is worse, the reader is told, is that these same children will likely inherit their parents' savage behavior. They are the legacy of his childhood instruction.

The authors of such volumes are quick to insist that the patients they have brought forth to witness for parent crimes are not necessarily, nor even usually the products of strained or brutal circumstances. Far from it. They are not homeless, they are not deprived, they are not neglected. By-in-large, they are prosperous, successful and attractive children of prosperous, successful and attractive parents. They are bankers, lawyers, physicians, business people, entertainers, artists, heirs and heiresses... successful and status-conscious children of respected citizens who cannot seem to control themselves at home.

And, oh the sham these parents live! For behind their respectably manicured lawns and shrubbery, they harbor

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36. Gannon, J. Patrick, PhD. *Soul Survivors: A New Beginning for Adults Abused as Children*, Prentiss Hall/Simon & Schuster, 1989 p. xiv

cesspools pools of sin and emotional debris. Their decorous all-American images are lies. They raped, they seduced, they beat their children; they drank and drugged and ate themselves sick; they screamed, they hit, they rebuked, they *kvetched*. They made and continue to make their children's lives miserable.

It is one of the curious characteristic of the self-help genre that it levels not only all of these alleged parenting crimes - from the sublimely evil to the petty - but the people who claim to suffer them. When it comes right down to case histories, nothing is left of the richly colored and textured recounting of classical psycho-analytic case histories as we remember them from Freud. There is little ornament of event, no iota of humor, no reference to the characters or culture of the people whose tales are related - no reference at all to their ideals, their idiosyncrasies, their imaginations, their traditions, or any other aspect of what one might call their individuality, nor their individual family lives.

Rather, there is simply the dispassionate and distilled recounting of a gritty cultural allegory: the story of anonymous perpetrator of crimes, called "parent," and an innocent victim, called "child," fortuitously thrust into a curious wasteland of family life. The former commits a series of offences upon the second by virtue of brutal

impulse - offences as removed from real emotions and circumstances as the shootouts in a spaghetti-Western.

Meet Jesse, for example, whose story John Bradshaw tells:

"Jesse is ... an alcoholic and a sex addict... He was inappropriately bonded with his mother and was abandoned by his own father. He had two stepfathers. They were both alcoholic. One was physically abusive...His mother carried the poisonous pedagogy in denying her son his sexual feelings as well as his anger..."<sup>37</sup>

Or meet Richard, a patient of J. Patrick Gannon who testifies in Gannon's book, *Soul Survivors*:

"When my mother could get angry, she would constantly tell me in so many words that I was a loathsome thing. As I got older, it got worse. She would call me a 'repulsive, pimply-faced shit.' When she was really in full rage, she would kick me and call me a 'cunt.' ...Of course, she would also use the classic rant, 'You're just like your father....All you ever think of is yourself'..."<sup>38</sup>

The authors of self-help volumes admit, of course, that the stories they tell are not drawn from case histories untransformed. They are distilled composites of patient

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37. Bradshaw, op. cit., p. 100

38. Gannon, op. cit., p. 32

records, altered with the object of protecting patient anonymity and of proving 'therapeutic' points. But what points do they prove beside the point that there are fathers who drink like sailors, and mothers who swear like sailors? In perusing these wicked and vulgar stories, one cannot escape the impression that they are broadly distorted, if not wholly unauthentic - indeed, that they are the cheapest cardboard mock-ups of the human condition.

Here, for example, a patient of Dr. Susan Forward (*Toxic Parents*) relates a tragic tale of woe - but in such a perfunctory rendition as to lend the recounting the spurious character of show-trial evidence:

" My stepfather was this popular minister with a real big congregation. The people who came to church on Sunday just loved him. I remember sitting in church and listening to him sermonize about mortal sin. I just wanted to scream out that this man is a hypocrite...this wonderful man of God is screwing his thirteen-year-old step-daughter!"<sup>39</sup>

This last, I find a curious foray in the language of therapeutic confession: In recounting her own humiliation, a victim of alleged sexual molestation strips herself of the very dignity of suffering. So treacherous, apparently, is family life, so base the human impulses that seethe under

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39. Forward, op. cit., p. 143

its surface just waiting to erupt, that those who have suffered its worst afflictions are nerve-dead, and quite beyond pity.

