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Before Helicopter Parenting

The nation's egalitarianism and independence spilled over into family relations. European visitors found American children to be brash.

By **DANIEL AKST**

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The end of history, the end of men, now the end of childhood. Whether “the end” in these formulations means termination or some ultimate purpose, book titles of this kind should put us on our guard. History, men and kids don't seem to be going away any time soon, and their ultimate purpose is likely to remain murky.

“The End of American Childhood” is the newest entry in the genre but is concerned more with the transformation of childhood than its conclusion. Its author, the historian Paula S. Fass, is a careful scholar who focuses here on how American childhood and parenthood have changed since the 19th century and how unique elements of the American story have differentiated child rearing here from parenthood in other places.

Heaven knows we could use a little history lesson in this arena. In generation after generation, as if re-enacting some profound genetic imperative, parents keep asking, “What's the matter with kids today?” At the same time, kids themselves—not to mention pundits, politicians and worried grandparents—wonder perennially why parents are so clueless. Ms. Fass demonstrates that if the questions remain the same, some things do change.

Among much else, she argues that America changed everything. The nation's founding egalitarianism spilled over into family relations, as did the national emphasis on independence. European visitors found American children to be brash and their parents not terribly strict. Most of all, thanks in part to chronic labor shortages, American children were independent and capable, gaining power in the family by tackling farm challenges and traveling far from home alone at ages that would make today's helicopter parents reach for the Xanax (and spur nosy neighbors to call the child-protection authorities).

At the age of 7 or 8, Ulysses S. Grant was hauling wood out of the forest for the household and his father's tanning business. From roughly 11 to 17, he wrote in his memoirs, “I did all the work done with horses, such as breaking up the land, furrowing, plowing corn and potatoes, bringing in the crops when harvested, hauling all the wood, besides tending two or three horses, a cow or two, and sawing wood for stoves etc. while still attending school.”

America and its children were also different because of immigration. When newcomers settled here, children usually learned the language first; their newfound empowerment tended to undermine the stern patriarchal authority that families had brought with them from the Old World. The American emphasis on universal education reduced time spent with parents, as well as their influence. It also made offspring more likely to surpass their progenitors.

Ms. Fass is particularly strong on the rise of the American high school. These beleaguered institutions, known today mainly as repositories of bad memories and lax standards, were once great elevators, levelers and mixers in the era before we started sorting ourselves so thoroughly by socioeconomic status. They gave America the advantage of a better-educated workforce and gave teenagers a world of their own, complete with a bevy of activities, such as sports, theater and clubs, that extended the school's influence beyond the classroom.

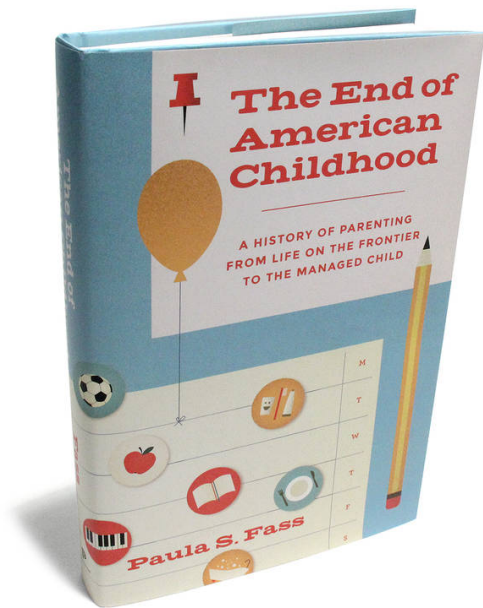


PHOTO: WSJ

“The End of American Childhood” is unfailingly learned and judicious, but the author’s style is sometimes ponderous, and many of the questions of greatest concern get little or no attention. What has been the role of religion in family dynamics? How have parents, over time, handled youthful sexuality? To what extent have smaller family sizes and larger homes changed parents and children? How have the roles of mothers and fathers differed or converged? What difference does affluence make? How about the rise of intermarriage, the drug culture and the Internet? Little of this is meaningfully addressed.

THE END OF AMERICAN CHILDHOOD

By Paula S. Fass
Princeton, 334 pages, \$29.95

The author demonstrates that paternal authority has been in decline almost from the republic’s founding but doesn’t say whether the troubles of modern boys, particularly those from lower-income families, are the result of the all-too-common absence of

fathers. (She reports that 40% of American children are today born to unmarried women, versus just 10% in the 1970s.)

Ms. Fass takes little account of the great power of capitalism and technology, to say nothing of the popular culture that is in some ways their offspring. (Movies, novels, music and TV shows are notable in the book for their absence.) Surely the Model T, which set in motion the process by which almost everyone got a car and became a driver, represented a giant step toward overturning parental values by giving teens mobility and privacy. Transistor radios fostered a musical culture of rebellion, and better birth-control technologies took the Russian roulette out of sex. Peter Stearns addresses much of this brilliantly in “Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America” (2003).

Despite its shortcomings, “The End of American Childhood” is a worthwhile and enlightening book, and its cautious author comes to some persuasively tough conclusions. She isn’t afraid to assert that two parents are better than one, and she has no patience for the historically ignorant bellyaching by upper-middle-class parents that fills miles of bookshelves and newspaper columns.

Long gone are the days when it was an accomplishment simply keeping your children from dying, yet parents in today’s extraordinarily safe childhood environment have opted for protection over independence. These parents, Ms. Fass asserts, are giving children “what they believe is autonomy without a real sense of responsibility.” The result is “children who are over-controlled and over-indulged at the same time, while mothers are run ragged.” Ms. Fass’s careful scholarship provides a welcome dose of perspective for parents who are convinced that they are child-raising pioneers—or that their kids face the kind of risks once common on the frontier.

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