KIDS TODAY

by Cullen Murphy

Why is there air? "To make basketballs," answered comedian Bill Cosby.

Why are there children?

One reason, of course, is that children provide jobs. Jobs for more than 1.3 million elementary school teachers, for 13 million stay-at-home mothers, for the makers of the 1.3 million infant and toddler car seats sold in the United States in 1980; jobs, too, for many of the 2,768 psychologists who received their Ph.D.s that same year. The very existence of children, moreover, implies that the economy is in for a long run.

Children keep democracy fit. Without kids there would be no PTA. Local town meetings would be reduced to acrimonious disputes over solid waste disposal. Congress would be little concerned about family subsidies, and utterly unconcerned about abortion, day care, and prayer in the schools. Children help to lure adults into political activity.

Children also challenge their parents to think about the future, and hence about values and standards. Children represent what society is going to become. While moral relativism makes for lively reading in the pages of *Us* or *Esquire*, the notions of right and wrong acquire a certain importance when adults contemplate their own offspring.

Thus, unintentionally perhaps, children do America a lot of good. Against all of this, however, is the fact that children are an immense burden on everyone, arriving in this world at odd hours, consuming precious resources. To their parents, they are a relentless inconvenience and a perpetual source of worry. They cause taxes to rise to pay for schools and welfare. They force many mothers into the work force just to help the family make ends meet and at the same time place obstacles in the path of mothers who wish to work, or must. They complicate divorce and they complicate remarriage. Even in the best of circumstances, they get sick, irritate friends, repeat their parents' errors, flunk school tests. They force adults, both as individuals and as members of a community, to make painful choices concerning time and money.

Because children mean so much to society, for better or worse, their elders long ago set up a kind of Distant Early Warn-

ing system—a DEW line monitoring the approach of serious trouble. Centuries ago, such surveillance was conducted in Europe by the community as a whole. Children, though not collectively produced, were a collective obligation. In the United States, the nuclear family—two parents—soon took over many of the functions once performed by relatives or by neighbors. That, too, has been changing. As historian John Demos writes: "Broadly speaking, the history of the family in America has been one of contraction and withdrawal; its central theme is the gradual surrender to other institutions of functions that once lay very much within the realm of family responsibility."

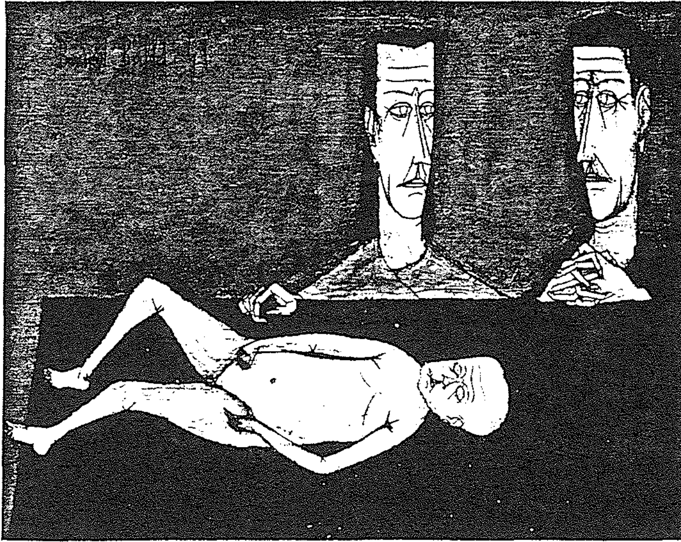
More Babies, Less Boom

Today we pay not only doctors, teachers, psychiatrists, and lawyers to help ease children into maturity, but also psychologists and sociologists to keep tabs on the trouble spots: education, sex, drugs, television, poverty, broken families. Under the rubrics "children," "childhood," and so on, there are some 42,000 titles in the Library of Congress catalog. Scores of scholarly journals are devoted to these and related subjects. Last year, Washington disbursed upwards of $400 million for research pertaining to early childhood.

The research effort is vast, yet there is actually very little one can say *for sure* about children in the United States and the prospects they face over the next few years. One certainty is that there will be a lot more young children around during the next decade than there were during the one just past. Another is that it will cost parents far more to raise them than it ever did before. Precisely what that money buys in terms of a final "product" remains a matter of dispute. There are a few indications that older children, growing up after the recess period of the late 1960s and early '70s, are beginning to behave a bit more sensibly. Cigarette-smoking is down dramatically, for example, and drug use has diminished.* The teen birthrate has declined slightly to about 52 per 1,000 girls. For reasons that are becoming clearer, however, a substantial minority of America's chil-

*According to *Student Drug Use in America* (1982), a seven-year study sponsored by the U.S. Public Health Service, the use of barbiturates, LSD, heroin, and other narcotics seems to have leveled off among American junior high and high school students, while both the number of daily marijuana users and the overall number of "anytime" users have declined. Prior to junior high, children's experiences are largely confined to alcohol (sampled by nine percent of sixth graders), cigarettes (2.9 percent), and marijuana (2.2 percent).

Cullen Murphy, 29, is senior editor of The Wilson Quarterly.



Bernard Buffet, Le Nouveau Né. © by ADAGP, Paris, 1982.

