

INTRODUCTION

Young in America¹

For a very long time, being a child in the United States included certain privileges and risks. So did being a parent. Americans were prosperous and their opportunities seemed without limit. Their children could move in directions not even imagined by the previous generation. With seemingly endless landed resources, a dynamic economy, free schooling, and laws that did not restrict them to following in their parents' path, succeeding generations could define their own futures. This appeared to liberate generations from each other to create a dazzling sense of change. Taking this all for granted, Americans then offered these possibilities to immigrants who, we proclaimed, came for their children's sake as much as their own. The sense of an unfolding future spilling into the welcoming land was what the American landscape painter Thomas Cole conveyed in the inviting second installment of his cycle of the Four Ages of Man (1840), the one he called *Youth*. America was about youth and youthfulness, new futures, and open doors.

These images also conveyed risk, both for children and for their parents. Parents had less influence, and children were on their own. Parents would have less power to control; and children, fewer shoulders to lean on. The future itself was far less knowable, and there were always those unable to adapt fast enough. Parents were not sufficiently respected, and their wisdom easily discarded as old-fashioned and out of date. Much was expected of children who had to fulfill not only their own desires but immigrant expectations. This mythological past has, of course, never been the reality for all parents and children. Generations of well-to-do and well-placed families passed their privileges forward, and poverty was often inherited. Slipping into lesser



The Voyage of Life: Youth (1842). Painting by Thomas Cole. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

positions always posed a threat as a possibility of intergenerational failure. Some children were deeply restrained by personality or upbringing or circumstances, while others were more freely risk takers. And even the myths could not blot out the reality of slavery and race in our historical memory. These have stained the experience of generations, past and present. Still our self-image had enough substance to remain vital to American institutional and political life. We acted in ways that made the images become part of the real life of the nation.

Today, Americans are asking if any of this system of beliefs and values still holds true. Are there any advantages to being raised in the United States? Do parents have too much control over their children? Are immigrants even offered the illusion of a better future for their children? Are we still raising a nation of risk takers or has globalization made us like everyone else? Is the promise of American childhood over? In exploring how we came to define the American generational promise, what it meant, how it functioned in the past, and if it has changed over time, this book tries to provide a way to

answer these questions. It lays out the historical terrain within which these questions and their answers first emerged and the points in our history when childhood, parenting, and generational relations changed in deep and important ways.

Historians have not often asked these questions about parents and children and how their experiences relate to our national identity. Creators of grand opera and great theater recognize the dramatic importance embedded in the relationship. They are aware that the intensity of the bonds between parents and children and their intimate variety not only serve as the basis for deep emotions, but also connect the audience to fundamental questions about society and history. And they have long tied the large concerns of the state to the small arenas of fathers and their sons or daughters, of mothers and their children. We learn this from Shakespeare and Verdi, Euripides and Arthur Miller. On a much smaller scale, this lesson is also part of what the public responds to in sensational news. A mother or father who mistreats and kills a child, either through negligence or intent, is telling us something about the society of which they are part.² These stories make headlines or run as a ticker under the television news. The audience is shocked and overcome by pity and grief. The existence of such unfortunate and unforgivable members of our society leads us to reflect on the nature of evil, the realm of psychopathology, the terrible unpredictability of life's circumstances, the inadequate protections of the state.

Historians are only now catching up to what theater, opera, and daily news have known for some time, as we begin to understand just how important the relations between generations are to who we are as nations and as societies. Our individual histories take place in the small theaters of our personal lives, but these are deeply entwined in a larger world of politics and culture. In the realm of popular culture, as in that of high culture, the audience knows the difference between the grandly dramatic and the ordinary. We never assume that stories in which mothers kill their children are what childhood or parenting is about. They are aberrational, recalling the extremes of behavior or misfortune, and they call us back to what we should and do expect when we think about childhood or parenting. We know that such terrible stories define the limits on behavior, not its content.

Historians of childhood and of the relationship between parents and children also understand the difference between the ordinary and the exceptional. But their task is more challenging, since they need to demonstrate that ordinary behaviors are the most historically vital and consequential, and further complicated by the elusive search for historical tracks. While generational relations may be connected to powerful changes in politics and society, it is the repeated, the expected, the ordinary that tells us what childhood and parenting was like. In this book, I have sought out these traces of past relationships and experiences in the descriptions of sociologists and the prescriptions of ministers, psychologists, and childrearing advisors; in parenting journals, popular magazines, and personal memoirs; as well as in the circulars of the government. Together such sources provide us with a record of the lives of Americans as parents and children.

