
Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers Their Future—and Ours

Kay S. Hymowitz

Kay Hymowitz is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a contributing editor of its quarterly publication, *City Journal*. Of Hymowitz's new book, *Ready or Not*, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead said this: she "leaves us with an indelible and compelling picture of children in the driver's seat, careening along without the brakes, the controls, or the road map that culture is supposed to provide."

Hymowitz holds a bachelor's degree in English and American literature from Brandeis University, a master's degree in English from Tufts, and a master's degree in philosophy from Columbia. Before becoming a full-time freelance writer, she taught English literature and composition at Brooklyn College and Parsons School of Design. She spoke to a Center of the American Experiment audience in February 2000.

I've been speaking about my book for some months now, and I've been hearing from people about their own experiences raising children. A woman I met in Philadelphia told me that the older of her two children, a girl, was one of those kids who just seem to want to go along with the program—I have one too, there are children like

this. You would tell her what's expected of her, and she would more or less do it. And then came her boy, who was nothing like that. He was a very, very wild child, she said. They couldn't seem to civilize him at all, so they went to a psychologist in despair. When they described the situation to the psychologist, he said—and this is not the kind

of advice you usually get from psychologists—they should treat the boy like a dog: Sit. Stand. Good.

And it worked! I'm not going to be recommending anything like that, but it is one of my favorite stories.

To get into the meat of my book, I want to use a different story that comes from an ad I saw some time ago. A seven- or eight-year-old boy is sitting on the steps of his house, a baseball mitt in one hand and a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken in the other. At the bottom of the ad, it said: "Have dinner ready for Mom when she gets home."

The anthropologist Lionel Tiger wrote about that ad in a column. He was impressed by what he called an epochal reversal of tens of millions of years of mammalian dining. Animals have always fed their young, but this ad seemed to suggest that we turn things around and have the young feed the adults. It was as if we had reached a stage at which we no longer needed to attend to either biology or millennia of human history. In our postmodern world, the young will feed their parents.

Abandoning Kids

Tiger was pointing at something much larger, of course—at a blurring, and sometimes an outright reversal, of the roles of adults and children. Popular culture gives us all sorts of examples.

An ad that appeared in *Time* magazine a year or so ago showed a middle-aged man with a confused look on his face sitting next to a boy who had that kind of scoffing teenage face. The text read: "It's time we had a talk about

sex." Underneath, it said: "Okay, Dad, what do you want to know?"

Tiger blamed the confusion of roles that he saw in the Kentucky Fried Chicken ad and that I saw in that *Time* ad on the time crunch experienced by just about all adults in this country today, and he's partly right about that. The growing number of single-parent and dual-working-parent families has contributed to a change in the dynamics between parents and children if for no other reason than that adults simply don't have the time to supervise their children to the extent that they once did. The Council of Economic Advisers recently reported that on average, parents have twenty-two fewer hours each week to spend with their children than they did thirty years ago.

This is the home-alone generation. New businesses are cropping up all over to service the now autonomous child. For the latchkey child—the child in self-care—there are new products: single-serving dinners to pop in the microwave while they watch *The Simpsons*, videotapes and books explaining their responsibilities. In my own neighborhood in Brooklyn—a child-crazy place, where thundering packs of strollers push you off the sidewalk—parents sometimes give their eleven-year-olds a couple of dollars to pick up a muffin and some orange juice for breakfast since no one is at home. The principal of my daughter's middle school says that he sometimes sees kids sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups, complaining that they went to bed so late, they can't wake up without it.

There's a memorable image of post-modern childhood.

While the time crunch is crucial for understanding the blurring boundaries between adult and child, and the changing conditions of childhood, it is by no means the whole story. I argue in *Ready or Not* that the changes in childhood we are witnessing today are not the inevitable consequence of changing demographics or, for that matter, the growing presence of a hypersexualized media. To a far greater degree than has been previously understood, they are a consequence of conscious human design.

In the past thirty years, we have seen the emergence of a new and seriously misguided set of ideas about what children are like and about adult responsibility toward them. These ideas have come from educators, experts, child advocates, judges, and, of course, the media. They boil down to this: children are rational, self-aware, morally mature, and autonomous. The universal understanding that the job of adults is to induct children into a pre-existing society, a web of meaning, a culture with a set of values and beliefs no longer makes any sense. Our prodigies can create their own meanings.