"The Newborn" *(1949), by Bernard Buffet.*

dren will face a disproportionate share of problems.

About 3.6 million babies were born in 1980, a half-million more than in 1975, prompting *Time* and other publications to herald a new baby boom. Such reports, unlike 91 percent of the newborns, are premature. What we are seeing merely reflects the fact that more women, women born during the true baby boom after World War II, have passed into the prime childbearing ages. The U.S. fertility rate per se has remained more or less steady at about 67 births annually per 1,000 women, and projections indicate that the total number of children an American woman will bear in her lifetime is now estimated at fewer than 2.2. Admittedly, women from age 30 to 34 recorded a 16 percent fertility gain between 1975 and 1979—but many of these babies were first births. Few of the late-starters will be producing baseball teams or even basketball teams.

Increasing numbers of men and women, moreover, are choosing to remain childless. While fewer than 10 percent of women born during the Depression never bore children, that percentage is projected to rise to 20 for women born in 1950 and to 30 for women born only four years later. The trend is most pronounced among affluent, urban, college-educated whites.

One is reminded of the inhabitants of Edwin A. Abbott's fanciful *Flatland* (1884) who, the higher they rose in socioeconomic status, the less fertile they became, with the top-drawer elite unable to reproduce at all.

The notion of "child-free living," once pursued primarily by the elderly, is now reflected in the living arrangements of younger households. Indeed, one-quarter of all rental units in the United States do not *allow* children, resulting in a shortage of space in many cities—New Orleans, Miami, Dallas, and Los Angeles are among the worst off—even for small families. Fewer than 10 states prohibit age-restrictive housing; court challenges elsewhere have rarely been successful.

Suggested Retail Price

Economists, professionally focused on a *homo oeconomicus* capable only of making rational choices in his own interest, must find it hard to explain why the species reproduces itself at all. The Health Insurance Institute estimates that the cost of having a baby, not including drugs and maternity clothes, averages between $2,170 and $2,220. According to the Department of Agriculture, a child born to middle-class, urban parents in the North Central region in 1979 will have cost them some $134,414 (reckoning eight percent annual inflation) by the time he reaches 18, assuming a "moderate cost level" and attendance at public schools. This figure would include the $54.16 that the average parent spent on Christmas presents for each child and the 51¢ that the average eight- to 10-year-old got every week as allowance during the mid-1970s.* Obviously, these numbers vary from country to city, class to class, family to family. Children are no more homogenous than Americans generally.

The Department of Agriculture originally began compiling its cost estimates to "provide budgetary guidance for individual families." In reality, the chief users of such projections are judges, lawyers, and social workers as they variously set the level for child support payments, sue for damages arising in medical malpractice cases, or calculate the monthly stipend for foster parents. The uses to which *The Cost of Raising a Child* is put suggest a darker side of childhood in America today.

*According to *The Child*, a study conducted by the Connecticut-based Gene Reilly Group, the average eight- to 10-year-old had a weekly disposable income (allowance plus earnings from odd jobs) of $1.29 during the mid-1970s, and 60 percent of children this age had already opened up a savings account. Of the money that children spent, most of it went for fast food and candy, but the amount varied by age and sex. Teenagers, for example, started buying more clothing and shoes, while boys of every age spent proportionately more than girls on toys, games, comic books, movies, and other forms of entertainment.

Increasing numbers of children are growing up with one parent in the home or with none—with consequences that are predictable for such youngsters as a group, though not as individuals. While economists quarrel over how to define "poverty"—should noncash government benefits be counted as part of a family's income?—too many children grow up in it. The public school system in many places is in disarray, especially in the older cities, where the exodus of middle-class whites and blacks to the suburbs has further tipped the scales against the children who remain. For many children, even in the more affluent suburbs, initiation into the worlds of drugs, sex, and crime comes before introduction to nouns and predicates.

These problems are real and merit the serious attention they have drawn in the media, academe, and government. It is sometimes easy to forget, however, that the average American child today stands a far better chance than did his parents or grandparents of, first, growing up, and second, doing so with a minimum of trauma. In three areas specifically, despite lingering ills, the vast majority of children in the United States are so much better off than their forebears that we have come to take the new conditions for granted.

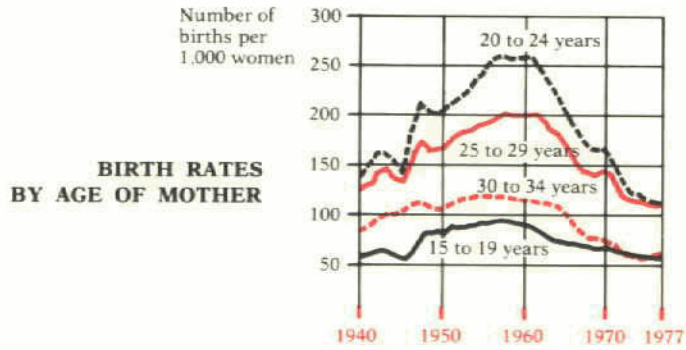
Improving the Breed

Health: The massive drop in infant mortality—from about 150 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1900 to fewer than 14 in 1980—reflects the great strides medicine has made. Polio, rubella, tetanus, diphtheria, cholera, typhus, and whooping cough have been virtually eliminated. Even measles, common as recently as 1960, has been reduced by 99 percent since then to a scant 3,000 cases a year in the United States.* Meanwhile, advances in neonatology have given premature infants weighing between 2.2 and 3.2 pounds as good a shot at survival (80 to 85 percent) as a full-term baby had in 1900.

