BACKGROUND BOOKS

CHILDREN

"To raise children is an uncertain thing," wrote Greek philosopher Democritus in the late fifth century B.C. "Success is attained only after a life of battle and disquietude. Their loss is followed by a sorrow which remains above all others."

Such ambivalence was characteristic of the ancients, observes Barbara Kaye Greenleaf in her popular survey, **Children Through the Ages** (McGraw-Hill, 1978). The Egyptians worshipped two gods who protected children: Maskonit, who appeared at the moment of birth, and Rainit, who insured that the infant was properly nursed.

Yet, infanticide was common in such cultures. The Phoenicians, Moabites, and Ammonites engaged in child sacrifice. And the Roman philosopher Seneca defended the practice of mutilating abandoned children and making them beggars.

"This one is without arms, that one has had its shoulders pulled down out of shape in order that his grotesqueries may excite laughter. . . . Have not these children been done a service inasmuch as their parents had cast them out?"

Indeed, psychohistorian Lloyd de Mause declares, "The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken." In **The History of Childhood** (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974, cloth; Harper, 1975, paper), de Mause chides Philippe Ariès and other historians for understating the extent to which children were "killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused" in the past.

Sending children to wet nurses, often for as long as five years, de Mause writes, was a common form of "institutionalized abandonment." In 1780, the police chief of Paris estimated that of the 21,000 children born each year in his city, 17,000 were sent into the country to be wet-nursed.

Things have always been a little different in the New World. The first Puritan settlers, worried about the spiritual salvation of their young, "were at once more severe with their children than members of other communions, and more concerned with each individual child," writes Mary Cable in her sprightly **Little Darlings: A History of Child Rearing in America** (Scribner's, 1975).

About half of all children in 17th-century America died before they reached the age of 10. With life so short, Puritan parents put a premium on "early piety." Cotton Mather wrote a primer containing "some examples of children, in whome the Fear of God was remarkably budding before they died."

Parents have never lacked for "experts" to advise them on the upbringing of their children. As Daniel Beekman demonstrates in detail in **The Mechanical Baby: A Popular History of the Theory & Practice of Child Raising** (Lawrence Hill, 1977), every epoch produces its Dr. Spock.

The philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) and John Locke (1632–1704), himself a bachelor, both propounded influential theories. Rousseau opposed swaddling, Locke opposed regular feeding, and both advocated icy baths to inure

children to nature's rigors.

The U.S. public school system began to take shape before the Civil War. Schools of the day, writes David B. Tyack in **The One Best System** (Harvard, 1974, cloth & paper) were disorganized and unimpressive. Only two percent of all 17-year-olds attended high school in 1870.

During the 1840s and '50s, school reformers promoted moral uplift. But as urbanization and industrialization accelerated, and the need to absorb new immigrants became more pressing, their aims shifted. "Efficiency, rationality, continuity, precision, impartiality" became watchwords.

The reformers thus set about bringing city school systems under central control, improving the status of teachers, and setting up the graded class system. According to Tyack, this quest for the "one best system" is largely responsible for many of today's educational troubles—bureaucratization, inferior education for the poor, political feuds over the schools.

School reform was often linked to an attack on child labor. In 1900, nearly two million children were at work—in factories, farms, as street-corner bootblacks—and not in school. By 1930, the number was down to fewer than 700,000, thanks largely to the state-by-state efforts of labor leaders, reform groups, and politicians. Yet, as Katherine Lumpkin and Dorothy Douglas write in their impassioned **Child Workers in America** (McBride, 1937), in some states, old practices died hard. In Mississippi, 25 percent of the white children between ages 10 and 15 and about one-third of the black children held jobs in 1930.

Fourteen-year-old Henry Dickinson, for example, rose at three every morning to work in a cotton mill for a $5 weekly wage. "Does it make Henry any less a child because he is a wage earner at 14?" Lumpkin and Douglas ask. "It does . . . by the time he has been there a few weeks."

Case studies furnish the core of psychiatrist Robert Coles's oft-cited five-volume series, **Children of Crisis** (Atlantic–Little, Brown, 1964–80, cloth & paper). Coles lived among Southern black sharecroppers, Eskimos, Chicanos, privileged white suburbanites, and other groups, trying to understand how children learn attitudes about social class, status, and the political system.

Coles ponders the cases of a banker's son who takes an alarming (to his parents) interest in television episodes of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and a migrant worker's daughter who develops an equally alarming hostility to farmers and sheriffs. Eventually, the boy's guilt about being wealthy fades and he takes to watching *Gilligan's Island;* the girl resigns herself to her fate.

How does this happen? Parents play a role, Coles says, but "in the topsy-turvy world of child psychiatry it is hard to come up with consistent or unqualified answers."

The whys and wherefores may be unclear, but to many of today's reformers, the "what to do" is not. Two representative studies—**Toward a National Policy for Children and Families** (National Academy, 1976) and Kenneth Kenniston's **All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure** (Harcourt, 1977, cloth; 1978, paper)—press the case for massive federal intervention.

Nearly five million children under age six live in some degree of poverty; 20 million children of all ages receive inadequate medical care. "Many of the difficulties faced by

families," write the authors of the National Academy of Sciences report, "are intricately linked with larger societal concerns: inequality, poverty, the decline of cities, poor housing, unemployment, inadequate health care, lack of transportation, the deterioration of the environment, inadequate education." The solution: national guaranteed annual income, day-care programs, and expanded health and welfare services.

But political scientist Gilbert Y. Steiner offers a cogent counterargument in **The Futility of Family Policy** (Brookings, 1981, cloth & paper). Big government proposals are too all-embracing, ill-defined, and contradictory, he writes. "Families would dissolve notwithstanding all these and myriad other exemplary public achievements, and [other] families hold together ... under conditions of war, economic depression, slum living, environmental pollution, and educational jungles."

Most of America's childhood "experts," however, are concerned not with political issues but with the development of individual children. A good overview of this enormous field is **Carmichael's Handbook of Child Psychology** (Wiley, 1954; rev. ed., 1970), edited by Paul H. Mussen.

Psychologist Urie Brofenbrenner provides a fascinating perspective on American child-rearing practices in his classic **Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.** (Sage, 1970). Everyone in the Soviet Union takes an extraordinary interest in children—even strangers. "Children in the park are expected to keep in the immediate vicinity of the accompanying adult, and when our youngsters ... would run about the paths, even within our view, kindly citizens of all ages would bring them back by the hand."

The Soviets overemphasize conformity and the primacy of the group over the individual, he concludes, but Americans can learn from their practices. "What is called for is greater involvement of parents, and other adults, in the lives of children, and—conversely—greater involvement of children in responsibility on behalf of their own family, community, and society at large."

Another perspective on childhood is offered by psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in his exploration of **The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales** (Knopf, 1976, cloth; Vintage, 1976, paper). "Each fairy tale," he writes, "is a magic mirror which reflects some aspects of our inner world, and of the step required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity."

In "Hansel and Gretel," for example, the children are twice abandoned by their poverty-stricken parents and are accepted back only after outwitting the witch in the forest (who embodies deep psychological conflicts within the children) and returning home with pearls and precious stones (which represent psychic remuneration).

It is a parable, Bettelheim concludes, about the rewards of growing up—and the impossibility of holding on to childhood forever.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Related titles may be found in* WQ's *Background Books essays on Men and Women (Winter '82) and the American Family (Winter '77 and Summer '80).*