The above are just a few of thousands of unrelievedly negative images of family life, and the intimacy or human relationships it promises - images conceived, one must remember, by way of marketing the 'healing' benefits of psychotherapy to a reading public. But these have been disseminated with such astounding success as to become the dominant impression of family life in contemporary American culture. So fully ingrained in public consciousness is the psycho-therapeutic image of parenthood as an impulsive and bestial pursuit that since the discovery of family pathology by the psycho-therapeutic professions, civic institutions have begun to monitor every home and hearth for terror and destruction. Many social theorists and educators, in the post-war period, have preached therapeutic intervention in family life. But recently there has been an explosion of communal activism and publicity intent on convincing the Americans of the vulnerability of family life to acute disorders, and of the universal need for therapeutic help. Everywhere schools, churches, community centers, and public services are keeping tabs on the parental beast, in order to repair the wreckage in his wake.

Scrutiny of the parent begins with the media. Their attention to the cause of child abuse in the past five years has so captured the nation that that the work of child protective agencies has been seriously hampered by bogus child-abuse reporting.<sup>40</sup> It will certainly not help matters that in the past year, in conjunction with ever more recent lurid tales and testimonies of child abuse, TV has stepped up its campaign exhorting viewers to report suspicions of child abuse in their environs.

Smaller scale public services, too, are engaged in a widespread campaign to enlighten the public as to the pressures and pitfalls of family life. Many adoption agencies, today, will not release a child until prospective parents are counselled to their satisfaction on 'dysfunctional' child rearing syndromes. Talks on therapeutic methods of handling day to day stress, and on the alleged dangers of such 'punitive' disciplinary methods as spanking and moralizing are now part and parcel of the preparations for adoption. Most agencies, in fact, look with disfavor on the applications of members of religious groups thought to be unresponsive to the psycho-therapeutic world-view; even if, as in the case of Mormons for example, they have demonstrated incontrovertible success in raising responsible and healthy adults.

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40. See Besharov, Douglas J.; "Gaining Control over Child Abuse Reports" *Public Welfare*, Spring 1990, p. 37-38.

Educators, community associations and religious organizations have made parents the targets of continuous solicitations for therapeutic help in marriage and child rearing. In my own community - a small town in Fairfield County, Connecticut - invitations to join parenting 'support groups,' to attend lectures on parenting 'styles' and 'stresses,' to take advantage of the services of school psychologists and social workers, and particularly to avail oneself of support groups and information on 'co-dependency' and 'abuse' flood mailboxes, and constitute a good portion of the literature sent home with children from the public schools.

Public school districts in general are zealous in their attempts to warn parents that they ought not to consider themselves alone and unobserved in the child rearing process. In fact, the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child," seems to serve now as a nationwide motto propounding the establishment of a communal authority in the setting of new standards and methods in child rearing. These standards and methods, it should be said, are - despite the allusion to ancient Africa - not at all inspired by the African model, but rather by the psycho-therapeutic model.

Even parenting magazines propound the by now popular view that conscientious mothers and fathers will seek help from

psycho-therapeutic resources as a preventative measure in child rearing - indeed, as a psychological 'check-up' before things start to go wrong in child rearing. Recently, one New York parenting resource publication - a publication specializing in advertisements for birthday party entertainment and nanny referral services - goaded parents to consider the benefits of family and 12- step therapy, whether there are problems at home or not. Pointing to the ever increasing suicide rate among teenagers, the article blamed parents who had not availed themselves of the benefits of the psycho-therapeutic experience, declaring, in the spirit of John Bradshaw, "If we live in America in 1992, we are more than likely the product of a dysfunctional family system, carrying our pain into our new family."<sup>41</sup>

One wonders, indeed, that the push for psycho-therapeutic intervention in family life is so ubiquitous. The capability of psycho-therapeutic methods to ease psychic pain, to alter abusive behavior where it truly exists, or simply to improve strained intimacies remains in serious doubt. Moreover, the therapeutic ethic is one of absolute neutrality in any decisions involving possible family breakup, so that its claim to offer a saving grace to ailing families is at best exaggerated, at worst hypocritical.