Over the course of the more than two hundred years of the nation's history, parenting and childhood—what parents owe their children and what children can expect—have not only changed in many of their details. In an always diverse and uncommonly heterogeneous population, they have varied significantly by group and locale at any specific time. I therefore include stories about many different kinds of parenting relations and children's experiences. Nevertheless, I will argue that American parent-child relations also demonstrate a cultural particularity that developed from the specifics of the American context and of American history.

In the United States, much earlier and more emphatically than elsewhere in the West, authoritarian controls over children gave way to a more relaxed relationship between the generations. This pattern and its consequences drew the attention of European and American observers quite early in the nation's history, and Europeans often described American children as rude, unmannerly, and bold. Americans were eager also to see themselves as different—fresher, newer, younger. From the time of the Revolution, some Americans believed that childrearing had to adapt to the changed possibilities of their New World environment. Americans were more open to endowing their children with greater independence and flexibility in choice because they believed that the future held better possibilities and opportunities for their children.

This view, together with the availability of land (on a breathtaking scale) and an absence of laws that specifically determined inheritance (as was common in Europe), did, I believe, recast the relationship between American parents and their children from the start of the nation's life, as it lowered the degree of publicly approved control that parents exercised over their children's future. This did not mean that American parents were indulgent toward their children or that children had a longer or more leisured or more playful childhood. The contrary was often the case. American children went to work early because land and labor ratios made their work desirable and necessary. That work was not, however, just a form of subordination as it tended to be elsewhere in the Western world. Instead, it often provided the young with a sense of the importance of their contribution and of their ability to create their own place in the world. It made innovation seem possible and creativity valuable. In a society expanding through immigration and where slavery was a fact of life for many, this could never simply be a description of all parents and all children. But from early in our national life, it did become an identifiable American pattern.

Instead of imagining that this pattern applied to all parents and children in the United States, it is useful to think of the early American experience as defining a formula or recipe that shifted the standard of what might be expected in the relationship between parents and children. It established a baseline that would often be invoked as desirable and legitimate, even as the initial circumstances that created it changed and then finally disappeared. As we shall see, it was this formula—one that emphasized children's independence and limited parental control—that dominated the American vision of childrearing even as parents struggled against its boundaries, and as new Americans with very different pasts brought alternative visions. It is also a pattern that has deeply influenced American childrearing advice. Parents today still struggle with this legacy, but it remains a fundamental part of our conversation.

In attempting to set out in broad strokes this most intimate relationship, I have made certain kinds of choices. I try to tell stories that help us to understand intergenerational relations at particular moments in time and to examine the changes that made those times

especially significant. The chapters are organized in broadly chronological fashion, each focusing on selected themes and problems that best capture the issues facing parents, children, and the public during that period. But because historical changes and people's lives do not obey arbitrary chronological limits, the chapters also overlap as they proceed. I am fully aware that the United States has always contained a great diversity of peoples and experiences, but I have emphasized only parts of this diversity at specific historical moments because it allows me to focus on particular aspects of the evolving story, not because they tell us everything that was happening at that point. In many cases, a later discussion will bring these other experiences to the fore. Readers may recognize some of the people whose lives I describe—Ulysses S. Grant or Margaret Mead, for example—but be much less familiar with others. All lives are historical, but some tell us more of what we need to know and I have made my choices accordingly. This book is full of people's lives and describes many experiences, but it cannot and does not try to be comprehensive. Similarly, many historical events have meaning for individuals and families, but some are more urgent and broadly consequential. I have drawn often on the self-descriptions of individuals, some of whom are remembering their childhoods, knowing full well that most of us are not completely reliable in how we tell our stories or in what we remember, but with the hope that this is less of a problem when we read broadly among many such self-descriptions.

The American Revolution first endowed children with an important role in the unfolding of the nation's future. The circumstances of land ownership and the early maturity that accompanied rapid economic expansion gave substance to that inheritance. American society circumscribed patriarchal authority, and women had greater authority over their children's lives than elsewhere in the Western world. Together these factors, as I suggest in the first chapter, set a basis in the early republic for children's access to more independence in their choices and in their destinies. At a time when the boundaries of childhood were fluid, early maturity gave even young people roles to play and a range of prerogatives.