The evolving roster of the top-10 child-killers tells the story. Before World War I, infectious ailments accounted for almost all deaths of children under four. Today, negligence, not illness, takes about one-half of these lives—accidents of one kind or another, especially automobile accidents (which in 1978 contributed to 1,287 deaths of children under age four). Homicide holds the No. 6 rank for children generally, No. 3 for blacks.

*So rare are the once lethal childhood diseases, and so immunized is the "herd," that many parents, lulled by ignorance or a false sense of security, overlook routine vaccinations. In September 1981, 77,600 students in New York City's public schools were denied admittance to their classes, amid public furor, until properly immunized.

CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

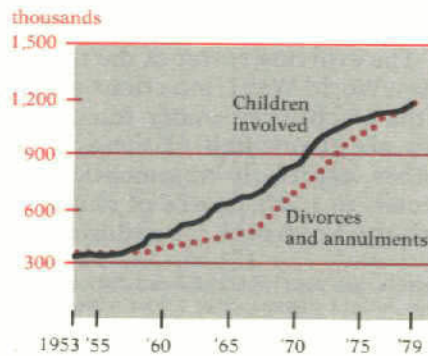


BIRTH RATES BY AGE OF MOTHER

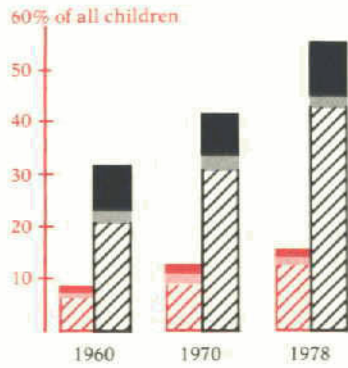
BIRTHS TO MOTHERS UNDER AGE 18, 1978

AGE OF MOTHER	First child	Second child	Third child +
< 15	10,203	292	28
15	26,926	1,377	68
16	58,005	5,606	400
17	90,423	15,355	1,689
TOTAL	185,557	22,630	2,185

THE CHILDREN OF DIVORCE



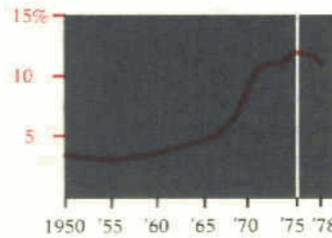
Source: National Center for Health Statistics; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Bureau of the Census.



LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER 18, BY RACE

Living with:
neither parent
father only
mother only
WHITE BLACK

CHILDREN RECEIVING AFDC* PAYMENTS (as percent of all children)



*Aid to Families with Dependent Children

At any given moment, one-fifth of America's children are living with one parent or with neither. Youngsters who do not grow up in two-parent households are more likely to need welfare, subsist below the poverty level, and be arrested at least once during their lifetimes.

WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE

Employment: Alexander Hamilton urged exploitation of child labor in 1791, arguing that children would "otherwise be idle, and in many cases, a burthen on the community." By 1880, 1.1 million youngsters from age 10 to 15 were gainfully employed, one out of six children in that age group. By 1900, the proportion was one in five. More than two-thirds of working children were employed in agriculture. The next largest category was textiles. "The golf links lie so near the mill/That almost every day/The laboring children can look out/And watch the men at play"—this popular quatrain by Sarah Norcliffe Cleghorn was published in 1915 as child labor in the United States reached its zenith.

Massachusetts passed the first child labor law in 1836, but not until after Reconstruction did a reform movement begin lobbying, state by state, to limit the number of hours children could work and to keep the very young out of the workplace altogether. Compulsory education laws were enacted over stiff opposition, even from educators. (Texas school superintendent Oscar H. Cooper opposed such measures in 1890, arguing that they undermined the "American idea" of "a minimum of law, thoroughly enforced, and a maximum of freedom.") Ultimately, in 1938, the U.S. Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which prohibited employment of minors in hazardous work—operating guillotine shears, for example, or priming rim-fire cartridges—and set down regulations regarding hours and pay according to the employee's age and job.

Currently all 50 states have child labor laws, many of them more stringent than federal statutes. Despite recurrent violations—some 13,825 minors were discovered working illegally in 2,493 establishments in 1981, and untold thousands of children, many of them illegal Hispanic aliens, are employed as migrant farm laborers—for the most part, child labor is no longer a burning issue.*

Education: Only about one-quarter of the grandparents of children born in 1955 completed high school; half of their parents did so. Today, some 86 percent of all children will get diplomas and a majority of graduates will attend college at least for a while. Admittedly, more time spent in class is not necessar-

*Indeed, some economists contend that the laws are now too strict and impede students who wish to work part-time. Handicap though the law may be, some one million 14- and 15-year-olds still manage to work at some job after school or during the summer in any given year. Female participation in the labor force is fast approaching that of young males. Surprisingly, the 14- and 15-year-olds who are still attending school are almost as likely to be in the labor force as the two percent of this age group that has, for whatever reason, dropped out.

ALL-TIME BEST SELLERS FOR CHILDREN AND PARENTS

From The Cat in the Hat Comes Back *by Dr. Seuss. © 1958 by Dr. Seuss. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.*

Children's Books

GREEN EGGS AND HAM, by Dr. Seuss (1960).*

THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ, by L. Frank Baum (1900).

CHARLOTTE'S WEB, by E. B. White (1952).

THE LITTLE PRINCE, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943).

THE LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE, by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1935).*

MY FIRST ATLAS, Hammond (1959).

LOVE AND THE FACTS OF LIFE, by Evelyn Duvall and Sylvanus Duvall (1950).

EGERMEIER'S BIBLE STORY BOOK, by Elsie E. Egermeier (1923).

BENJI, by Leonore Fleischer (1974).

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD, by Watty Piper (1926).

*Five other books by Dr. Seuss and one other by Laura Ingalls Wilder would appear in a strict listing of the top 10, but have been omitted to broaden the list's scope.

Parents' Books

INFANT CARE, U.S. Children's Bureau (1914).

BABY AND CHILD CARE, by Dr. Benjamin Spock (1946).

PRENATAL CARE, U.S. Children's Bureau (1913).

YOUR CHILD FROM 1 to 6, U.S. Children's Bureau (1918).

BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS BABY BOOK (1943).

YOUR CHILD FROM 6 TO 12, U.S. Children's Bureau (1949).

BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD, by Haim Ginott (1965).

Source: Avon Books; Bantam Books; *Children Today*, Jan.-Feb. 1981; Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best Sellers, 1895–1975;* Pocket Books; U.S. Government Printing Office.

Infant care

Published by the U.S. Children's Bureau, the 13 editions of Infant Care *have sold more than 60 million copies.*

ily time better spent. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has registered a decline during the 1970s of some reading and math skills. Discipline and daily attendance is a problem in many schools—New York City's, for example, where the number of truants daily ranges from 58,000 to 108,000.

That the educational system has its troubles is no longer

news. Still, the fact that public education is both universally available and a subject of universal concern suggests the importance that has, only recently in our national history, been attached to the schools. The *average* schoolchild in 1982, unlike that of 50 years ago, is likely to receive at least an adequate education—if the youngster remains in class. More girls than boys stay the course.

A Two-Way Street

Governments, like gamblers and students of particle physics, thrive on averages, but averages mask disparities. Consider the 3.5 million babies born in 1979. The "average" infant weighed about seven and a half pounds at birth, but 34 percent of new babies weighed more than eight pounds and 15 percent weighed less than six. The average baby was "normal," but many were not. Of those 3.5 million newborns, for example, as many as three percent had some kind of noticeable congenital deformity. One out of 700 to 750 white children (and one out of 1,000 to 1,300 black children) was born with a cleft lip and/or cleft palate. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome affected at least 5,000 babies and about 2,000 were born addicted to opiates.

The average child was born to a married couple, but 17 percent were born to unwed mothers, and between 32 and 46 percent (projections vary) will grow up in a one-parent household at some point before the age of 18. Most unwed mothers these days—more than nine out of 10—keep their children, but thousands of newborns are still put up for adoption. Currently 120,000 children are available for adoption in the United States; one-third of them are black, and many are by no means babies any longer. "There is a family for every child," may be the motto of modern adoption services but in fact, the children most in demand are white, healthy, and newborn. For these, the waiting list exceeds seven years.

The range of variation in children, physically and socially, is enormous. Recognizing this, doctors and psychologists over the past several decades have noticeably shifted their perspective on early childhood—*away* from an emphasis on what the environment does to an "average" child and *toward* the qualities each infant as a unique individual brings to his environment. Dr. J. P. Crozer Griffith, in 1895, considered a newborn to be "little more intelligent than a vegetable," but even fetuses, it turns out, have remarkable powers of discernment. They are acutely sensitive to light and darkness, and can differentiate some sounds, primarily voices. Infants are responsive to stimuli

immediately after birth and can make choices, preferring some sights (patterns rather than plain surfaces) and sounds (a female voice rather than a male's) to others. Certain personality traits, such as shyness, show up early and may be inherited. John Locke to the contrary, the child's mind is no simple *tabula rasa*.

The nature/nurture question is obviously complex, and one wonders how the Lord will deal with the matter when he apportions blame on Judgment Day. Calvinists and behaviorists aside, though, most specialists happily concede that the interaction between genetics and circumstance, between a new individual and the enveloping world its caretakers provide, is a two-way street. What remains elusive is the pattern of traffic.

120,000 Commercials

Some environmental correlations are simply too strong to ignore, even if they cannot serve as "predictors" in *individual* cases. Birth order, for example, appears to make a difference, as parents have long suspected. "Being an only child is a disease in itself," wrote psychologist G. Stanley Hall around the turn of the century. But recent studies indicate that "onlies," and first-born children generally, are in fact over-represented in graduate schools and the professions and tend to be especially intelligent, ambitious, and creative. (Of the first 16 astronauts, 14 were onlies or first-borns.) "Middle" children and the "baby" of the family likewise often display distinctive traits.