This fallacy I call anticulturalism. Instead of grasping the profound truth that children are shaped by their culture—not just their values, but also their beliefs and their very grasp of their own identity and place in the world—we have concluded that children pretty much shape themselves. They are anticultural. They develop

apart from and often even in opposition to culture.

Three examples will give you a sense of where I see these ideas showing themselves, how pervasive this fallacy is, and how its effect is to abandon and isolate children and to leave them, in many cases, to their own worst impulses.

The Competent Infant

The first example comes from the field of psychology, and it concerns infants. In the 1970s, research psychologists came up with something they called “the competent infant.” They were amazed to see—via new video technologies—that infants were capable of far more than anyone had ever imagined. They announced that every baby, from its earliest days, is an active, perceiving, learning, information-organizing individual.

It is true that the “competent infant” phrase never developed common currency, but the image of the autonomous infant overachiever, exploring and learning about the world by himself and for himself, persists.

“Your child is a genius,” begins one 1985 self-help book. “His or her capacity for learning is virtually limitless.” I recently read about a set of videos called *Baby Einstein*, and I suspect its title is only half tongue-in-cheek. You can see the same expectations about infants in some of the leading advice books of the second half of the twentieth century.

Here's Dr. Spock: “Things we think we must impose on children are actual-

ly things they enjoy learning to do themselves.”

“Don’t insist your youngster try new foods or eat his peas,” Penelope Leach said. “Trust him to know best.”

How do we know when a child is ready to be toilet-trained? The very popular *What to Expect* series of advice books answers, “Look no further than your toddler for the answer. Only your child can tell you.”

Sociobiologists’ current theories actually confirm the picture of the competent infant. Children, even babies, we learn, are naturally empathic. That’s why newborns cry if they hear their dorm mates wailing in the hospital nursery, so goes the theory.

It is not my purpose to argue that empathy is not natural or that babies are not learning all the time, but nowhere in this picture of the independent and kindly information organizer do we get a sense of the child’s less obliging side: the irrational behaviors, the restlessness, the cruelty, the egotism. It is particularly surprising that we don’t hear anything about such things from sociobiologists.

The political scientist James Q. Wilson remarked that he was surprised, when he looked at contemporary books on moral development, to see nothing about self-restraint.

If my reading of the literature is correct, our baby Einsteins and toddler Gandhis have no impulses to restrain. Indeed, the word *impulse* has virtually disappeared from expert and advice literature. The word *instinct*, which once described our animal urges, is now benign and constructive. We hear

about the language instinct or the attachment instinct, but not about the instincts that we all know so well: to bash brother or sister, for example.

Notice how the role of the parent changes when the definition of the infant changes. Parents are no longer experienced members of a culture, one of whose jobs is to teach the limits of a child’s egotism and the meanings of the world around him. Parents are now personal trainers and companions, along for the ride.

This is an epochal shift in mammalian culture.

Anticultural Education

My next example comes from the world of American education theories. According to many educators, we should empower children to choose what to learn, how to learn it, and even, in some cases, how they should be graded.

This is not what we’re hearing in most of the newspaper stories about education these days. We’re hearing an awful lot about testing and standards.

But a 1998 study from Public Agenda, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization, found that only 7 percent of education professors think teachers should be “conveyors of knowledge who enlighten students with what they know”; 92 percent believe teachers should simply enable students to learn on their own. That is a very dominant idea in the education establishment.

You see a lot of examples of this kind of thinking all through education literature. Let me give you a few.

The new Standards for the English Arts, published by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, say that “children’s perspectives, interests, and needs [should] shape classroom discussion, writing projects, and curriculum choices.” Educators from High/Scope, an organization that founded one of the most highly respected Head Start programs in the country, recommended that “teachers share decision-making with children”—very young children, by the way—“about what will be learned and how they will learn it.”

At a curriculum meeting last fall at my sixth-grade daughter’s school, her earth sciences teacher announced in a very excited way to the parents that he had asked the children what they wanted to learn. Amazingly enough, they answered that they wanted to learn about the human body. He was redesigning his entire curriculum to conform to what the children wanted to learn.

