



## **How Social Responsibility Became Parental Anxiety: The Past and Present of Child Welfare in America**

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In today's overwrought world, where dangers seem to loom everywhere, especially for children, it is difficult to remember that American parents once had good reason to anticipate that their children could die and that dangerous diseases such as diphtheria, intestinal disorders, and ear infections could be fatal. Two hundred years ago, children (and mothers) often did not survive childbirth, while nearly one-third of those children who did would die by six from a variety of major and minor maladies.

Starting in the late nineteenth century the picture began to change as child survival rates increased as new public health measures and scientific medicine with a serious new pediatric component invigorated a growing commitment to children's welfare in the western world, and in the United States specifically. The sentimental view of children as precious and needing care had become a commonplace among the middle classes by the middle of the nineteenth century. The literary portraits of children by Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe, as well as the many illustrations of charming children that decorated Victorian sitting rooms had made the public eager to

shelter and protect those considered weak, innocent and dependent. But the new possibility of child survival through proper care and the potential for children to live longer and better lives strengthened the sentimental attachments by the end of the century. Together these commitments and innovations helped to organize and define a strong new vision of the need to assure the welfare of children in the society and underwrote a social reform agenda. These changes are well documented in the collection that I edited with Mary Ann Mason, *Childhood in America* (New York University Press).

This paper will look at how that fundamental new set of expectations about children's survival and well-being and the parental obligations it entailed underlies many of our contemporary fears and obsessions. It will examine how the new belief in the possibility of creating better lives for children eventually prepared the way for an urgent sense of the need first to enhance, and then to control children's lives. I will look specifically at how the culture created behavioral expectations and nurtured particular emotions toward children. Since I have written about child abductions in *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in American* (Oxford University Press), I will use kidnapping, and the stories about well-known kidnappings, as a special entry point for how portrayals of parents and children and of the dangers of modern life were orchestrated by the media into particular kinds of public spectacles about children and their care. My presentation will analyze how what began as a focus on abductions for ransom in the early twentieth century became an obsession with the sexual predator by the 1970s and 1980s. I will discuss how the natural concerns of parents was transformed into heightened anxieties about the sexual victimization of children and show how the pedophile became the

embodiment of the ultimate danger to children, first in the United States and then in Europe, and now haunts the public imagination.

Although child abduction and the pedophile have come to represent the perils to children in the modern world, this paper will also discuss the manner in which other matters relating to children's well being has been used to both stimulate an intense sense of parental responsibility and privatize the caretaking of children in many realms in the United States in the recent past. From the V chip to the videocam, Americans are expected to watch over their children and protect them from various perceived social ills. As most common health dangers for middle class children have declined, new dangers for children portrayed as social or environmental ills have become the source of increased anxiety. It is my argument that what began in the early twentieth century as a broad commitment to children as a societal obligation has become in the twenty-first century a much more narrow gauged focus on the parents' need to guard and control their own children. It is my argument in *Children of A New World* (forthcoming New York University Press, November 2006) that the social investment in childhood as a shared enterprise is now in serious decline. Today's controlling parent is the heir of a historical process which has now become a distorted product of genuine parental caretaking emotions, media representations, and political decisions about the limits of the social in the modern world.