Americans admired and rewarded the initiative of the young. But greater autonomy could also be a threat to order, and the problem

of children who were inadequately cared for, abandoned, and adrift became a major focus of public attention by the second half of the nineteenth century. In chapter 2, I suggest that the turmoil of the Civil War, which had devastating effects on family life and brought the problems of freed slaves and their children to public attention, altered the conversation about parents and children in important ways. These changes were compounded by industrialization, particularly as it accelerated at the end of the nineteenth century. As many of the young engaged in unhealthy indoor work, rather than self-directed outdoor activities, while others were lost in urban disarray, Americans reconsidered the nature of family authority, elevating a new vision that focused on the protections children needed, and began to use public institutions when parents seemed inadequate to the task. Middle-class Victorians reimaged family roles and began to hedge childhood with new restrictions by the late nineteenth century. How to salvage independence and self-direction became a problem for educators and others as new scientific values became prominent.

By the end of the nineteenth century, saving children who needed care and providing advice to mothers about effective nurture became the central commitments of public life. These continued forcefully into the early twentieth century. Drawing on the prestige of science and the lever of statistics, even the federal government became a critical actor in this realm, with the establishment of the first and only federal agency devoted to children's welfare. As chapter 3 shows, this was underwritten by a new professionalism in the twentieth century that enlisted pediatricians, psychologists, childrearing advisors, and experts in juvenile delinquency. Together they reframed the parent-child relationship as mothers, in particular, were urged to look outside the home for counsel. By the 1930s, this "expert" knowledge about children produced a national vision of a normal childhood.

Especially important for immigrants, these extra-home agencies grew in variety and number in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The presence of so many newcomers and their great diversity changed American institutional life, the public schools most prominently. In raising the stakes and the age of school leaving, immigration made the high school a uniquely American institution and turned adolescence into a prominent cultural experience. The large

number of immigrants created the conditions for these institutions to grow in ways that, as I show in chapter 4, transformed the relationship between immigrants and their children and had significant consequences for generational continuity. In fact, by changing what it meant to grow up in America, the high school and adolescence recreated childhood for everyone in the United States. A sign of America's new wealth and growing self-confidence on the world stage, the high school meant that the United States continued to be a very different place for children and adolescents than was the case elsewhere in the Western world. In extending childhood while separating children from their parents, it endowed the young with a different kind of independence.

In the context of the elevated role of schooling, it was unsurprising that education became the social pivot around which Americans chose to address race and racial inequality in the 1950s and 1960s. In chapter 5, I discuss how black children and youth became objects of national policy. The postwar period also saw a special delight in childhood, as the enormous increase in the child population defined the era and Dr. Benjamin Spock presided over a renewal of family life deeply centered on childrearing. In the context of the emphasis on both equality and the importance of children, the period became the site of a startling intergenerational revolt that took place not only at lunch counters in the segregated South but in high schools, in colleges, and on the streets throughout the country. Affirming their independence even as schooling began to shrink its reality, the youth of the time were, in fact, deeply dependent on the institutions that had been created for them. But the young also helped to refashion practices and alter institutions that affected children for the rest of the twentieth century. These changed intergenerational relations in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 6, I turn to where this tangled set of events has left us, as parents and children face each other across the divide of shrinking independence for the young and growing fears by their parents, and in the context of a new immigration and a globalized world. As American confidence has eroded and our institutions appear to have lost their coherence, the young have become the repositories of our many anxieties. The chapter asks whether and how the American

difference still matters in a world grown smaller and American prosperity less distinctive, while our children's prospects seem no longer as bright as they once were. Today, our conversations remind us of both the tradition we still value and the vast changes that have taken place in the past half-century.

In writing, I have focused on the significant moments of change while also keeping in view certain common beliefs and expectations that created a tradition against which and around which discussion about parenting, childhood, and generational relations took place and continues to revolve today. *That tradition emphasizes the desirability and possibility of making children independent of their parents and giving them the tools to become so.* In the United States, themes of independence, autonomy, self-definition, and individual success have been viewed as essential to cultural identity, and, as a result, they have been deeply embedded in our views about children, childhood, learning, and family obligations. Even as Americans today try to make their children safer and more secure, they hope to maintain a certain edge that would allow their children to succeed by being independent and innovative. Economists, too, are beginning to look to this quality as essential to successful "flourishing."³ Americans have from their earliest times looked to a future different from the past and to their children to define and fulfill it. As a result, I argue, even today there is something very American about how we discuss and worry about parenting and childhood.

While the United States' population today is drawn from everywhere on earth, these American cadences remain very much alive and part of our national conversation. Whether these are still useful or possible or desirable is something the reader will have to decide. The book introduces the reader to the historical basis for these beliefs as they grew from our earliest sense of nationhood, and to the changes that have challenged and tempered them as they became a tradition over the course of more than two centuries. These include several domestic and foreign wars, fundamental transformations in the economy, the massive elaboration of schooling, changing religious and scientific beliefs about the nature of the child, and recurrent migrations of people who came from societies with very different visions of these matters. It also includes important moments when

we have tried to address if and how race has been an exception to these patterns.