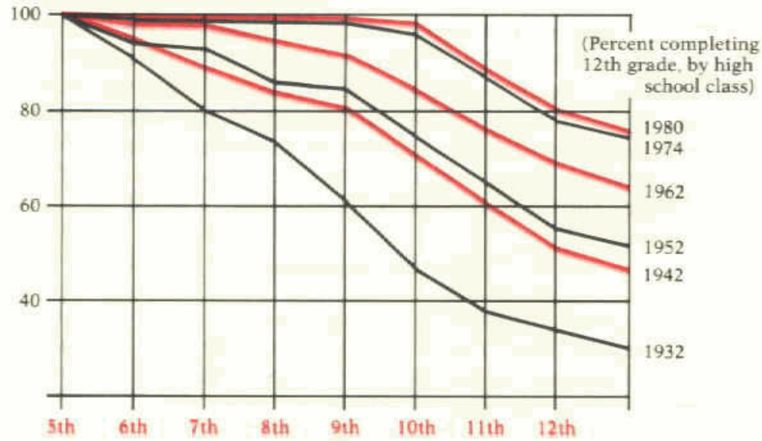
Between birth and the beginning of school at around age five, the average American child will learn about 6,000 words, although the first reading primers the child uses in school will contain only between 78 and 104 words. (As psychologist Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out, the techniques employed so successfully by parents in teaching children to speak seem to be "forgotten or ignored in many of our schools when we begin teaching our children to read.") Six-year-old children will also have watched 6,000 hours of television and as many as 120,000 commercials.

A link between television and children's behavior and learning skills probably exists, but no one has quite defined what it is. There is a positive correlation for young children, for example, between low IQ and high levels of TV viewing, but it is impossible to say whether cause and effect is involved or, if so, which way it runs. Programs such as *Sesame Street* apparently can teach the alphabet, but educators are otherwise divided on TV's effectiveness as a learning tool. Some ramifications are clear. According to the latest report on television from the National

CHILDREN: EDUCATION, JOBS, AND CRIME

SCHOOL RETENTION RATES, BY GRADE

Percent of group entering 5th grade

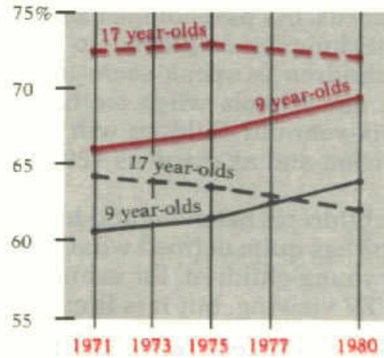


Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress; National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1981 and *Youth Employment During High School*, 1982; U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Crime in the United States*, 1980.

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

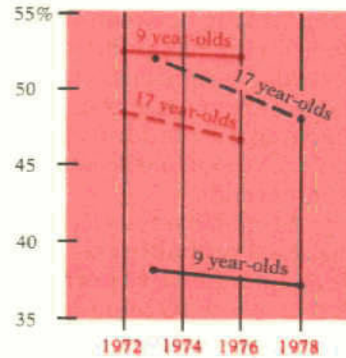
% of correct responses (national average)

Reading



% of correct responses (national average)

Math & Science



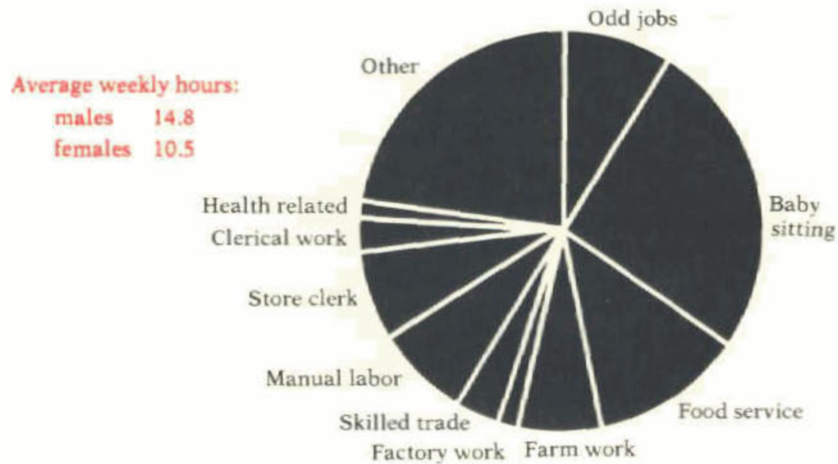
Literal comprehension

Inferential comprehension

Science

Math

HOW 15-YEAR-OLDS WERE EMPLOYED, SPRING 1980 (both sexes)



JUVENILE ARREST TRENDS (Persons under 18)*

OFFENSE	1971	1980	Percent change
CRIMES AGAINST PEOPLE	51,761	66,452	+ 28.4
Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter	1,207	1,237	+ 2.5
Forcible rape	2,652	3,093	+ 16.6
Robbery	27,499	34,829	+ 26.7
Aggravated assault	20,403	27,293	+ 33.8
CRIMES AGAINST PROPERTY	465,336	487,401	+ 4.7
Burglary	127,335	145,377	+ 14.2
Larceny-theft	279,067	295,667	+ 5.9
Motor vehicle theft	54,050	41,152	− 23.9
Arson	4,884	5,205	+ 6.6

*The number of agencies reporting arrests to the FBI varies from year to year. The figures above—which are intended to depict trends rather than the absolute number of arrests—are drawn from the 3,806 agencies that reported in both 1971 and 1980.

Institute of Mental Health, "the evidence accumulated during the 1970s seems overwhelming" that TV violence *does* prompt aggressive behavior in children. For what it is worth, kids prefer adult comedies and dramas to cartoons and are under few illusions about what the intent of commercials is.

The Impact of Divorce

Frequent moves, especially over long distances, affect school performance for the worse. A newborn in the United States can expect to move 12.9 times in his lifetime, and the average 16-year-old has already had three different homes. At first glance, the statistics show that children who are highly mobile are the *least likely* to have fallen behind the average achievement level for their age group. This is because the bulk of the moves made in any year involve intact families where the fathers have relatively high educational attainment—giving their children a head start to begin with. If these variables are "controlled," then the impact of moving becomes negative: It increases the likelihood that a child will fall behind in class. The more important lesson to be drawn, however, concerns the powerful influence of family stability and parents' education.

Findings about the effect of divorce on children are surprisingly consistent. About one million divorces are granted every year, involving more than one million children under age 18. Young children tend not to see divorce as a relief from family stress. Their school performance falls off, and relations with their peers suffer; many become fodder for the psychologists. In general, the children of divorce can expect lower lifetime income, less education, and a higher rate of marital instability than children brought up in stable families. In mitigating the emotional damage done by divorce, incidentally, the most important single factor seems to be continued close contact between a child and his missing parent (usually the father).*

"Happy families are all alike," began Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, "every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Yet, if only because it is pathology rather than bliss that attracts the lion's share of the research effort, it is among children with problems that one finds familiar patterns.

Some 11.4 million children under age 18 live in families whose income is below the poverty level—$8,414 for a nonfarm family of four in 1980, according to the U.S. government. Most of

*A good overview of the research on divorce is by Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan B. Kelly, "Children and Divorce: A Review," *Social Work*, November 1979.

these children have one thing in common: They are not living with both parents. In Illinois, for example, 89 percent of all children receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments live with their mothers only or with neither parent. Virtually the entire increase in the number of children in poverty in that state between 1969 and 1975 occurred among female-headed households.* The reasons are obvious. Single-parent families must subsist on one income. The arrival of children, furthermore, usually curtails a young woman's education and limits her employment opportunities.

There is little any American government can do to eliminate divorce, abandonment, or out-of-wedlock births, which suggests that there is little that any agency can do, in the final analysis, to eliminate poverty. At most, the government—and private agencies—can treat the more painful symptoms.

A Misleading Debate

More than half of the 25 million U.S. wives with children are in the labor force (versus 20 percent in 1950), and about 7.5 million children under the age of six have mothers who work. What is to be done with all these kids? Must Washington subsidize a massive expansion of community day-care facilities?

In and out of Congress, the issue of day care somehow manages to stir ideologues of every stripe. The far Right condemns day care as a malevolent federal intrusion into family life—"the boldest and most far-reaching scheme ever advanced for the Sovietization of American youth," in the words of columnist James J. Kilpatrick. Other conservatives are willing to swallow day care if it gets the "brood mares"—Sen. Russell Long's memorable term for welfare mothers—into the workforce. Feminists see day-care centers both as a tool for eventually ridding the society of sexism—assuming they can get hold of the kids at a tender enough age—and as a means to allow more women to find jobs. The problem here is that when one question is asked (Do we need day care?), a second question is really implied (What kind of society do we want?).

The most respected writers on the subject—people such as Harvard's Mary Jo Bane—take a moderate view of government-subsidized day care. In the 1980s, as Bane notes, the responsibility for child care should rest where it has for more than half a century: with parents and schools, "supplemented by a

*A recent study published in the Urban Institute—*Teenage Child-Bearing and Welfare* (1982), by Kristin A. Moore and Martha R. Burt—estimates that each year a woman delays having her first child reduces her chance of being on welfare at age 27 by two percentage points.

"CHILD POLICY" AT HOME AND ABROAD

During the 1979–80 school year, state and local governments in the United States spent $87.4 billion on elementary and secondary education for 47 million youngsters; Washington provided $9.5 billion more. At the federal level alone there are more than 260 programs that variously affect children, administered by 20 agencies. Even so, the United States has no true "national policy" for children or families. While there exists a U.S. Administration for Children, Youth and Families, most of the major federal efforts—Aid to Families with Dependent Children and the School Lunch Program, for instance—fall outside its jurisdiction.

Federal programs are a hodgepodge in part because Americans, putting a high value on family autonomy, seem to have wanted it that way. "All children are dependent," wrote Grace Abbott, director of the U.S. Children's Bureau, in 1938, "but only a relatively small number are dependent on the state." This is still true. With few exceptions (e.g., public schools), government, local or federal, has acted only to help families in trouble—to succor abused children, to support poor single mothers and their offspring, to give disadvantaged children a "Head Start."

By contrast, most European countries do have an explicit overall family assistance plan. Typically, these policies were originally designed to encourage couples to have more children and thus reverse a declining birthrate. More recently, family policy has had to tackle new problems: Should women enter the labor force? Will working women still have enough children? Who will care for them while their mothers are on the job?

Every industrialized country except the United States provides a yearly allowance, usually between five and 10 percent of the median wage, to *all* families with children. Many nations try to ensure that children and expectant mothers are in good health. In France, for instance, maternity benefits (currently about $840 per birth) are withheld from mothers who do not seek proper medical care. Most European governments ensure job security for as long as three years for new mothers who take a leave from work. Many require employers to allow days off to care for sick children.

rich and diverse array of extended family, community, and market arrangements." Government has a role to play—but not necessarily a very big one.

Today, of all American pre-schoolers with working mothers, 29 percent are taken care of in their own home by a relative or by hired help, 47 percent are taken care of in someone else's home (usually by a non-relative), and 19 percent are taken care of by the father or mother (at work, or at home when the return

All family policy is not alike. Columbia's Sheila Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn have identified four different "models" illustrated by four European nations:

¶ Hungary's policy of encouraging mothers to stay at home to care for their young children was originally designed to relieve a labor glut. But its popularity and the high cost to government of supplying day care explain why it has lasted through more recent labor shortages. After a 20-week paid maternity leave, Hungarian women are entitled to a yearly child-care allowance, amounting to about half the average woman's salary, for up to three years, if they stay out of the workforce. Czechoslovakia and West Germany have adopted policies with a similar intent.

¶ The emphasis in labor-short East Germany, on the other hand, is on placing young children in day-care centers, mostly to enable women to return quickly to work. Government-run centers care for more than 50 percent of children aged three or under. After their 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, women may elect to take an additional year, but without pay.

¶ The French government helps mothers who return to work (via subsidized child care) as well as those who stay at home (via special stipends for lower- and middle-income families). About one-third of French children under the age of four receive some kind of out-of-home care.

¶ In the interest of equality between the sexes, Swedish policy (copied in many respects by Finland and Denmark) encourages both parents to share child care. Paid "parental leave," with the expense shared by state and employer, is available to both the mother and the father.

As the Europeans have discovered, a national policy on children is no simple matter. The French, for instance, have a "neutral policy" in part because they cannot make up their minds which is more important, increasing the birthrate or helping women enter the labor force. In most countries, cash bonuses for mothers have not been successful in raising the birth rate. And in Sweden, despite the egalitarian rhetoric, most mothers still assume primary responsibility for child care. Only about 12 percent of eligible fathers actually took leave from work in 1979 to help raise their newborn offspring.

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of one parent enables the other to depart for a job).

Only 15 percent are sequestered in a child-care institution of some kind. These institutions are not all day-care centers. They include Head Start programs, for example, as well as nursery schools. Of day-care centers per se, only seven percent are operated by government agencies; private entrepreneurs, churches, employers, and community groups run the rest. White-collar families in the suburbs are disproportionate con-

sumers of day care. As psychologist Suzanne H. Woolsey has noted, "A policy-maker or academic who lives in Bethesda or Cambridge, with parents in Fort Lauderdale and a sister in Berkeley, is not predisposed to think of relatives caring for his or her children. It is easy to forget that for those who live in South Boston or Harlem, a child's grandmother or aunt is more likely to be a few blocks away."

As noted above, the largest child-care program of all—public schools—is already in place, overseen by state and local governments. Community efforts are augmented by scores of federal programs (e.g., for the handicapped, to combat drug abuse), not to mention hot lunches and/or breakfasts for 23 million children every day, which cost $2.5 billion in 1981. In September 1982, roughly 2.7 million five- and six-year-olds will enter first grade in public schools, another 350,000 in private schools. Six out of 10 private grammar schools are Catholic, and their student bodies, despite a median annual tuition of $400, are disproportionately black and Hispanic.

To some degree, the first three or four years of grammar school are a period of categorizing, pigeonholing, even weeding out—tasks conducted by teachers, psychologists, and social workers while the basic job of imparting the skills of reading, writing, and 'rithmetic proceeds (or does not proceed). Children are given ear tests, eye tests, IQ tests, tests of physical coordination, psychological tests. By the time the average American child leaves high school he will typically have taken a dozen full-length, two- to six-hour batteries of intelligence tests alone and had at least an equal number of physical examinations. If the child is not average—if he has a physical or mental disability—the figure could be two or three times as high.

About two percent of school-age children, mostly boys, will be adjudged "hyperactive" and possibly sedated or put on special diets. As many as 1.5 percent may be mentally retarded to some degree (although only 100,000 mentally retarded children are currently institutionalized).* At least two percent will have some speech impediment, 0.1 percent may be deaf or hard of hearing.

Other handicaps today are of a different order. Unable to speak English well, 295,000 schoolchildren are being taught in

*Mental illness among children is not so rare as may be supposed. Some 50,000 chronically mentally ill youngsters are institutionalized in any given year, and an estimated 12 percent of all children suffer from some sort of "clinical maladjustment," ranging from schizophrenia to depression to minor behavioral disorders. The United States has as many licensed child psychiatrists (3,300) as it has neurosurgeons. Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death for children from age five to 14.

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one of 80 other languages (Spanish being used in at least two-thirds of these cases). The federal government alone contributed $99 million toward bilingual education in fiscal year 1981, although the long-term impact of such efforts, in terms of both learning and the nation's social cohesion, remains a matter of dispute. Nearly one million students, identified as "gifted," have also had their educations modified thanks to special efforts by state governments. (Forty-three states and the District of Columbia reported spending $148.5 million on education for the gifted last year.)

The vast majority of American schoolchildren, not marked for special treatment of any kind, will get on with the job of learning their lessons. Well before junior high, millions of youngsters will have achieved computer "literacy"; yet the deterioration in children's test scores on various standardized exams—including the much publicized 55-point drop in SAT verbal scores between 1963 and 1980, and a parallel 35-point drop in math—suggests that overall, children are not learning as much or as well as they did two decades ago. On the other hand, the long-term decline seems to have slowed lately and, in some places, even to have reversed. In Washington, D.C., elementary school children have finally reached national norms in reading and math; for the first time in 10 years, New York City scores have actually edged *above* the national average.

Educators and politicians have apparently taken to heart the angry criticism leveled by parents. By 1981, 17 states had adopted competency-based certification for prospective teachers. Two-thirds of the states now have "minimum competency" standards for public school students—and in 17 states, high school seniors must meet the standard before getting their diplomas. Many school districts have ended the practice of "social promotions" (i.e., automatically advancing students through the grades even if they are unable to handle the work).

None of these measures, of course, will help children who do not stay in school. Dropout rates are high. In 1979, some 25 percent of black males and 22 percent of black females had not graduated from high school by age 20. (The figures for whites are 17.7 and 14.3 percent respectively.) Why children leave school one can guess though not prove, the data being sparse and fragmentary. Disciplinary problems, family turmoil, boredom, pregnancy—these are probably the chief causes, in that order. Few youths drop out confident that they are ready to make a go of it in the real world.

A Subsidized Matriarchy?

Indeed, the real world may already have taken its toll. Crime, for example, is a fact of life in the schools. Every month American children spend in secondary school, they can expect to experience, as a group, 2.4 million thefts, almost 300,000 assaults, and more than 100,000 robberies. Criminal behavior starts early—usually in school—and it peaks quickly. More 17- to 20-year-old males are arrested for virtually every class of crime (including homicide) than males of any other age. But the record of children under 10 (55,000 arrests in 1980) is itself sobering, and it gets seven times worse by age 14. In 1981, 2.3 million juveniles were taken in by the police, if not necessarily charged. Of the more than one million youths referred to juvenile court in 1977, fewer than half were living with both parents.

No one really knows precisely how many girls end their educational careers on account of pregnancy, but more than a half-million teenagers bore children in 1981, and 65 percent of those new mothers were unmarried at the time of conception. Pregnancy, like crime, becomes more of a problem as children get older, but it is something to be reckoned with from the beginning of junior high, when six percent of young females are already sexually active. Contraceptive use among this age group, while rising, remains sporadic. Although, as noted above, the teen birthrate has dropped somewhat, 52 births for every 1,000 females under 20 remains extraordinarily high by comparison with rates in other industrialized countries.

The costs and correlatives of teenage pregnancy are well known. In one study, some 82 percent of the girls who had their first child before their 15th birthday had mothers who were also teen parents. Teen mothers will have larger-than-average families. Their educations will be curtailed, their income stunted, and they are prime candidates for the welfare rolls. Of the $9.4 billion paid out in AFDC benefits last year, half went to

women who gave birth to their first child as a teenager. There is no evidence that young girls are getting pregnant deliberately in order to collect welfare and move out of the house—but the availability of welfare may influence the teen mother to bear the infant (instead of having an abortion), to keep the child (as almost all of them do), and to reject marriage to the father. It may be, as urban affairs columnist Neil Pierce has observed, that especially among poor blacks, we have developed a "self-perpetuating, government-supported matriarchy."

America's children survive many things—chicken pox, firecrackers, TV commercials—but what they have the most trouble surviving with anything like "acceptable" casualties is growing up without two parents. The absence of one of those individuals often puts a household into chronic difficulty and, in extreme cases, may trigger a kind of chain reaction. During the 1976 presidential campaign, Jimmy Carter had a standard stump speech on families. He would rattle off data about one unfortunate group of children after another—the unwed mothers, the juvenile delinquents, the runaways, the drug users, the illiterates, the illegitimate. The point he never made—the truly important point—was the extent to which all of these statistics overlap, the tendency for individuals who fall into any one of these categories also to fall into many of the others.

Making Adjustments

The stresses on children that attend, precede, or ensue from family instability feed on one another. While the majority of children who experience family disruptions learn to cope, in enclaves where broken families predominate—in some urban slums, in public housing projects, in isolated rural pockets—the odds are heavily against many children breaking out of the "underclass" cycle of disorganization, poverty, and dependence. It is not clear that any policy of government "intervention" acceptable in a democratic state can end *this* localized crisis of the family, which seems to be worsening.

Most American children, fortunately, have not fared so poorly. Childhood experiences during the past 30 years, and increasingly during the past 10, reflect the profound changes the society has undergone since World War II. The fact of the baby boom itself made the United States a child-centered (and then youth-centered, and ultimately, when the baby boom kids became adults, self-centered) nation. Deficiencies in children's health, education, standard of living were deemed intolerable—and remediable. Meanwhile, the nation's population was