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41. "Mind and Body. Suicide: Are Your Kids at Risk?" Parenting Guide, December 1991. p. 18

In light of the manifold clinical failures of family therapy, it is perhaps understandable that the *credo* of family pathology and the panacea of therapeutic intervention has been launched most zealously upon that portion of our citizenry least aware of its failures, and least critically equipped to resist it - namely, upon our young.

The National Department of Health and Human Services has set aside funds for the establishment of "Crisis" centers for children in communities across the country. These, it seems, are open efforts to bring families in for counselling, conflict mediation, and child-rearing intervention by making a direct appeal to children. My own community newspaper recently printed a front page article advertising the 'hotline' services of a nearby "Kids in Crisis" center. The center expects children to call its hotline not only in cases where they are physically maltreated or demoralized by family conflict, but also in cases where they might simply be "afraid to go home because of a problem at school" - in other words, when they are looking for someone to diffuse the force of parental discipline.<sup>42</sup>

A growing number of day and Sunday-schools, moreover, introduce the therapeutic process through school-based 'support groups.' Geared mostly for those children who have

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42. "Hotline and Shelter for Kids in Crisis" *Wilton Bulletin*, December 29, 1992

undergone major 'separation crises' (divorce, desertion and death), these groups are made attractive by the closed, *esprit de corps* that defines them, and by such snappy, flippant names as "Banana Splits!" It remains to be seen whether such forums, bringing as they do intensely emotional and private matters to public review, do not actually intensify the recent tendencies of children to act out the frustrations of their home-lives in the classroom setting.

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A discourse of family pathology and suffering is in any case entering the elementary school classroom, where increasingly children are given the opportunity to publicly air whatever gripes and concerns they might harbor in regard to their home-life. Teachers in public and independent schools now commonly set aside daily or weekly time for the purpose of unveiling the spectres hanging over each child - from the high tragedy of parental desertion to the low comedy of resented bedtimes.

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43. In her April 1993 *Atlantic Monthly* article, "Dan Quayle Was Right," Barbara Whitehead recently remarked on the growing tendency of the classrooms to function as "emergency rooms for the emotions." She attributes the schools' interest in therapeutic intervention to the increase in family break-up and ensuing childhood crisis. She is certainly correct. But I tend to see the therapeutic bent of educators as something more than merely a practical response to the need for crisis intervention. Rather I see it becoming a pedagogical theory of socialization *sui generis*. I am worried about the increasing tendency of schools to impose therapeutic resources on children who have no need for them. (see Whitehead, Barbara Defoe, "Dan Quayle Was Right;" *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1993, p. 77)

Most of the time, in fact, such exercises in the confessional mode are performed within the context of "comprehensive health" or "life-skills" curricula mandated by state governments. These programs instruct children in the delicate subjects of pedophilia, alcoholism, drug addictions, racism and other dangerous negative propensities of the 'adults' in children's lives - and this introduction to the big, bad world of the grown-ups in children's lives begins in kindergarten.

The *Here's Looking at You, 2000* Comprehensive Health Curriculum, now used in thousands of school districts throughout the nation and entitled, features a cuddly parrot puppet by the name of Miranda who instructs children in almost all the ins and outs of family pathology. In the opening lesson for second grade, Miranda implies that when adults scream at children, it usually means they've had one too many bottles of beer. Through songs, stories, films, and "role-playing," she encourages them check the family cupboards for alcohol, nicotine and other, "poisons," share their "feelings" about the "war" that is their "home-life," and confess "problems at home" by "writing secret messages" to the teacher.

How do parents feel about such classroom exercises? Focus group research reveals that they are notably unhappy.