Having inherited the consequences of these many changes means that childhood and parenting today are quite different than they were in the early nineteenth century when this story begins. Households are much smaller, with far fewer children born, and all are expected to survive into adulthood. Our lives are much more urban, lived more indoors, more hedged around with legal provisions (which are sometimes protections), and children are expected to remain children and to be taken care of by their parents for much longer periods of time. Parents are usually more self-conscious regarding good parenting, although they are not necessarily better parents as a result. Today's parents, especially in a middle class that expanded dramatically in the middle of the twentieth century, discuss and read about parenting regularly, from scientific and medical experts, from psychologists and educators, even from cookbook writers who advise them about what is safe for children to eat. Much of this knowledge has extended the life, well-being, and education of children but also circumscribed their freedom and narrowed their path to self-defined maturity. That paradox—a better, longer childhood that at the same time seems to make raising and being a child more problematic—lies at the heart of the story I tell in this book. Even as we protect them, we still want our children to have access to those characteristics that we believe made them successful in the past when they were far less protected, and we pay lip service to their autonomy and right to self-definition. Whether the many changes in our history can be reconciled with these values is something the reader will be asked to think about as we follow the lives of the many different parents and children detailed in this book. I hope the reader will also realize that there are many ways of being a good parent and that our judgments should be much more cautious.

When I describe the treatment of children and the relationship between the generations in the United States as different than in Europe through most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I am aware that this comparison is fluid, the differences are variable, and the sharpness of contrasts has receded over time. In 1800 when this book begins, the United States was small and very self-consciously a

new kind of society. Its population, slave and free, was four million, almost all of it rural. By 2015, the American population had passed well beyond 300 million, and the world from which that population is drawn has changed massively. Today, the United States resembles Europe more than it did in the past, so much so that historians have come to speak about the West as a single entity in ways that would have been unfamiliar even half a century ago. In that light, Americans today not only are Western in their generational patterns but have been extremely influential in their creation. While differences remain between Americans and Europeans in their views and practices regarding parenting, childhood, schooling, and what generations owe each other, those differences are much narrower than they were in the past. The changes in economy and industry, governance and social welfare, work and schooling, mortality and disease, scientific outlook and religious sentiments over the past two centuries that helped to create the Western world as we know it deeply affected the intimate sphere of the family, generational relationships, and how we understand and expect to treat children. Even in the shrinking global world of the twenty-first century, however, generational relations, family patterns, and parenting still distinguish the United States from most parts of Asia, South America, and Africa—the places from which most newcomers now come as immigrants. As we absorb the newcomers today, our sense of what is American will almost certainly continue to change. If asked, however, Americans will likely offer the view that they remain different even from those in Europe today, and certainly from the rest of the world. That difference is the result of our historical attachment to certain practices and values regarding what the generations owe each other. The following book explores the origins and development of those views, in the hope that our current conversations about parenting may become much better informed and meaningful. I also hope that the centrality of family, parenting, and childhood to society, economics, and politics will become evident as a fundamental feature of national life.

One of the aims of this book is to show Americans what has changed in their past and how the relationship between parents and children filters into other historical changes. Today, as parents and their children face very new circumstances domestically and internationally,

they want to know how to respond, what to reinvent and adjust, and what they can still call upon as part of their tradition in order to move confidently into the future. I hope that this book can serve as something of a guide in that process. History is never a road map to the future, but even a modern GPS system requires knowledge of older landmarks and a familiarity with the basic terrain. As a scholar who has explored commonalities in Western childhood and who is keenly interested in these matters globally, and as a parent with a deep personal stake, it is my contention that knowing what has been different about our past will allow us to better organize the quest for guided change in a more emphatically global world. As will soon become clear, I am firmly convinced that there remains something useful and necessary in understanding *American* childhood, *American* parenting, and *American* generational relations.

We will begin, therefore, not exactly at the beginning—that is to say in 1776—but at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a new president from a new political party, who articulated the very basis of American independence, Thomas Jefferson, became head of the nation he had helped to create. All that newness also brought deep reflection on how children should be raised and why they had the right to expect that their lives would be better than those of their forebears. Through two centuries of national life, civil and foreign wars, new sciences of man's evolution and a child's development, innovative schooling institutions and visions of the life cycle, and migrations from many continents, we will wind up asking ourselves in this book what we are continuously asking ourselves in books, in newspapers, on television, on the internet, and in person—what is happening to American childhood and parenting, and what do the generations need in order that we may move together into the future?