Throughout history, human beings have imagined education as a process whereby an experienced and knowledgeable teacher passes on the knowledge considered meaningful in that culture to the ignorant and inexperienced young. No longer. Now we don’t have cultural education, we have anti-cultural education. Our children do not need to be taught.

In the current argot, teachers are not even teachers. They are facilitators, managers of instruction, or coaches. One expert has even called them co-learners. And in some schools, students

grade teachers in reverse report cards. No wonder that a worrisome percentage of teachers leave their jobs after only one year.

Anticultural Sex

My final example of anticultural thinking comes from the field of sexuality theory. Here again, experts have taken up the anticultural approach. You load the kids up with facts and let them figure out what it means. Sex educators, curriculum planners, public health officials, psychologists, and popular writers all talk in this way.

We often used to hear—I think the scene is changing now—that sex education was kind of an X-rated event in the schools. This image may have been more hype than reality. Fearful of controversy, most educators stuck to the more neutral and more anticultural policy of encouraging teens to make their own decisions. By 1981, according to the Guttmacher Institute, 94 percent of school districts agreed that the major goal of sex education ought to be informed decision-making, and they went about it in a big way. They taught decision-making skills and refusal skills and communication skills and stress management skills and goal-setting skills.

The decision-making model is anti-cultural in this sense: it assumes that kids already possess the values, beliefs, and self-awareness that go into good decisions. They are their own parents and teachers.

The psychologist Mary Pipher, who is well known for her book *Reviving Ophelia*, tells her young patients to find

a quiet place and ask themselves, "How do I feel right now? What do I think? What are my values?"

"Once they have discovered their own true selves," she continues, "I encourage them to trust that self as the source of meaning and direction in their lives." Even younger teens seem to have access to what Pipher calls their own true selves.

A human sexuality values and choices program for seventh and eighth graders uses the same model. And I came across a fascinating statement from somebody who was at a debate about AIDS education in New York City. One member of a district school board said, "The more information you give people, the better choices they make." Unfortunately, she was referring to nine- and ten-year-olds.

Those of you with teenagers at home, or those of you who have a dim memory of being a teenager, may recall an alternately insecure and grandiose, idealistic and crude, moody and perpetually glandular creature. But according to the experts, the competent infant and the self-directing, self-grading grade schooler has grown up to become the rational, self-aware, and independent-minded teenager. It really seems as if we have very little to teach such marvelous creatures.

Parents are often paralyzed, especially when it comes to the subject of sex. Take this example from a book called *Ground Rules* by Sherril Jaffe. She had an awful period with her fifteen-year-old daughter. The child disappeared overnight. She stopped going

to school. She refused to tell her parents where she was. Jaffe asked the family therapist what she should tell this poor child about sex. "All you should say," the therapist said, "is 'I hope you practice safe sex.'"

"I hope you practice safe sex," I said to her one day. She gave me a look of disdain.

"I hope you practice safe sex," she said back to me in a mocking tone.

Why had she mocked me? Because she didn't need to be told to practice safe sex? Because, of course, she would practice safe sex? . . . Or was she taunting me because she bitterly resented me making assumptions about her sex life? The last possibility I thought of was that she was mocking me because she could tell my words were from the therapist's script. These weren't my words at all. I was a foolish woman without any words of her own.

I find this an affecting description of the situation many parents find themselves in. They're not really sure of what their own words are. But I need to stress that adults like my daughter's life science teacher and Sherril Jaffe do not do these things out of laziness or stupidity. They are acting out of a sincere belief that they are respecting and empowering children's individuality and freeing them to be themselves.

Searching for Meaning

Lucinda Frank wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* some time ago, "Those of us who were veterans of the sixties and seventies swore that we

would treat our children with respect. We vowed that we would . . . treat our offspring like people, empowering them with the rights, the importance, the truth-telling we had been denied." We would treat them like complete individuals, rational and knowing, and they would thank us by acting that way.

What was left out of this dream was a difficult truth: human beings are born unfinished selves who require experience within a culture to complete them. This means a great deal more than that human beings are born lacking information and skills. It means that they are wired to pick up the rules about how to act, what to believe, what values to hold dear, how to dress and behave. They are searching for meaning. So what happens, then, when adults refuse to teach children in this most basic sense? Unfortunately, it's not liberation. Children are not the self-aware and completed creatures Americans have dreamt of.

Anticultural education is a perfect recipe for restlessness and disengagement. Student apathy and restlessness are the most common complaints among teachers today. In a 1996 study, Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg found "an extraordinarily high percentage" of "alienated and disengaged" students. The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute finds entering college students "increasingly disengaged from the academic experience"; the highest percentage ever reports being bored in class. Of course. They are told by their elders that the outside world offers lit-

tle to inspire their allegiance and that heaven lies inside their own narrow and unstructured minds. What we have given these children is not freedom but solitary confinement.

When it comes to sex, the guiding idea once again was to liberate youngsters to express their full individuality. Kids are now having sex earlier and more frequently than their parents did when they were young, but this has not proved to be the sexual promised land. For one thing, kids are not capable of being that self-aware, of knowing "their own true selves." The National Health and Social Life Survey found that nearly a quarter of teenage girls describe their first sexual experience as "voluntary but not wanted." That's a haunting evocation of too much of adolescent experience.

It's no surprise that, given a message that it doesn't matter, kids would think that sex doesn't have all that much to do with human emotion and higher aspiration. You can find a good deal of talk in sex education curriculums about making decisions and respecting yourself and your partner; you won't find much about love. A researcher reported that one girl said of her seventh-grade sexual initiation, "It was sort of the thing to do. It wasn't supposed to be a big deal." A recent Kaiser Foundation survey of teenagers found that over a third of sexually experienced kids said they weren't using birth control partly because they didn't know their partners well enough to talk about such things.

The Teening of Childhood

Most kids will not turn out to be Lolitas or Hitler-worshipping killers, of course, but they will suffer more insidious consequences of the adult retreat: conformity and materialism.

Absent a clear message from adults, kids will look to their peers, who, in turn, look to the media to help explain the world and to endow it with glamour and meaning. This has long been the predicament of adolescence. Today, increasingly younger children have been freed from adult guidance and turn to their friends, who in turn rely on the media for cultural messages.

The consequence of this is what I call the teening of childhood. Recent studies have found that children are forming cliques at younger and younger ages, and that these cliques have very strict rules about dress, behavior, and leisure. The cliques also determine status according to grooming and clothes. Teachers and principals see an increasing number of ten- and eleven-year-olds who have given up toys for hair mousse and name-brand jeans and who heckle those who have not.

What matters to this new breed of child, according to Bruce Friend, vice president of worldwide research and planning at Nickelodeon, is “being part of the in crowd” and “being the first to know what’s cool.”

The real message adults should be concerned about today is not that we are giving them freedom, but that we are telling them we have no real stake in our own or our culture’s meanings. It doesn’t matter if you study the human

body or mollusks. It doesn’t matter if you study video production or the American novel. It doesn’t matter if you have sex with one partner or with many.

The shootings at Littleton make it clear that there are children out there who have heard our message that nothing much matters.

Following her speech, Kay Hymowitz took questions from the audience, which included two Minnesota state senators.

Mitch Pearlstein: At the end of your book, you say that loving our kids is not just a personal act. In many ways, it’s the most social thing we do. Could you expand on that a bit?

Kay Hymowitz: The way you raise your children inevitably shapes them into citizens. You are raising the future. You are raising children who will see their role in the world the way you tell them it should be. What is worrisome is that some of the present ideas do not communicate the sense that children are part of a broader world, that they are growing up to be citizens and parents and spouses, that they inevitably have a social identity. We’re not shaping them to adopt that in a responsible way.

Dick Erlandson: I thought your book was so enlightening that I bought three copies as Christmas gifts to the parents of our ten grandchildren. I’m wondering about the adult practice of ending sentences directed to children with “Okay?”—as if you want the child

to confirm what you're telling him or her to do. It's not really an instruction to the child; it's like a democracy in which you're taking a vote.

Kay Hymowitz: I'm glad you made that analogy with democracy. At times I'm awfully critical of parents and teachers and other adults who are in charge of children, but the truth is, we should understand that this is an evolution of American thinking.

Americans are anxious around authority. They don't like it. They don't like to be told what to do or how to live. In the sixties and seventies, we began to see those ideas extended to children. That's the kind of talk you see in the children's liberation literature of that period. It's as if children are full citizens. In fact, that liberation literature came out of the civil rights movement; children were viewed as another kind of oppressed group.

Most mainstream people did not pick up on these ideas—I don't think many of us believe that children are an oppressed minority—but nevertheless, the idea that somehow something is wrong when you want to control this individual lingered and permeated the culture. An awful lot of parents now are attempting to create an egalitarian home; the child becomes more of a friend rather than a child. And it doesn't work. Some kids—like the one I mentioned earlier—will pretty much be socialized no matter what you do. They seem to have an intuitive longing to do exactly what's expected of them. But there are some who will not, and will suffer for being considered a friend.

Kevin Petersen: Is this unique to America today, or has it happened in another culture or another time or place?

Kay Hymowitz: As far as I can tell from looking at the history of child rearing, this is new and anomalous.

It has always been assumed that adults are responsible for passing on the rules to the next generation. That's what seems to be blurring right now.

It is also true, though, that people have not always had the same sense of childhood. In the Middle Ages, for instance, by the time the child was seven, he would be off working as an apprentice. He would not be part of a family unit in the way that we imagine today. There was a much shorter period of socialization, but there was no question about what was supposed to be happening during the child's first years. Whether it all happened in the home or whether it happened in the village square was irrelevant; the child had to be socialized.

As for other countries, my sense is that there are enormous changes going on in Western Europe right now, and although some of them correspond with the changes occurring here, Europeans seem to have a better sense of that line between children and adults. What will be very interesting—if not disturbing—to watch is, as the out-of-wedlock birth rate rises, as it is doing all over Western Europe, whether the increasing number of single-parent homes will lead parents to see the child more as an equal. All of the research suggests that single mothers tend to see

the child as an equal or to give the child more responsibility earlier on, for the simple reason that they don't have the time or the capacity to supervise in the way that two parents might.

Kathy Asgrimson: I have an eight-year-old daughter, a third-grader. I use what I call choice with boundaries, and it seems to help her organize her time. When we get home from school, I say, "By 6:00, your piano has to be done. You can do it anytime between now and then, but it's got to be done by 6:00." There are consequences if it's not done at 6:00.

Is this an effective way of parenting?

Kay Hymowitz: What you're describing is American child rearing at its best. You're saying to your child that she has to do certain things, but she has some control over when and how they're done.

We Americans are raising children for freedom, and that means we don't simply lay down the law. We are preparing our children for a life of freedom by encouraging them to make choices. We need to be introducing them, at fairly young ages, to the kinds of self-discipline they will need in order to thrive in such a world.

Senator Tom Neville: In Minnesota, as I suppose in other states, we're lowering the age at which we treat young children as adults for their criminal or violent acts. Is that the right way to be addressing young kids, young juveniles, who are committing these types of crimes, or is there a better way? We assume that these kids are

making rational choices and should be held accountable, just like adults, even when they're fourteen years old, and I think the pressure is going to be to go even lower.

Kay Hymowitz: You're right—there is that pressure.

I'm glad you raised this question. I have a chapter in my book on the law. When I started that chapter, I had never before read a legal decision, so I wasn't sure what I was getting into. I spent a good six months reading recent decisions about children. I was amazed to see that the law led the way in terms of redefining children.

When it comes to criminal issues, my feeling is that we're going down the wrong track and that conservatives are completing a liberal project, which is to turn the child into a premature adult. I believe that a fourteen-year-old is not, in fact, a completed human being.

That doesn't address the question of how a community expresses its outrage over a horrible crime. I'm going to leave that question for a moment and get to another issue.

The juvenile court was originally set up at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century with the explicit idea of acknowledging that a child is not an adult and that the court, instead of simply punishing children or condemning them to jail, had to take some role in socializing them. It's true that the crimes they were facing at that time were generally not the kinds of serious crimes that are causing this reconsideration.

The upshot of several Supreme Court decisions in the late 1960s regarding due process for kids has been that it has become much more difficult to punish children for earlier and more minor crimes. Let me explain how it works. When kids have full due process rights, you're much less likely to go after a bicycle thief or a schoolyard bully. It is simply too expensive and inefficient, and there are more serious crimes to pursue.

The problem is that the bicycle thieves and the bullies are not getting a clear message at an earlier stage. Kids who commit serious crimes generally start with less serious crimes, and we have to be dealing with them at an earlier stage. I was startled to see that Nathaniel Abraham, who was the youngest child ever to be tried as an adult for murder [in Michigan in 1999], had twenty-two contacts with the police and was never arrested. That's before he committed murder. Now, something is wrong with a system that doesn't deal with a kid who has been in trouble numerous times. I should say, though, that this was a bad kid. Even some of his earlier crimes were fairly serious, and it may be that nothing was going to help. But we can't simply write off a nine-year-old and say either we're not going to do anything because it's too minor a crime or we're going to put him in jail. We have to deal with the fact that they are children.

Aaron Sprague: Would you address one of the most nefarious parental cop-outs that we hear nowadays, especially when it comes to sexuality?: They're going to do it anyway. It's as if that

somehow gives parents license to facilitate that behavior. Is that connected in any way to the theories you put forth, or are they entirely separate?

Kay Hymowitz: You do hear that a lot. In fact, you hear some parents say, "They're going to do it anyway, so they might as well do it in my house." And then they allow drinking or coed sleepovers.

It is consistent with what I'm talking about. It's as if the child's sexual drive simply has to express itself, whereas the anthropological record shows that every culture shapes and organizes sexual self-expression. And parents, teachers, the culture as a whole have tremendous influence over what kids do. The irony is that a lot of recent research is showing that parents are the number one influence on when sexual initiation takes place. So it's funny that there is that kind of fatalism. Maybe it isn't just fatalism; maybe it's also not really wanting to try to stop it. My generation is worried about seeming anti-sex, or they remember their own history and wonder if they are going to seem like hypocrites, and they are not really dealing with the reality that their children are living in today, which is quite different than it was thirty years ago.

Kathryn Moore: You mentioned cliques starting earlier and earlier. What do you suggest for parents experiencing that?

Kay Hymowitz: Children need to be reminded that they are children. This is not to say that we don't respect their longings and desires, but they

need to be reminded in subtle ways that you are the adult and know more than they do.

A rich home environment counteracts the culture that they are so influenced by at school and on television. And take them to the right movies, not the junky movies that the kids are all talking about.

There will be a lot of compromises. This happens all the time with my daughter. She will want a certain dress because, according to her group, it's cool, but it looks kind of trashy to me. So I'll say, "You can get this one but not this one." That's common sense stuff.

The most important thing is that the child remain attached to you and to the home. That's the best way to fight the cliques. You may not totally succeed, and there may be rough periods, but they come back.

I have two children in college; my oldest and my youngest are ten years apart. This problem has accelerated enormously in this gap. When my oldest, who is now twenty-two, was twelve, the cliques were not as powerful at this age. Something new has happened.

Senator Linda Runbeck: Parents are looking to legislators to help make their job easier. Essentially, they want laws to give them backbone. Let's have the law say how late adolescents can work and when they must come in at night. Do you agree that government has a role in helping parents? Does this make sense?

Kay Hymowitz: My guess is that when people are looking to the government for help, they've already lost con-

trol at home. I think that they do need more help from the schools, at times. This problem of adolescents working is something that a lot of educators are complaining about. Some kids are working as many as thirty hours a week while they're going to school, and homework just isn't going to get done. But I don't see why the government needs to get involved. It seems to me this should be a parenting decision.

Scott R. Erickson: Do you think that the people of this country have stepped away from their faith in God? And, if so, how does that affect society as a whole and children in particular?

Kay Hymowitz: The surveys and polls I've seen indicate that we are still a very religious nation, so I'm not sure that explains what I'm trying to describe.

There's a tendency to see parents who want to be their children's friends, who are reluctant to assert authority, as renegeing on their responsibility. That's one view. But in many cases they imagine that they are doing something good for their children, that they are allowing the children to be more completely themselves and creating a happier, richer childhood. I would be reluctant to conclude that that has anything to do with loss of belief in God.

Daryl Williamson: Would you comment on the use of Ritalin and Prozac and other drugs?

Kay Hymowitz: One of the consequences of the blurring boundaries between adults and children is that we turn to harsher, more coercive measures to control them because we're not

doing the work of socialization. There are definitely children who need to be on Ritalin, but I fear that in many cases, we are seeing children who have not been adequately parented. Because their parents have not done what they needed to do, the children are overly impulsive and overly active. And then we put them on drugs.

One side effect of the competent-infant theory was the idea that infants should be stimulated as much as possible, since they take in all this information and are learning all the time. The best thing parents and teachers can do is to give them all possible stimulation.

I've always been puzzled by that. In other cultures, there's a tendency to lull infants and children, to keep them quiet and calm. And it's interesting to me that you don't see hyperactivity in some of those countries. I'm not saying it's because we're buying our babies mobiles that we're seeing the growth of Ritalin, but I do think there are some misunderstandings about the baby's nervous system, about the young child's need for structure and order.

Terry Kelly: I was on the faculty of a prep school, and if there's a laboratory for the formation of cliques, it's a boarding school. It seemed to me that a lot of the cliques that formed—on the basis of athletic prowess, gender, race, all of those things—were predominantly a product thing, more of a Madison Avenue hucksterism that gave these kids so many choices in clothes and appearance that they were able to form these cliques and keep them going. Is that a factor?

Kay Hymowitz: Absolutely. What often happens is that the peer group feeds off the media, and the media feed into the peer group. The more that parents remove themselves from the socialization of middle school and high school kids, the more children look to peer groups and the media to tell them what they're supposed to be doing. We can't look at the media in isolation.

There's tremendous variation in how families are approaching the media. An astonishing statistic I came across recently indicated that something like two-thirds of older children—and an astounding number of one- to seven-year-olds—have televisions in their bedrooms. Those children usually are not getting any supervision as to what they're watching. On the other hand, some people don't have televisions in their home at all. The media make it difficult to be a parent now.

The family has to do something it has never needed to do before, which is to set up a wall—permeable, but a wall—between itself and the dominant popular culture, and to create a counterculture.

Mitch Pearlstein: Michael Medved says that no matter how hard parents may try, there is no escaping Madonna. That is his metaphor. How does one remove oneself from the culture in some reasonable way?

Kay Hymowitz: I'm not a purist on this, and my family hasn't actually gone so far as to remove ourselves. We do have a television, but there's a constant conversation going on about

what we're watching and what we consider valuable. And we have limits on what our kids can watch and for how many hours.

You also want to be able to show your kids good stuff. There are wonderful movies out there. Your children will resist like crazy: I don't want to see that, it's black and white; I don't recognize the star. Sit down with them and say, "Next week we'll choose something that you're more interested in, but this week, this is what we're watching." They get interested, and eventually—I know from having a twenty-two-year-old—they come around and see the difference between the junk and the good stuff. It's important not just to say no, but also to say what kids might find attractive and aesthetically powerful.

Rick Rice: I've noticed a difference in discipline and organization and motivation between the oldest kids in the family and the youngest. Does birth order develop differences in kids, or is it just my imagination?

Kay Hymowitz: It's not your imagination, although a combination of forces are at work. It's birth order, but it's also temperament: an impulsive child who is the youngest child is going to be one kind of problem. But most of the research has shown what I've experienced, which is that the oldest child is easier to socialize. They're more identified with the adults in the home.

It makes sense to me that the oldest child would be more in tune with the adult world. Then the next child comes along and looks at the oldest child and thinks, "I'm not going to do that." That's why the next child often is more difficult.

I suspect this is more true in this country than in other places because we do—and should—encourage self-expression in our children. We are raising them to be free Americans. That may encourage, among some children, a certain amount of rebellion, which we hope to keep contained. When you add this cultural factor to the fact that, for instance, the second child is more likely to be rebellious, you're likely to see more, and more intensified, differences than you might in other cultures. That's a guess, by the way. I've never seen any research on it.

Something is changing as we speak. Columbine was a tremendous turning point that caused a lot of people to ask what's going on when seventeen-year-old kids can develop an arsenal in their bedrooms without their parents' knowledge, and when children are allowed to make videos in which they're shooting up their school.

People are beginning to ask questions. I wouldn't say that I've turned into an optimist, but there's something in the air. n