Not a few parents complain that confessional "support sessions" and discussions of sexual assault violate childhood modesty and innocence, and that sensitive children complain of the schools' probes into their private lives and feelings. Many children, parents charge, are made to fret that their parents are not living up the school's standards of family life. Though they joke off-handedly about being "turned in" to school authorities for smoking, drinking, failing to recycle, screaming, or spanking, they remark with considerably less good humor that they are losing their children's trust and respect, and that the schools are partly responsible. 44

I, personally, know that to have a child in the public schools is to combat anxieties about home-life brought home from school. My own seven-year-old child worries now that her parents drink wine with dinner, that our marital spats will lead to divorce, and that we haven't the wherewithall to handle an emergency properly. For that eventuality, she has memorized a slew of 1-800 numbers given to her by her teacher.

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44. IAV Focus Groups on fatherhood and on childhood, Teaneck, NJ. April 16 and Oct. 13, 1992, by David Blankenhorn and Dana Mack, respectively. Also: Towson, Maryland Focus Group on Childhood, Sept. 7, 1993 (Dana Mack)

Is parenthood the repository of brutality, tyranny and incompetence our culture implies it is? Is family life pathological, and parental authority sadly misplaced? If this were true, the ever increasing influence of the child-rearing elite - educators, health professionals and the media - in children's lives during the post-war period would have already produced a psychologically healthier, better socialized citizenry. But that, unfortunately, has not happened.

It seems superfluous to say -and yet it must be said - that one of the more trustworthy barometers of rising delinquency and anti-social behavior among post-war American youth has been the growing number of parents who cede their authority to the "professionals" and have allowed the child-rearing experts to talk them into disengaging themselves from their children. Indeed, the post-war "hands-off" child-rearing prescription for parents has fostered - along with rising delinquency - a veritable ideology of child-neglect. This is a problem Richard Elkind has pointed up in his book, *The Hurried Child*. The underlying impetus of the movement to 'liberate' children from parental control and impositions, Elkind has revealed, has little to do with concern for the welfare of children. Rather it has more to do with the desire of adults to free themselves of the heavy responsibilities of family life by assuming the competency of schools and communal institutions to raise children, or

worse, of children to raise themselves. "Our new family styles (divorce, single parenting, two-parent working families and blended families)," Elkind says, "make it next to impossible for the majority of parents to provide the kind of child rearing that goes along with the image of children as in need of parental nurture..." 45

Indeed, statistics on waywardness in youth indicate that it is hardly the untoward imposition of parents upon children that is most likely to produce criminals of them, nor even of the sickest and most tyrannical exaggerations of parental authority, but rather, parental detachment. It is telling that while the statistical link between child abuse and later criminal behavior remains murky at best, the statistical link between parental abandonment (specifically, fatherlessness) and violent criminality is emerging quite clearly. 46

In its discourse on the subject of child abuse, the media has placed great emphasis on abuses of parental authority -

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45. Elkind, David; *The Hurried Child*, revised edition. Addison Wesley, 1988 p. xii-xiii

46. See Galston, William A. Elaine Ciulla Kaymarck, Elaine Ciulla *Putting Children First: A Progressive Family Policy for the 1990s*. Progressive Policy Institute, Washington, D.C. Sept. 27, 1990 p. 14-15. The authors say that in studies of juvenile crime in poor neighborhoods which have controlled for family configuration of juvenile criminals have effectively erased any substantial connection between criminality and poverty, indicating that single parent homes (and here, by process of deduction we are talking mainly of fatherless homes) a major factor in wayward juvenile behavior.

specifically on physical and sexual mistreatment of children. But in taking the measure of childhood misery in this country, one finds that the overwhelming majority of substantiated cases of child mistreatment in America involve not abuse but neglect - child abandonment, deprivation of necessities, and lack of supervision. If American Humane Society statistics on the subject of child mistreatment can give us any indication at all of the trend in contemporary parent crimes, they point first and foremost to the fact that parents are far more likely today to abandon their children than to abuse them.<sup>47</sup>

This is not to say that children, from time immemorial, have not suffered the whims of ill-willed, immoral, vindictive and even vicious parents, nor to deny that today, many, many small cups are filled to the brim with suffering and oppression. But if there is an inherent criminal disposition to be feared in parents today, it is hardly their tendency to abuse authority, but rather their temptation to abdicate it.

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<sup>47</sup>.See *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1991 Annual Fifty-State Survey*; The National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse.